

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSCENDENCE

*Human Destructiveness  
and the Universality of Constructive Relations*

Jolana Poláková

Translation from Czech by

Jan Valeška

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## FOREWORD

Dr. Jolana Poláková is an outstanding Czech philosopher who deserves highest esteem in international circles. Her reflections upon the possibilities of transcendence, however, call for the attention of the tacit implications and presuppositions in her way of thinking. Born in 1951 in a politically disturbed Prague and yet well-prepared for a bright academic career, Jolana Poláková worked for several years at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in the field of research of creativity and ethics. As soon as she got involved in the political and ideological controversies of the time, she was expelled from the Academy and forbidden to publish. Actually, she was threatened in the core of her existence. In the early 80s she worked in a medical publishing house as an editor. At the same time, she was a pioneer in an unofficial humanitarian movement and joined the authors and editors of the Catholic samizdat publishing. Only in 1990, after the downfall of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, she was allowed to return to the Academy and to resume her work in the Institute of Philosophy.

Jolana Poláková lost some of her best years in isolation of the international discourse, and yet, after the restitution of freedom of thought and speech she felt enabled to develop her own way of contribution in the field of philosophy. The main topic of her thought and research is the call for transcendence in postmodern times. In 1993, she won the Canadian URAM Award for excellence in creative scholarly writing. Since 1994 she acts as a member of the New York Academy of Sciences.

Reviewing her new publication against the background of her personal fate, the order of thoughts, as a matter of course, is shaped in the framework proper to her own life experience. The experience of „extreme situations“ referred to in the book with utter modesty, is nothing but Jolana Poláková's personal life story. This story is the very background of her speculative dealing

with the possibilities of transcendence. However, reading a manuscript as the report of a personal life story as well as an invitation to apply these experiences to one's own life results in a very exciting reading. Whoever, therefore, deals with this book, cannot approach it in the spirit of aloofness and scholarly reserve by withholding one's judgements and emotions; he has to begin the reading with the resolution of getting involved in the problem of transcendence as a question of life and death.

That leads us to another observation. Someone might find it curious to encounter in a philosophical argument with – rather – religious resp. theological terms, like love, faith, grace etc., at the end with God. It is, indeed, amazing that Dr. Poláková does not hesitate to use these kind of terms in the context of an overall analytical approach to reality. And yet, her analytical approach implies the conviction that it is thoroughly linked to the attitude of witnessing and confession. In Dr. Poláková's argument the existential experience of destructive and oppressive powers in the world is counterbalanced by the universality of possible constructive relations. Dr. Poláková herself insists upon the point that „the universal possibilities of human destructiveness are always *principally relativized* through the universality of possible constructive relations“.

In a time when the loss of the spiritual dimension of human life is painfully felt and many people are searching for new ways towards human fulfilment, it is helpful to meet with someone who explains her argument from the inside of her own inner spiritual experience. It is only half of the truth to call attention to the religious resp. theological terminology which Dr. Poláková uses in an anthropological framework. By all means it has to be added that Jolana Poláková is engaged in rationalizing the realm of human life which is close to the field of mysticism, too. Terms like void, emptiness, nothingness, abandonment, silence, darkness open up horizons which surpass human possibilities and expose the human being to the possibility of a breaking-

through of the true reality. Dr. Poláková argues strongly from the point of view of Christian mysticism. Although she does not elaborate on the affinity to other religious experiences like e.g. Buddhism, she enters in her specific way of rationalizing the common field of universal human experiences.

We live in a time when the distrust in the possibilities of human reason is growing. All the more it is astonishing that a person like Jolana Poláková who passed through the depths of the experience of human malice, never lost her faith in the fundamentally positive strength of human nature, human reason as well as human will. She continued to trust when it was dangerous to communicate even with the best friends. She did not hesitate to advocate the abundance of selfless love when hatred and the spirit of dissolution occupied her country. It is the spirit of resistance against the evil which inspires her to try again the build-up of philosophy which does not end in the methodology of falsifications but looks for ways *between* and *beyond*, – *between*: in the various ways of communications, and *beyond*: in the attempt to relate oneself and the world we live in to the unrelated one which – according to her – is the final possibility of transcendence. For Jolana Poláková, „after all, there is basically only one possibility of transcendence“: the ever new constitution of relationships which leads to a network of trustful and uncompromising love.

Hans Waldenfels, S.J.

Hans Waldenfels, S.J., Lic. Phil. (Pullach/Munich), Dr. theol. (Rome), Dr. theol. habil. (Würzburg), Dr. theol. h.c. (Warszawa), is professor of fundamental theology, theology of non Christian religions and philosophy of religion at the Faculty of Roman-Catholic Theology in Bonn university.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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In Czech:

„Člověk v mezních situacích“ (an earlier version of the article „How to Be in Extreme Situations“), *Studie* (Roma), 1986, 133–153

„Svoboda a vztah“ (Freedom and Relation), *Souvislosti* (Prague), 1992, 3, 14–27

„Antropologické předpoklady křesťanské víry“ (Anthropological Terms of Christian Faith), *Teologické texty* (Prague), 1993, 80–81

In English:

„Truthfulness of Faith“, *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 1991, 263–278

The favourable reception and response of these publications (particularly the presentation of the „URAM Award for Excellence in Creative Scholarly Writing, 1993“) have encouraged me to prepare an English version of this book. Czech original (*Možnosti transcendence*) is published by the Zvon publishing house in Prague (The Czech Republic) last year (1994).



## INTRODUCTION

### ***Approach and Intention***

This book is an experimental study in philosophical theology. Its approach is, therefore, not deductive in character but rather strives for an independent search, focused primarily on the matter involved.

While proceeding from starting points based on direct experience (in which not the examining finite being but ultimate reality itself is the decisive factor) and while operating within a neutral philosophical framework and with the methodological accuracy of philosophical thought, the study sets out to answer the question of expressing the possibilities of transcendence, which usually remain inaccessible both to the traditional natural theology (with its „God of philosophers“) and to the modern philosophy of religion (with its programmatic „epoche“) so that interpretation of these possibilities is left either to a methodologically uncontrollable personal rendering or to the doctrinally predetermined language of spiritual theology.

The main purpose of the approach applied in this study is not to interfere with these special competences but rather to supplement them by applying conceptual means which, however, should not be anthropocentrically degradable to the tool of a mere objectifying external description. Thus, without losing their theoretical character, philosophical concepts can become – in the spirit of responsibility towards ultimate reality – internally stimulating components of spiritual life itself. The following texts attempt to demonstrate that philosophical approach and spiritual search can find a mutually enriching methodological alliance. I think that such an interpretation of transcendence is attainable wherein theoretical reflection does not erode but rather fulfils the meaning of spiritual growth.

## ***The Core of the Conception and the Structure of Exposition***

Throughout the following investigations, the reality of *relation* has kept emerging as the central dynamic constant of an authentic spiritual life. That is the place of a possible intercrossing of an active and passive transcendence, and thus also a basis of a productive awareness of an ontological discontinuity between them. This discontinuity poses a challenge to human openness towards the genuine transcendent Absolute.

In the sequence of chapters, spiritual relatedness is presented in a feasible development pattern, ranging from an anonymous consonance with absolute transcendence (in relation to values, meaning, being etc.), through a consistent critical reflection of the starting points of one's own faith, to a mature spiritual relationship, explicitly formulating itself as one's total self-giving to God. This procedure corresponds with various complexes of conceptual depiction of the aspects or phases of human spiritual experience, as indicated in the headings of the individual chapters.

## ***External Circumstances of Research***

This elaboration of the possibilities of transcendence can – with certain reservations – be also viewed as a kind of spiritual yield of my own life in the „controlled conditions“ of the spiritual oppression exercised by the former communist dictatorship in my country. But to a smaller or greater extent, analogically destructive living conditions are actually or potentially present anywhere in the human world. Thus, the most profound *raison d'etre* of a philosophical theology may be perceived in that these universal possibilities of

human destructiveness are always *principally relativized* through the universality of possible constructive relations, implicitly anchored in the unique relationship with Transcendence.

## HOW TO BE IN EXTREME SITUATIONS

### **Introductory Notes**

If there really happens to be a conviction shared by sensitive and rational people of our times and our culture, then it most probably is the view claiming that our civilization finds itself in the throes of a crisis. Explanations of the genuine cause of this crisis as well as attitudes to it tend to vary. One of those, which – in our view – seems to have its sights set on the very crux of the matter, is the explanation of such a crisis as having been caused by an indisputable hypertrophy of an external, materially mediated dominance, which has gradually given rise to an atrophy of a life-giving internal, spiritually conditioned understanding, as if internal sources of intrinsically human life have been virtually exhausted for us. Indeed, in various contexts of our spiritual life we invariably come up against frequent manifestations of relativism, superficiality, a loss of perspective, although these are coupled with a new quest too. It is evident that the question whether this is still „merely“ a crisis of growth is closely associated with another – whether there is any human dimension of that growth at all.

Our historical process has led to far-reaching crisis situations facing mankind as a whole (ecology, economy, global military-political problems), various small or large groups of people (discrimination, manipulation, disinformation) and an ever growing number of solitary individuals (poverty, diseases, social marginalization, deterioration of interhuman relations, devaluation of spiritual values). Attempts at remedying such situations are usually confined to endeavours to identify mere symptoms; what exceeds the possibilities of external control is generally neglected to the detriment of the key, intrinsically human need to understand one's self and one's actions, even though such a need is usually most acutely felt by humans in situations of the

deepest crisis. An externally oriented civilization is neither able nor willing to admit that a path can be found out of extreme situations neither with the help of „the best social order“ (which on the contrary – in totalitarian and military regimes – tends to provoke such situations on a large scale), nor with the provision of the highest material wealth and well-being (which rather serves to multiply them – in rich societies and social strata – by lowering the threshold of sensitivity to them).

There are certain elementary extreme situations, inevitable for human life and its maturation, associated with the natural course of life. But we often no longer know how to cope with these either. In our present era people seem to have somehow forgotten traditional spiritual strategies and tactics of coping with them (documented by myth, theology and philosophy), there is no inner connection to model personalities in extreme situations (Jesus, Buddha, well-known saints and martyrs), no rehearsal situations (initiation rites, exercises, etc.) are available, and even simple human empathy and active solidarity with people in extreme situations have likewise disappeared. On the other hand, the capacities of mental hospitals, jails, orphanages, and other specialized institutions have been expanding, various repressive measures have been widespread, and there are mounting tendencies to make up for the utter lack of meaning in life with a hectic scramble for power and wealth even at the cost of bringing about new situations of major crisis proportions, neither natural nor inevitable, which are increasingly difficult to cope with in any meaningful manner.

A merely externally conceived defence against extreme situations, which leaves all the spiritual possibilities of superseding these untouched, usually results in a drastic impoverishment of humanity and further reproduction of such situations at new and new levels. Naturally, extreme situations may be countered efficiently and productively solely with the help of *internal, intrinsic sources*; only therefrom is it possible correctly to stipulate the choice of external means too. An authentic capacity to carry out what would amount to a

genuinely helpful external intervention is always commensurate with internal human maturity on the part of the decisive agents.

That is why the cultural-paradigmatic importance and profound historical human need of all such individual activities and social movements has been growing, activities and movements which – often deliberately tying on to certain spiritual traditions – are able, irrespective of their economic and social backup, to provide – inexorably proceeding from profound inner resources and at the cost of one's own sacrifices – *meaningful ways out* of various modes of natural as well as unnecessary extreme threats to humanity anywhere and anytime. (Let us name eg. the order of Mother Theresa of Calcutta or the Czechoslovak Charter 77 Movement or most followers of Western anti-psychiatry groups.)

The following philosophical study is dedicated to such personally motivated and involved people *struggling for human dignity under any situation*.

The individual sections – Entities, Humans, Values, Meaning, Being, Love – are meant as thematic probes into the contexts which seem to be of key significance for the issue under scrutiny.

## **1. Entities**

If we approach everything there is receptively and with a critical detachment from our own utilitarian intentions, we may discern entities in the dimension of their own original inner self-determination, integrity and irreplaceability. They present themselves to our eyes in their *independent identity emanating from the depth of being and aspiring to the heights of being*. This makes it evident to us that characterization of this or that entity can in no way be exhausted through the characterization of its mere situatedness: no entity is „soluble“ within this or that situation, it is never completely shaped or

determined by it; in changing situations it more or less remains itself – or it ceases to exist in its identity.

This initial, ontologically primary (and in view of the possibilities of any entity in extreme situation substantially significant) identity of any entity shows two different aspects. The *external*, actual aspect comes out directly against us: this is given by the specificity, differences, clear-cut particularity of entity, which outwardly tends to develop its identity vis-a-vis other entities. The *internal*, potential aspect of the identity of each entity can only be surmised in its entirety; it inheres in the inimitability, inaccessibility and inexhaustibility of the substantial specification of the given entity, which is internally rooted in the creative depths of being. Thanks to its „ready-made“ identity, entity therefore encounters other entities – finding itself in situations. Through its creative, internal, potential identity it stems from being – outside any situatedness, which is, as such, moulded solely by the interaction of entities.

It therefore seems that the creative current of *being* flows, as far as entities are concerned, *from the inside outwards*: for each entity its initial point in existential terms lies in its inner identity, received in profound dependence on being, while the impact of a situation on entities is determined only by their interrelations. Seen in this light, a situation affects entity principally secondarily, outwardly: the dependence of entities on a situation is conditioned by the dependence of a situation on entities, which jointly create it (actively or passively).

Under the term *situation* we may describe a sum total of *external conditions and circumstances*, under which something (meant as the „centre“ of a situation) exists or happens. At the same time, (especially as regards extreme situations) of vital importance is the fact that these external conditions and circumstances are not primarily constitutive for what exists or happens – although they may support or suppress existence, action or even the very origin of anything.

Whether a situation affects entity positively or negatively, whether it is more or less in harmony with it (Cf. an apple tree in a fruit garden) or whether it is in conflict with it (Cf. an apple tree in a building site) is for each entity a crucially important feature of its situation. An extremely unfavourable situation wherein *the very identity of entity is threatened* up to its actual limit of resistance beyond which its being-related potential to perfectibility opens up – such a situation is most accurately designated as its *extreme situation*.

The actual ontological *necessity of the emergence* of extreme situations evidently ensues from the fact that *entities do exist in situations*: given its external particularity and hence its actual limitations, no single entity can cope with an unlimited number of factually possible situations. The paradoxical ontological *possibility of superseding* extreme situations, on the contrary, emanates from the fact that *entities do exist out of being and for the sake of being*; on the basis of its internal determination – which is potentially inexhaustible (having emerged from the creative depths of being, in which each entity is rooted, and proceeded towards the transcendent heights of being, to which it is attracted) – entity may hold out even under an extreme situation.

Therefore, extreme situations are both exceptionally dangerous for the identity of entities, and immensely stimulating in terms of creativity and development. Being is the source and goal of the growth of their independence and integrity. Everything inanimate, animate and conscious gradually flows out of being into the space of the world, in time, which is pervaded with the struggle for growth in being – at different levels of its reception.

## **2. Humans**

While an extreme situation is a situation whereby the most intrinsic identity of any entity is revealed and subjected to trial, a human extreme



situation is a situation wherein all this concerns Man. Man in an extreme situation is also threatened in his own constitution, which he alone has acquired from being.

This signifies that exposure to extreme situations will most clearly show which particular characteristics are actually specific to him in terms of „species“, what is intrinsically his own and what eventually matters to him most. Man's extreme situations are situations highlighting and stimulating his humanity as a result of this humanity being jeopardized. All *subhuman animate* entities demonstrate their identity most prominently in situations in which their *life* is threatened. (A snail will withdraw into its shell, a gazelle will run, a tiger will fight.) After all, their innermost intrinsic characteristics serve their own survival in a specific manner. A threat to life and a threat to intrinsic characteristics in subhuman live entities are identical; their identity neither survives nor in any way extends beyond their physical existence. Just like in the case of inanimate beings an extreme situation poses a threat to their intrinsically own mode of inanimate existence, *situation involving a threat to one's life is the specific extreme situation of subhuman animate entities.*

This should be seen as the point of departure while identifying the extreme situation of man as a live and consciously perceiving being.

While an animal which finds itself in a situation endangering its life tries to get out of it quite unambiguously and at any cost (although sometimes in a mediated fashion, as dictated by the instinctive attachment to one's offspring, mate or herd), under such a situation man does not always behave so unequivocally. His attitude to his own life is not determined solely by instinct, being freer and more complicated. Man is capable of not only saving his own life but also of sacrificing it, he is capable of running the risk of losing his life and sometimes of giving it up in passive resignation.

Such a free and differentiated approach attests to the fact that man does not identify what he intrinsically is with his own physical existence and that he

can somehow confirm his humanity independently of his own survival, sometimes even against it. Evidently, he strives to exist somewhat differently than a biological entity, trying to transcend his physical existence. To put it in positive terms: he strives for a *spiritually* independent existence. Only on such a basis is it possible to compare life with other values and freely avail oneself of it.

This spiritual existence implements a purely human possibility of self-transcendence through a principal attachment to values. Man can sacrifice or save his life because of something that exceeds the value of this biological life – because of values towards which his life aspires, on which it is based, into which man invests, with which he identifies himself, to which he attaches a supreme meaning. Only a threat to such *values* – „sublime“ or „mundane“, but always *vitally important* – constitutes an extreme situation characteristic of man. If the principal values of his life have been destroyed or devalued, his bare life has any value only if and when he is capable of retaining at least some hope of discovering or creating new values. Then life becomes, provisionally, a supreme value only in the name of those unknown values and in a linkup to them.

Seen from a human viewpoint, life, survival does not appear to be an end in itself, something absolute, unconditioned but rather something to which man can assume a personal attitude: not an arbitrary but spiritually free approach – connected with values. The fact that man carries inside him something which he protects more than his own life and without which his life would lose its meaning and humanity for him may point to the conclusion that unlike other live beings *Man's specific extreme situation is a situation involving a threat to value (values) which he regards as supreme (one of the supreme)*. A threat to life is perceived by humans as an extreme situation only insofar as it also jeopardises their possibility of living for certain values. In a situation of a

total value vacuum and hopelessness, life tends to become virtually irrelevant to man.

Thus, he may attach to a certain value (not to his bare life) that which is intrinsically his own, his most profound identity, independence and integrity – which thus reveals its ontologically unique spiritual nature. What seems to be significant in human extreme situations therefore is not any boundary of human potential for biological survival but rather a limit of this or that individual value orientation and attachment.

### **3. Values**

Freedom, health, honour, property, loyalty, power, friendship, enjoyment, work, success – each human individual is known to live in the name of a certain basic value orientation, which integrates his life. One may deduce from man's prevailing attitude to life his supreme, vitally important values whose threat inevitably takes him into an extreme situation.

The innumerable possible types of threats posed to various vitally significant values may be systematically classified by this three-degree scheme: I. threat to the embodiment of a given value, II. loss of the embodiment of a given value, III. doubts cast on the validity of a given value.

I. The first degree of the threat posed to a vitally significant value – extreme situation of the first degree – arises when *the embodiment of* such a *value* (ie. t o w h a t such a value is ascribed: a valuable thing, person, a valuable relationship, status, activity etc., collectively expressed as „goods“) is seriously *threatened*. (For instance, if I appreciate friendship or human dignity or property as the supreme value, then the embodiment of this value is my friend or my civic rights or my bank-account.) If such a threat is to fall into the category of extreme situations, the only one or the most important embodiment

of this (supremely significant) value must be threatened and it must be extremely difficult to avert such a threat.

The imminent destruction of what is or can, for a certain individual, be genuine fulfilment, lively accomplishment, implementation of one of his uppermost values in life – tends to provoke massive defensive reaction. Man applies himself to *saving the situation*, which is not yet totally lost, even though it is so unfavourable that in order to retain a chance of changing it man has to stake out everything. After all, he has got nothing to lose because an extreme situation is a situation posing a threat to what is most valuable to him, with which he is tied up in a life-and-death relationship and from which, more or less, the very value of all the other things is derived.

An extreme situation of the first degree is therefore marked by its risky and demanding but still practicable changeability, which encourages man into trying to avert danger at any cost. What ought to be done by the individual, who – through the struggle for the existence of the embodiment of his cherished value – thus fights for the integral existence of himself, is to *mobilize* as much *courage* as possible.

Man will either succeed in saving the situation, in restoring the original state of undisturbed existence of the „good“ involved (regaining one's friend, civic rights or bank-account) or he will not.

II. Man who has not managed to do that finds himself in an extreme situation of the second degree – which, however, may also arise directly, without passing through the first stage at all. This is the situation involving the *loss of the embodiment of a vitally important value*. Its eventual restoration (if this is at all feasible, if – for example – no exclusive personal relationship is involved) is usually a long-term affair and does not depend solely on man's own activity.

In an extreme situation of the second degree the value itself (friendship, human dignity, property) is still not destroyed, on the contrary, it remains valid, man continues to regard it as his own supreme value and maintains towards it his intrinsically serious attitude. But the value's embodiment, through which the individual participated in that particular value (or intended to participate), no longer exists or is definitely inaccessible to him.

Within these terms, there is nothing to save at the given moment, the original state of affairs cannot be restored and it is uncertain whether the value itself will ever see its alternative embodiment. It is thus crucial to *bear the situation* at all. This means enduring the profound contradiction between what is most desirable for the individual, what „should be“ in order to sustain his integral existence and between that which simply „is“ under the given situation, regardless of the conditions of his most intrinsic identity and of the possibilities of his truly human life. This contradiction, which must be suffered, is one involving the existence of an abstract meaning of value and non-existence of its concrete embodiment. The value indispensable for the life of an individual, in its embodiment always intimately bound up with his life, loses – in an extreme situation of the second degree – its lively and impressive particularity and is preserved solely in his mind as a powerless idea, as nothing but a destructive awareness of what an individual cannot live without.

Extreme situations of the second degree, unlike the preceding stage, are characterized by the impossibility of salvaging the original state. The only way out here is to turn towards the future possibilities of finding a new embodiment of the selfsame value. That is why such a situation necessitates maximum *mobilization of hope*. For a man who attaches the meaning of his life to friendship or human dignity or property it is certainly difficult to live on his own or in prison or in impoverished old age, hoping for new encounters or freedom or a lucky win. The fulfilment of his desire does not depend solely on his own will and behavior – he simply has to persist: waiting and hoping.

It may well happen that man will not endure his trials physically and die; or he will lose all hope and commit suicide; or he can no longer endure that contradiction between the existing validity and non-existing embodiment of his value and will succumb to an insane illusion that the embodiment continues to exist („I manage to talk to my friend across the distance between us“, „I am Jesus“, „I have a treasure hidden somewhere“) or in a desperate desire for solace (at any cost) he will change his value orientation in an uncontrolled and unreflected manner (although with later „justification“), mostly by lapsing to lower values. (The value of friendship will gradually be replaced by eg. the value of external social recognition and appreciation, the value of human dignity will imperceptibly give way to chemically induced euphoria etc.) Or man will begin re-examining his existing value orientation quite consciously in a process that will, however, qualitatively change his extreme situation.

III. While humans grapple with false ways out of an extreme situation of the second degree, this situation may deepen still further, proceeding towards its third degree. This, however, may also arise in response to the first degree of the threat posed to the value involved or quite directly, without any previous threat having been posed or without the loss of embodiment of the given value. (This may also be a hidden process, a process which seems to be concerned not so much with the values themselves but rather with the embodiments representing them.) As far as the third degree threat to a vitally important value is concerned, not only is it the embodiment of this value that is threatened or lost, but the *value itself* is in jeopardy.

This may occur only after *doubts have been cast on the validity* of such a value, on its significance for man and its position among other values in his personal hierarchy of values. To cast doubts on the validity of one's supreme value is a free internal human act (albeit caused by external circumstances either repelling man from one value or attracting him to another), whereby man experimentally gives up his previous conviction of the meaning of life and sets

out to seek a new, more substantial answer to the question: why live at all and where to invest one's life. Man goes out of his way to find a new value orientation or to make sure, with a degree of reliability, whether another value orientation would not be better, whether in it he could really find himself and his own path to the world. He does this in a conscious and reflected manner – unlike the above-mentioned uncontrolled escape from an extreme situation of the second degree into a scramble for fake values.

Quite voluntarily man thus introduces problems into his ultimate life certainty (which itself may turn out to be not quite as bright and conflict-free as one would hope) and abandons it for the uncertainty of assessing, pondering and searching. He asks himself whether he has not been deprived of the embodiment of such a value rightly, whether this particular value is really worth sticking to as a supreme value (or one of the supreme values). He therefore wants to *understand the situation*.

The process of casting doubts on the validity of an existing vitally important value may stem from the value itself – man feels a certain dissatisfaction and uncertainty towards it, without perceiving as yet any other alternative value – or such doubts may, indeed, be caused by a comparison of one's hitherto valid principal value with other values – when man hesitates at a crossroads, trying to choose the right direction, not to opt for an illusion of salvation at the cost of committing betrayal.

To avoid getting oneself wrecked in the straits of widespread inner uncertainty and intractable conflicts, to avoid losing oneself amidst the chaos of numerous options, a chaos, which tends to render choice impossible or at least difficult, man needs to *mobilize wisdom* out of his innermost self. It is immensely difficult to decide whether one has justifiably cast doubts on a key value, eg. self-assertion, and whether it is more appropriate eventually to replace such a value in one's hierarchy eg. with the value of loyalty or health. Faced with a situation involving doubts about, eg., the value of property, it is no less difficult to discover for oneself a higher value which would be

sufficiently satisfactory. And nobody wiser can stand in for him in this decision-making.

One may or may not succeed in understanding the situation. One may not gain an insight into the situation and may succumb to resignation. He may even opt for a voluntary departure from life. Or he can quite consciously choose an inferior, easily attainable value („why should I seek meaning of life when there is so much fine drink and so many pretty girls around“), which, however, usually fails to be fully satisfactory to a man who has once set himself much higher objectives in life so that he now constantly lives with a suppressed sense of non-fulfilment, eventually of betrayal. Or he can finally respond by resigning, by becoming bogged down in the deadlock of the impossibility to decide: he will be seized by the experience of vanity and relativity of everything and gradually disintegrated by the feeling of absurdity and a loss of future.

Or a human individual will really manage to work his way to a clear-cut recognition and endorsement of a value he is able genuinely to accept with all his personality as a supreme value. As the case may be, this can even entail that original value, on to which doubts were cast for a time, or a value to whose unsuspected importance man has been led only through suffering experienced in an extreme situation.

#### OVERVIEW

	<i>first degree</i>	<i>second degree</i>	<i>third degree</i>
<i>initial situation</i>	threat to embodiment of value	loss of embodiment of value	doubts cast on validity of value
<i>goal</i>	save situation	situation	understand situation
<i>way</i>	mobilize courage	mobilize hope	mobilize wisdom

#### 4. Meaning



It is evident that human choice and defence of certain vitally important values or – on the contrary – their conscious abandonment cannot be explained by or deduced from a mere situation. There are situations which seem to be optimal for the full assertion of a given value, and yet under such situations man may give up this very value in exchange for another value (eg. to devote oneself to hard work in a situation facilitating a „dolce vita“). On the other hand, there are situations extremely unfavourable even for the very internal preservation of a certain value, and yet man is prepared to defend that value at the expense of his life (eg. the value of religious freedom in an atheistic dictatorship).

It seems that in consciously selecting and defending or giving up a certain value, man is not necessarily guided by *situation*. The ultimate *explanation and justification* of his decision is a purely internal matter: a certain value either has a *meaning* for him or it has not.

The meaning of a value need not be in accordance with the situation at all (on the contrary, it may prove it to be senseless), emerging independently of situation and enabling man to assume an independent position towards it. Also independently of a situation, a certain value may lose its meaning so that man no longer has any reason to defend it, much as the situation should „require“ it.

As a symptom of the intrinsic verity of values *meaning refers to being and not to situations*. It is its „sign“, which emerges as a mainstay or a challenge to man to espouse a certain value orientation intrinsically important for him.

In this way, each of man's c o n s c i o u s attitudes to values is guided by the perspective of meaning.

However, man's attitude to his principal values is not always fully conscious. Man may not find out which particular values are actually most significant for him until he gets involved in situations where such values are

endangered: Extreme situations can therefore call forth *a conscious verification of the meaningfulness* of vitally important values.

In *extreme situations of the first and second degree* man may be forced into taking a conscious decision whether to mobilize his courage in order to save the situation, or his hope in order to endure the situation or not to mobilize them all. He is, therefore, forced into consciously examining whether the value whose embodiment is threatened or lost has any meaning or not.

If he realizes that, in actual fact, a situation involving a threat to his value simply signals to him that the value in question only seems to be one of his supreme values, that it has really lost its meaning for him, that he has – so to say – outgrown it and that he has acknowledged it thus far maybe only because it has not yet been endangered, ie. because of his certain unconscious inertia, while meaning has in the meantime been transferred to other values – then extreme situation immediately cancels itself out, without man having to save anything or trying to bear an unbearable situation in any way. He emerges out of extreme situation enriched with a clear awareness of what is really meaningful for him. (For instance, a distinguished scientist who has suffered a spinal column injury and who has found out that he will be able to continue his work but won't be able to walk any more may first react as if his supreme value had been jeopardized. But he will succumb to this extreme situation only very briefly – before he realizes quite clearly that for a long time the actual meaning of his life had not really lain in the value of physical health anyway. Similarly, an extreme situation can easily undeceive eg. a philosopher who believes that he cannot lead a meaningful life without a certain social status or father of a family who is convinced that the material well-being of his closest relatives is of paramount importance.)

If, on the other hand, man establishes beyond any doubt that a value whose embodiment is threatened or has been lost nonetheless does retain its meaning for him, this will serve as a source of virtually inexhaustible inner

strength for him: it is truly remarkable what extraordinary feats can be performed and what an immense amount of hope can be held out by people inwardly integrated through their perception of the meaning of an espoused value. (A man saving the life of a child drowning beneath a weir, a political prisoner withstanding the torture by his interrogators, a wife forgiving her husband's repeated infidelity and cruelty, an aging author rewriting his destroyed lifelong work, etc.)

If long-lasting extreme situations of the first and second degree are involved, man repeatedly has to reassure himself of the meaning of his coveted value. Otherwise, the danger may arise that meaning will escape him and he will therefore succumb to the impact of situation after all. A prerequisite for rescue or endurance is repeated restoration of one's clear-cut awareness of whether and why he should still stick to this or that value. Only thanks to a keen perception of meaning man knows quite invincibly what he really wants, what he is working for and in what he puts his hope, whatever situation he may find himself in.

This keen awareness of meaning in situations of extreme suffering gives an exceptionally profound dimension to human life; rendering it perhaps truly human. If the meaning of a certain value is virtually the only thing that „sustains“ man in a situation where the embodiment of this value is lacking, he meets, as never before, the opportunity of fully experiencing the most profound, spiritual dimension of his own life and of leaning on it.

The inner strength, thus acquired and maintained, has nothing in common with the defiance of a man who tries – in uncontrolled panic, entirely on his own and at any cost, often using morally unsavoury means – to cope with his situation in his own behalf, without examining at all what this behalf is going to be from the viewpoint of meaning.

He, who believes, however transiently, that the meaningfulness of a certain value has been established merely by the fact that he himself wants it,

runs the risk of getting bogged down in an illusory imitation of meaning. It cannot be used for long to draw strength for one's own will power because – on the contrary – such an illusion tends to live off his own will and depletes it.

The strength emanating from mere defiance will be quickly used up in an extreme situation and man will either lapse into resignation and failure (depression, suicide, hopeless feelings of guilt, a slide to surrogate life values, to „solace“ in alcohol, drugs, violence, vulgar distraction, overindulgent imagination etc.) or – in a happy moment – he will eventually awaken and – with the meekness of a keen awareness, even though he initially believes that this would only hopelessly deepen his suffering – he will start asking about meaning. Thanks to this, he will freely distance himself from all his illusions, sorrows, guilts, anxieties, uncertainties, and apathy. In this way he will be approaching the very underpinnings of meaning, which may turn out to be a source of necessary courage and hope in his life, whether it turns out to be meaningful to remain faithful to his value or to abandon it.

Conscious verification of the meaningfulness of life-values in *extreme situations of the third degree* qualitatively differs from the similar activity on the preceding two levels.

This entails not only a mere act of ascertaining *whether* the given value has a meaning or not, but also an intricate process of examining *which* value really has any meaning, either within the framework of a given alternative or in a previously unlimited (but always at least somehow structured) space offering possibilities of choice.

Man therefore finds himself, at least for a time, in a situation marked by lack of basic inner provisions, by an uncertainty as to which main values should be used to guide his life. (For example, a woman doctor, who is both a mother and a scientist in the field of tropical diseases, may – under the impact of her personal first-hand experience with the greatly insufficient system of

medical care in developing countries – start re-examining the meaning of the value of maternal love for her teen-age children and the value of providing assistance to unknown suffering people whom she feels she owes her own deal of responsibility as a result of her professional qualification. Or an adolescent will suddenly start casting doubts on all the values he has recognized up till now, because he finds that his choice of such values was unconscious and that through these values he actually seemed to be directed from the outside. He duly rejects such an absurd situation and embarks on a painful and groping search for a new value orientation, still unknown but certainly more profound and indisputably his own.)

Faced with an extreme situation of the third degree, it is particularly crucial to retain unbiased confidence in meaning in general.

Naturally, one may also „seek revenge on fate“ in a negativist fashion because he finds himself in a state of hopelessness as far as values are concerned, one may even derive almost inhuman delight out of what can be termed the cult of absurdity (sometimes with tragic external consequences). But it is destructive enough when an unhappy individual allows his consciousness to be obscured by very intense feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, uncertainty, guilt, and despair, when he fails in extricating himself from his own self and in attempting to pursue the meaning, which seems to be escaping him, when he fails to allow himself to be led without any conditions or strings.

Within the enclosed space of the human mind, all the possibilities remain indifferently open. If man is not to become – in his own eyes – as unreal as such possibilities, if he is not to be drowned in a sea of indefiniteness and relativity, it is essential for him to leave his prison – to step out of the confines of his own self and of his situation. Conscious openness towards meaning is invariably supra-situational (practicable under any situation), making it possible to transcend the horizon of all the given possibilities and to assume towards them a novel approach „from above“.

There are people who – faced with situations in which doubts have been cast on their vitally important values – are capable of brightening up their consciousness possibly as never before particularly through their unqualified trust in meaning. They can divest themselves of all the negative and chance influences and positively gravitate towards the substantial. An awareness that I have nothing to lose and everything to gain is in itself a source of peace of mind and concentration even amidst the hardest suffering.

It is necessary to allow ourselves to be literally permeated by nothing else but our own thirst for meaning – to such an extent that we forget ourselves (making ourselves, in a sense, available to meaning instead of seeking it for our own ends). This is the condition for transcending the zone of what is seen, from our present standpoint, as liable to doubts, for opening ourselves to that absolute horizon in whose perspective, in the deepest perceivable background of our existence, a certain shape of our alternative value orientation, continued movement in life begins shadowing forth.

This key, liberating moment of understanding, when man's individually intrinsic shape of the fulfilment of humanity reveals itself, is not so much a moment of literal „discovery of meaning“, but rather a moment of „discovering ourselves in meaning“. This moment arrives only when man is so genuinely concerned with meaning that he longs for it not only because of himself but because of meaning itself.

Man who seeks meaning in such a selfless way, who is willing to let himself be led solely by it and never be distracted by any of its imitation on the one hand or the illusion of absolute meaninglessness on the other has the prerequisites to emerge from this extreme situation inwardly transformed and liberated for the certainty of his values. Through meaning received the order of human experience is again interconnected with the order of being.

## 5. Being

Through the external aspect of his own identity man finds himself *in situations* and through its internal aspect he proceeds *from being* while simultaneously gravitating *towards being*. In this context, man basically does not differ from other beings (Cf. above under 1) – even though he follows his own ontologically unique human path. The fact that his independence and integrity (unlike all other entities) inheres in his existential relationship with values constitutes the focal point of his self-determination with regard to situations and to being. Through the choice of values he freely determines the mode of his procedure from being as well as the mode of his emergence in situations.

He can be guided by two principal criteria. In view of the situation involved, each value is more or less practicable, and in view of being it is more or less meaningful. To orient oneself during the choice or defence of values according to their practicability, therefore, means increasing the rate of one's dependence on situations, while to orient oneself according to their meaningfulness means enhancing the rate of one's responsibility towards being. Responsibility towards being means, at the same time, assuming a free attitude to situations and, on the contrary, loss of responsibility towards being is conducive to the enslavement by situations.

Each extreme situation puts man at a crossroads: whether to take his bearings either according to practicability or according to the meaningfulness of the endangered life-value.

One may orient oneself in terms of a situation: to abandon a meaningful value because its embodiment is threatened or made impossible, and to assert a value that is intrinsically perceived as not too meaningful but in a given situation practicable. (This course of action guarantees to me a certain situational profit but, at the same time, substantially harms my human dignity.)

Or one can orient oneself intrinsically: to abandon a practicable value if it is meaningless and to uphold a value which is – true to say – practicable with greatest difficulties but which I intrinsically experience as meaningful. (This implies to me that I manage to persist in humanely fulfilled harmony with being.)

A situational solution of extreme situations subordinates meaningfulness to practicability, the viewpoint of being to the viewpoint of situation: what is practicable is also „meaningful“, what is not practicable is „meaningless“. The concept of meaning is deprived of its genuine sense of a regulating agent independent of situation.

An intrinsic solution of extreme situations, on the other hand, subordinates practicability to meaningfulness, the viewpoint of situation to the viewpoint of being: what is practicable is not necessarily meaningful and what is meaningful does not have to be practicable here and now. The concept of meaning retains its authentic sense so that what is also preserved is that creative tension – specific to human life alone – between the requirement of practicability and the requirement of meaningfulness, which spells out man's lively relation to being.

An intrinsic solution of extreme situations thus offers the preservation and promotion of what belongs to human identity and dignity: *a free relationship to situations and to one's own life in the name of responsibility towards meaning and being*; in intrinsically selected and defended values man experimentally codifies his free differentiated attitude to situations and his responsibly integrated approach to being.

Being, meaning, value, life, situation – to a man oriented on being all these concepts have their full meaning and an order of their mutual creative tension stemming from being, resembling the tension of a cascade of lively streams, flowing gradually from the heights of being down to the levelling-off breadth of all situations. A keen sense of order of this ontological streaming constitutes a condition for man's full endorsement of his own being.



On the contrary, a situational solution of extreme situations tacitly presupposes that this order is completely converse. Ontological dominance has been ascribed to situation. To maintain such an idea being must never be allowed into play – its concept is simply utilized for the denotation of a mere summary of all situations. In this way, situation grows to be a supreme power. Whereas being – as an infinitely profound source of everything there is – constantly provides something, situation – as an infinitely broad context of everything – incessantly consumes something. Sucked into its whirlpool, man loses himself and his sense of the whole ontological order: he subordinates his life to the requirements of situation – and he subordinates to life, thus degenerated to a mere struggle for survival and prosperity, his values; „meaning“ (if it is at all mentioned) is reduced to a mere expression for satisfaction derived from the practicability of chosen values. The fullness of human being is then ascribed to the full development of one's abilities to adapt oneself to any situation and to succeed in deriving profit for oneself. This adaptability may – as need be – figure even as „responsibility“ – and power, attained through adaptability and situationally conditioned, may then be glorified as „freedom“.

Conflict between a situation-dominated and being-serving man is virtually inevitable. It can develop into extreme situation for both (their vitally important values contradict each other). Outwardly, the latter is usually the loser, sometimes to the point of the violent liquidation of his physical existence. But the main support of his human, ie. spiritually conditioned, existence can never be taken away from him through any situation whatsoever.

On the other hand, such a confrontation with the second from the two elementary life options may call forth, in the very depth of the soul of the situation winner, an unexpected feeling of *guilt*: a sudden pang of conscience that he is, after all, acting against being, against meaning, against values, which – independently of the situation – he would probably endorse as his own, a realization that he is, indeed, acting against himself. This sense of betrayal or

defection from being – which invariably arrives as soon as the individual realizes that *he has himself threatened a value* which, at the bottom of his heart, is meaningful for him – at the same time paves the way for re-establishing his attitude to being.

If, however, such a man remains absolutely consistent in his situational life orientation, this orientation may result in his genuinely exceptional external prosperity, but also in his inward mortification, extinction of what is intrinsically most specific to him as a human being – his creative spiritual existence, which offers him, through an inner attachment to meaningful values, a fabulous privilege among all other entities: a free attitude to situations and a responsible relationship with being.

No external situation probably provides reliable breeding-ground for what makes man human; each attempt at striking root in the presupposed *universality* of outward situatedness (in the desire to master situations by incorporating oneself into them, to prosper under any circumstances) inevitably leads (on the contrary) to human independence being swallowed up and disintegrated by the *relativity* of this situatedness. In it man – callous, devoid of inner support from meaning and being, captive, and irresponsible – is dissolved and disintegrated into a building material of purely external (biological, economic, social, psychological, and ideological) factors of his life. He loses his self.

At the opposite end of the scale, human partiality rooted in being (without ambitions towards universal situational profit and power) receives life-giving fulfilment just like human *partiality*: it receives – free and responsible – an *absolute* life dimension.

A man who is inwardly happy thanks to this fulfilment is capable of meaningfully coping even with an immense situational suffering. A man who is „happy“ only outwardly, as a result of a favour granted by situation and for the

purpose of situational appearances, is at the same time quite helplessly exposed to a hidden innermost suffering, before which he can either ignominiously flee in search of external distraction or to admit to himself, frankly and meekly, the intrinsically significant meaning of such a suffering, which challenges man to mend his ways.

But whatever the vitally important values this or that human individual has chosen so far, according to this or that criteria, in each situation involving their threat – in each extreme situation – he is offered a new basic opportunity in life: once again he finds himself at the crucial crossroads between being and situation, between the preservation and loss of one's human identity, *between being and non-being*. An extreme situation may even be directly outlined also as a situation in which the question whether to be or not to be is highlighted to man with extreme urgency.

Man more *is* if he chooses and defends his vitally important values primarily according to their meaning, that is in accordance with being.

Man more *is not* if he chooses and defends these values primarily according to their practicability, that is in accordance with situation.

If a human individual goes out of his way to avoid extreme situations – which is possible only through an unconditional adjustment to any situation – then he rejects his specifically human being.

If, on the contrary, he tries to accept any situation in freedom and responsibility – which is possible solely in unqualified loyalty to being – then his human being develops towards its specific fullness.

## **6. Love**

Being is love. This is the only reason why something exists. Being gives itself (everything a loving subject can give) to everything there is from that moment on.

We learn that being is love inasmuch as we ourselves are. To be really fully means to find oneself in the streaming of this original love. To know that if I am I am loved and if I am loved I can love.

To love, that is to join being in its creative and salutary self-giving: to support being in everything that is. To support being independently of any situation, just for its own sake.

*To be fully* therefore means *to love intrinsically*. The choice and defence of meaningful values in free and responsible harmony with being, under any situation whatsoever, actually represent a specifically human mode of upholding the order of ontological love. Its endorsement contains the main key for tackling extreme situations.

In actual fact, situation constitutes a certain sum-total of the external impacts of entities on the entity which is conditionally singled out as the „hub“ of the situation. The centre of „my“ partial situation is „myself“; in relation to the given situation I assert my own identity, independence and integrity. An extreme situation is a situation in which I have only a minimal or zero possibility of continued assertion of my identity, a situation in which I stand on the brink of my own (primarily internal) extinction – if I remain to be the absolute centre of this situation: if – in my destructive and situation-targeted *self-love* – I remain shut off from that inward-filling, liberating, absolutely purposeful streaming of love-being.

A key point for finding a way out of an extreme situation is to *centre it towards being*. To refer it to this hidden centre of all situations of all entities, each separately and also in their entirety; to pass it on to what secretly shares situation with each individual entity and supports its identity and independence in the absolute empathy and justice of love.

The order of love then highlights, in a totally different light, what had supremely endangered us: loss of property, social status, health etc. will open up for us access to a deeper understanding and endorsement of personal values; out of our love for a close friend or relative we will view his death as his

liberation and as our commitment towards his spiritual heritage; loss of external freedoms is conducive to an awakening of our inner life; an act of betrayal by a friend will strengthen our capacity to be faithful; uncertainty concerning values as well as doubts and a sense of absurdity will sometimes result in understanding the general possibility to love.

If a man renders being itself the centre of his situation, he simultaneously gives himself to it – he is no longer firmly fixed merely in his situational identity – and at the same time finds himself identical in his anchorage in love, capable of responsibly sharing as his own also situations other than his own and ready freely to abide by the meaning-providing order of being, common to him and all other entities. *He loves*, and thus independently of his own situation he finds and supports in everything and especially in other people their own being, their love. (Kliment Maria Hofbauer, a Viennese priest, once asked a stranger for help for people who found themselves in need. The man attacked him verbally and spat into his face. The priest quietly took out his handkerchief, wiped his face and said: „That was meant for myself. And now, please, give something to my poor.“ The astounded man emptied the contents of his walet into the priest's hat.)

On many occasions we can spot this possibility to love – the possibility to *support being in everything there is* – but fully open ourselves to it often as late as under extreme situations – when we usually have „nothing that is our own“ to lose. Yet this possibility as such remains available to us at any time. It does not offer itself as the possibility of definitely safeguarding our own selves against extreme situations (a goal a situationally oriented individual strives to attain in vain) but on the contrary – as the possibility of free innermost exposure to extreme situations in the name of the meaningful order of being.

By attaching himself to being, a human individual, therefore, is not rid of extreme situations – on the contrary, such an orientation may sometimes be an overriding cause of their emergence (Jesus, Socrates and others) – but he is deprived of a far more dangerous factor – inner fascination with them. Extreme

situations lose their power over him, something greater matters to him more than such situations.

Extreme situations constitute a constantly feasible component of the existence of each being (Cf. under 1), they cannot be essentially avoided. It is, therefore, crucial to be ready for them beforehand: using wisdom, hope and courage (Cf. under 3), one should be trained to understand them beforehand as something which stimulates us to the greatest extent towards creative acceptance and endorsement of being. That is why extreme situations may sometimes be even sought out as a demanding yet most straightforward path to a more profound integration with being. A gradual active process of exposing oneself to very harsh living conditions (ascetism) and a gradual active process of casting doubts on all value-related supports, mere „signposts“ of human life, practised in the name of what is their ultimate objective (mysticism), lead to the gradual increase of independence of situational context of life. Man *is* (without adding anything) and this „is“ operates through him as active love more powerful than death, than blind thirst for life. Man is then received, permeated and carried by being, for which he has opted and which he serves without any reservations whatsoever. Viewed in this perspective, extreme situations are incorporated into life as a dynamising element of the hidden process of *the growth towards the fulness of being*. If this growth implicitly matters most in each human life, *the endorsement of the „imperative“ and order of love* may be the paradigm of an optimally humanly possible (even though in its possible perfection commonly unattainable) attitude to extreme situations.

## **In conclusion**

It has been shown that if we pose – despite shocking impressions – quite consistently the question as to the *truth* concerning extreme situations, we will basically come to the conclusion that extreme situation is, in fact, a demanding

and significant lesson in our „*art of being*“. In it, a situation of deepest crisis, the question invariably arises – always uniquely, always seen from a certain inimitable angle – as to the ultimate perspective of human life, its overall value and meaning, its absolute relational constant. In a situation of downfall man seeks his own self against the background of a higher meaning, which would enable him not only to cope with the threat but also to encourage further growth.

The fuller, more general – more absolute, more universal – the cherished meaning, the more magnanimously and truthfully can man accept his situation and the more creatively can he cope with it. Short-sighted solutions, fixed solely on the relative and partial, purely functional contexts of human life, make it impossible to promote fully all human relational potentialities, which extreme situation tends to stimulate, and thus sometimes condemn man to lifelong spiritual invalidity, intrinsic lack of fulfilment, to languishing in an entire inner dependence on what actually lies beneath his ontological level.

Seen against this background, the impact of human relationship with the endangered man is not without its significance either. In the main text of this study, it has been a deliberate intention to abstract from this issue because in an extreme situation man always remains essentially isolated. Furthermore, man's absolute orientation may be mediated by a second person only to a certain extent.

Naturally, a man in jeopardy may be given situational support: economic, social, medical, psychological, ideological. This support should, however, not obliterate, suppress or replace intrinsic, spiritual assistance. The latter, unlike the related psychological and ideological help, consists neither in the slightest mental manipulation nor in the presentation of ready-made „absolute truths“ but in mere *co-being*. *I am* with the fellow man in his situation so that he too could *be* in this situation. Jointly we therefore open the possibilities of *being* in the given situation.

As far as this love-filled support for the identity and independence of another man is concerned, the first task is to overcome in him distrust in the existence of an ontological context deeper than the situational one (if such distrust ever occurs). Such distrust often arises as a result of previous experiences of interhuman relations as situationally connected. Proceeding from such a basis, an analogically distorted self-conception arises. On the contrary, spiritual co-being as a *supra-situational* human relationship (persisting in any situation) offers to man under threat a pacifying key experience, a reliable gateway towards supra-situatedness in general. Within its principal context, he is more or less himself able to understand and save the endangered identity and independence against the destructive powers of situation. (Enjoying freedom towards situations and responsibility towards being, he is capable of selecting and upholding meaningful values.)

This intrinsic help to an individual who has found himself in an extreme situation should always predominate over situational support. Mere situational help conceals the danger of one-sided promotion of what is nonetheless a situational context, which – under the impact of such helps – may pose a definitely vicious circle to thus afflicted a man. Overemphasis on the situationally functional viewpoint (sometimes forced on another in good faith) poses the danger of exacerbating an extreme situation, which can really be overcome solely „from inside out“ – through the preservation and promotion of the individual's intrinsic identity.

Intense situational support without supra-situational co-being likewise tends to plunge the endangered man into a situational dependence on the individual providing help, whereby the former seems to cease living his own life and awaits, well beneath his dignity and in a fairly escapist manner, what his relatives, authorities or psychiatrists „are going to do with him“. On the other hand, co-being reverts man to himself, to his own being. It revives in him his intrinsic ability to enjoy free loneliness, contemplation, independent quest, and



at the same time provides him with the supra-situationally anchored possibility of responsible togetherness, dialogue, joint creation.

In short, it teaches him how to „associate“ *with being:to accept it in oneself and support it in others*. At the same time, this is the most efficient method of *prevention* both against succumbing to extreme situations and against creating unnecessary extreme situations in any dimension (Cf. Introductory Notes). It is likewise the only *point of departure* towards such a process of changing human situations which would transpire without any unpredicted threatening impacts, in the genuine interest of all people – because conducted in profound harmony with being.

## ABSOLUTE LOVE

I think I can sense a Divine silence  
beyond this indifferent tranquility of the  
sea.

Shusaku Endo

Absolute love? Can a concept like that be sensibly and reasonably contemplated at all? To love absolutely – presumably to give everything and not to ask anything in return – that seems to go beyond the confines of common experience and imagination. One may even say that in this world of ours nothing can be more certain than the assertion claiming that „absolute love“ does not exist. After all, such a kind of love can give nothing smaller but everything in the world and cannot give it in any other way than absolutely selflessly – while excluding any possibility whatever of breeding any unwarranted feeling of obligation on the part of the recipient. That means: hypothetical absolute love would have to give everything there is without presenting it as a gift and without betraying itself as the giver.

But doesn't the very world we live in and our own existence have the nature of such a delicate gift? As a matter of fact, we are not obliged in any way to perceive the world and our own existence as a gift. Everything seems to be a matter of course and with its imperfections it does not look like a heartfelt gift. The relationship of giving has been successfully covered up precisely with this. Both in formal terms – with the gift and the recipient being identical (we are given to ourselves, the world is given to itself) – and in terms of contents: the world goes on without apparent outside interventions and its end will probably be similarly natural; it is marked by the suffering of the entire living kingdom and a lack of human kindness. We can, therefore, pose a paradoxical question whether this is not a gift of absolute love, which hides itself precisely behind such a world so as not to tie anyone's hands against one's own will. Only in

such a world are we offered the possibility of freely deciding – on our own – in an ambiguous, „zero“ position towards that „gift – non-gift“ to search for that conceivable just as inconceivable selfless absolute love. There is no unequivocal trace left behind it save for this unequivocal sign that it is precisely absolute love which can never leave behind itself any unequivocal trace unless it is to cease being absolute love. This clearcut piece of information, encoded into everything there is, can be a starting point for a further quest. It serves to confirm both our own freedom and the unobtrusive and non-binding selflessness of absolute love in their outgoing link-up on the basis of which an encounter is made possible.

The world as a mere paradoxical invitation to such a meeting does cover up absolute love's never-ending desire to give, after all, itself – overtly and totally. But none other but we ourselves can gradually divest it of the concerns and considerations in the name of which it always endows only to such an extent so as not to oblige. Only our free decision to accept however big an obligation or challenge – the initial willingness to sacrifice everything and expect nothing in return – releases absolute love for a totally apparent act of self-giving. The moment we abandon our calculating disinterested approach, curtains and barriers tend to fall down on the part of absolute love as well. We are with absolute love to the same degree we have made up our mind to give ourselves as much as it does. Full encounter here means unification. And the biggest commitment as well as the greatest gift.

Only afterwards can we discover how has absolute love actually borne our free decision with us since the very onset; each of our sacrifices on its behalf is at the same time its own sacrifice inside us through which it serves our decision to be totally for it. Therefore, the „yoke“ of absolute love is „light“. But the same cannot be said of the burden of the ballast which we are still dragging along and which renders our commitment incomplete: that is the dead weight of uneasily disposable self-centredness with which we enclose that commitment also partly because of ourselves or despite the persisting fears for

ourselves. Absolute love does respect this. It is there waiting for man to relinquish care for himself to this love on his own free will and to assume that „light“ and totally emancipating interest in itself in all its entirety and purity.

To be for absolute love in this way, to love it fully means to love what it loves and to love in its own way. Such profound, gentle, sober bliss of this commitment is inviolable and indestructible by external factors, such as drudgery, waste and frustration, persecution, unless, of course, man himself begins to pay greater attention to such factors than to absolute love itself and to those he loves together with it. Through self-forgetfulness because of it man is offered the chance of experiencing the suffering of others as if it were his own suffering, of assuming such hardships himself, but also of experiencing it together with absolute love, and hence together with its inexhaustible potency of giving, seeking ways out, liberating, and supporting one's neighbour in his genuine being. Looking through its eyes, man will discern the simple truth that one should love most those who need loving most and that the greatest happiness is the happiness achieved jointly with those who have previously been most unhappy.

It is never absolutely clear whether our love is sufficiently intense. Concentration on one's own impotence or on one's own merits tends to dampen the spirit of love. Only if we desire to achieve the impossible will absolute love come to our rescue. To love together with it means to change one's criteria: to give even out of a life's minimum – psychological, social, material one – if this happens to be the other person's inaccessible maximum. To be with absolute love involves soiling oneself both with other people's suffering and with one's own errors and failures, spending one's life in a complicated and exhausting struggle with something that cannot be completely conquered. Absolute love is fragile and defenceless. But it invariably is what remains even on the ruins, it is what can always be taken up to start with, what continues independently of anything else. Free beings have nothing to lose but it.

A human relationship sharing the vantage points and modes of absolute love makes it abundantly clear that through his love the donor himself gains the greatest thing: happiness derived from being involved in absolute love's act of self-giving, while the gift itself as well as any gratitude of the recipient – compared with such happiness – displays an infinitesimal value. Then a gift may be accepted without having to be unequivocally regarded as a (binding) gift. He who has thus been endowed can search for hidden prerequisites of this act of giving, which does not oblige man against his own will but rather emancipates him at the very bottom of his freedom.

To stimulate in one's fellow man a resolve to embark on the road towards absolute love, a desire to encounter it at whatever cost, to accept its obligation, gradually to open ourselves out and to become a tool of its self-giving to others through ourselves – that is the greatest gift: for the fellow man, for myself, for absolute love – but always primarily from absolute love.

## TRUTHFULNESS OF FAITH

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche constitutes a paradigmatic expression of the gradual resignation, both overt and covert, to verity which, on the whole, characterizes European thought of the past one hundred years. It seems as if after Nietzsche nothing were left to us but life as a *game* whereby knowledge and faith appear to have been released from the demands of „enslaving“ truthfulness. However, at a certain stage of its exhaustion, the destruction of grand ideas and a renewed surge of elemental and elementary creativity – both, following Nietzsche, taking the shape of an almost conscious and deliberate process in Europe – pose precisely due to this issue of truthfulness a new challenge and offer novel possibilities.

It was only from a certain postmodern position of detachment from the totalizing systems of „eternal truths“ that became possible to pose the question of truthfulness at a more profound and generally determining level. It came to transpire that the rational underpinnings of „a certain knowledge“ had been built on moving sands of a more powerful, fundamental and omnipresent irrationality out of which each rational formation of ideas proceeds, consciously or unconsciously, while serving that irrationality at its own level of accuracy. Not to be aware of it means being victimized, usually by its worse aspects (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Jung, 1957).

Consciously to proceed from the terrain of irrationality – or to put it more precisely, from the innermost reality of spirit and life, which transcends and nurtures every conceivable thought – and not to resign, at the same time, to the dimension of truthfulness means to deepen one's own reflection as much as possible, taking it towards the most extreme point of departure of human spiritual life. It means to enquire about the truthfulness of *faith*.

Seen from this fundamental angle, truthfulness can be defined as a *relationship* towards what there *is*. As such, truthfulness is not a fetish of idle knowledge but rather a prerequisite of life. Because, even when the only thing

left to us and the only thing important for us would be a totally blind, unthinking and unspiritualized life, we cannot ignore the invariably dearly paid-for conclusion that a life not aiming at truthfulness tends to be self-destructive. Unrelated towards what there is, enslaved by the destructive power of illusions, such a life turns into a self-enclosed dying, however rationally endowed it might be (Krzyston, 1984; Havel, 1989; Peccei, 1981). Confusion of playful coherence with relational truthfulness (Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Rorty and others) throws human life at the mercy of any spontaneous irrationality. It deprives life of the possibility of taking one's bearing in what transcends it, letting life spiritually down. If „nothing is true and anything goes“, human life disintegrates itself into the shallowest functions. The abyssmal complexity of the real world is reduced to a superficial terrain of playgrounds and stages of the most diverse kinds, and the demanding profundity of genuine relationships between people is reduced to the tyranny of chance and the rules of manipulation. Individual persons and whole groups of people who perceive life as a game lose their capacity to self-transcendence, losing their relationship to reality and to one another – in an analogy to drug intoxication. But most probably only under such a historic situation is it possible to highlight sufficiently the importance of radically formulating the question concerning truthfulness.

But are we still capable of putting up with it? We feel that it is beyond our human powers to answer that question. But on many previous occasions we have already discovered that what prevailed merely by virtue of human strength was not the truth. We are afraid of the truth maybe because we sense that it is sufficient „merely“ to open ourselves out to it: what is this going to do to us? But are we entitled to defend ourselves externally against ideological and social totalitarianism when, internally, we tend to be ourselves so hopelessly close-minded?

However, we need not go to the entire length of exploring the weakness of a spiritual situation whose dimension of truthfulness has been lost, in order to

start enquiring about truthfulness as such. After all, it is both possible and necessary at any time. Possibly, this is what renders the question of truthfulness so characteristic. Each and every situation provides its specific springboard for the formulation of this question. Nowadays, more than ever before, we have the opportunity of asking the query regarding the factor that controls and focuses our entire life from our depths: regarding personal faith.

### **Relation and Image**

Humans are the only beings on Earth capable of maintaining a spiritual *relationship* with anything. (For a fundamental clarification, within our context, of the specificity of humans as spiritual beings see Scheler, 1927; cf. also Gehlen's dictum, „humans do not live, they lead a life“, 1940.) They do not live only in an unconscious immediate link to their environment as animals, plants and inanimate beings; they are capable of reflection, judgement and conceptualization. Automatic interconnection between situational stimuli and immediate purposeful reactions, typical of living organisms, is disrupted in man as if from another dimension: through enquiry, evaluation and decision-making.

Man *relates* to everything by adopting a certain distance, proceeding from an awareness of contexts which go beyond the immediately perceived situation: in his consciousness and unconsciousness, he constantly carries within himself a coherent system of individual, group and ancestral experiences, a system of *ideated experiences* at various levels and provenances. (Cf. eg. Husserl, 1913; Cassirer, 1923–1929; Jung, 1964; Ricoeur, 1975; and others.) These, in particular, constitute the mediating pillars of human relationships, enabling as they do to maintain a distance, providing an overview and



independent effect on things. We compare and anticipate everything we actually encounter with those objectified and non-objectified *mental images*.

Their system as well as each individual image tends towards a certain degree of self-sufficiency – towards separating itself (and hence separating man) from what it really depicts, from what it has been originally related to. But if we manage to retain an unqualified interest in what is depicted, then, on the contrary, our images can be developed towards greater truthfulness, though remaining to be humanly limited.

Any image is all the more truthful the more permeated with relationship it is, the more successful it turns out to be in presenting what we relate to. A „relationship“ *without an image* is not (a mental) relation at all but a mere immediate linkage to something which we humanly fail to recognize (because we lack the detachment provided by the image). But not even a relationship *towards an image* constitutes a real relation but rather a one cancelling itself out by sinking into itself, by getting bogged down in its own innermost structure, which has replaced the other pole of relationship, namely reality. Spiritual relationship is a relation *towards an object through an image*.

In this case, an aspiration towards truthfulness presupposes an awareness that there invariably lies *ambiguity* in the roots of human relating: an image enabling to maintain an inner distance and thus a spiritual relation (unlike immediate link) at the same time makes that relationship impossible precisely by placing itself, in human consciousness and unconsciousness, in between the relating man and his opposite, simply by not being that opposite itself. If we are really concerned with truthfulness in the sense of relationship to what there *is* we should somehow cope with the fact that through an image man actually separates himself from what he wants to attain but in spiritual terms he cannot reach the object he aspires to in any other way but through a relationship, hence through an image. If we want to remain human beings, there is simply no way of extricating ourselves from that paradox. Through this

„koan“ something may open up to man only by virtue of his lifelong efforts for achieving greater truthfulness of all his relations.

To a considerable extent, the spiritual life of today's civilization appears to lack this sense of direction. The point of departure of genuine orientation to truthfulness is the neglected awareness that each image – ie. not only a concept but also a symbol, metaphor, word, even a non-verbal expression, each experience, either realized or unrealized but somehow and sometimes ideated – separates us from what can appear through that image, separating us all the more, the more we are (even) *philosophically convinced* that an image is an expression of the „thing itself“. In actual fact, the more we tend to forget it, the more we set our sights on the image, losing a relationship with the thing. What appears itself (through the image) is not exactly because of that appearance the truth of the thing itself. As a result, the paradoxical and deceptive ambiguity of each image (concept, symbol, metaphor, etc.) causes us to be tempted to live in a (mostly shared) realm of images, which we regard as an authentic self-expression of being, and in this way images, unwillingly, separate us from being. Therefore, in this game, involving speculative imagery „unburdened“ by the question of truthfulness, we find ourselves at the threshold of spiritually withering away.

We are in a position to preserve our affinity with being solely through constant self-transcendence by asking the question of the truthfulness of our entire spiritual life. To keep on posing such a question means to restore the relationship by questioning each image. This is all the more difficult because images do seem to have an autonomous life of their own: as if they came to us on their own. We are usually content with what springs to our mind spontaneously in an unrelated self-sufficiency of our creation. Thus, images can somehow completely „by themselves“ block the horizon, making vision absolutely impossible. They can become the most significant, profound, original thing. But some people seem to be concerned precisely with that: *spirituality*

*sunk into imagination* experiences the loss of all relationships towards anything situated „behind images“ as a complete unification with the universe. (Eg. Neubauer, 1980: „In experience we experience the being of entity as it really is /p. 91/. Speech is reality itself /p. 84/. ... to live in truth that is to do the same as reality does – to be creative active self-sufficient self-expression /p. 84/. Reality is inherent in experience as my behavior, my attitude“ /p. 86/.) When totally separated from everything, when ceasing to feel that apart from myself and my imagination there is still anything else, I can easily come to the conclusion that I myself have become Everything.

It is possible for us to enter that distinguishing dimension truth-untruth only by having soberly assumed responsibility for our own images. In this way, relationship to anything else outside them (and outside myself) can be reopened. But it can also transpire that reflection of imaginative unrelatedness formulated merely as a descriptive *scientific methodological statement* confirms that unrelatedness, consciously legalizing resignation to truthfulness. The fact that we cannot suddenly and totally penetrate towards what there is, that we cannot have at our complete disposal an absolute yardstick of truthfulness may grow to be a reason for sophisticated alibism, covering up a lack of interest in truth, and for an attempt to legitimize giving priority to other interests, which may easily turn one's quest for truth into a noncommittal, slightly dramatic aesthetic game.

In the sphere of hermeneutics the escape from the issues of the truthfulness of interpretation takes the shape of an attempted dialogue of mutually integrating interpretations, which is in itself a purpose, a yardstick and a meaning. In natural scientific research the same principle of game assumes the form of a similarly self-serving competition between theories, vying with one another in the growth of their empirical contents and their critically verified coherence.

An unrelated creation of beautiful, keen, useful, lofty, exciting and other images then automatically, unrestricted by their own creators, may eventually result in an ideological lie and material violence levelled against everything there is; before a relation could have or has been established the thing involved is being handled according to an image.

Linking up to such a spiritual facticity of our times, we can formulate a certain elementary vantage point: The struggle for the greatest possible truthfulness of relations, and hence for relatedness itself, should apparently be conducted as (1) a fight for our own sober awareness that we are all the more with the „object“, the more thoroughly aware we are that its image is nothing but an image, (2) without simultaneously giving up a relation with „object“ – without abandoning the truthfulness of our images.

It is impossible to find out how to conduct that struggle specifically (and whether it is futile or not) in any other way but by starting to fight. The sphere of faith constitutes the absolutely elementary field of action.

## **Faith and the World**

Faith renders the world accessible in spiritual terms: by depicting it through a certain system or sequence of emotional and intellectual meanings. Ranging from the elementary proto-faith mediated by our mothers to the reflected and cultivated form of mature faith, faith indeed makes the world comprehensible and habitable, through the initial immediately experienced „*our* world“.

The world of each of us is different (Gadamer, 1961; Husserl, 1954): marked by a different shape, size, complexity, openness, arrangement, specialization, limitations, impact on other human worlds, with which it coexists, overlaps or cancels one another out, with which it finds itself in an inexhaustible interaction of support or absorption, indifference, destruction or

enrichment. In a similar vein, faith, which co-shapes each of these worlds, is likewise differentiated.

The personal worlds we live in tend to create – using all the different modes of their specificity and interaction – a more general plurality of broader, supra-individual common worlds, once again with their relatively shared rules, scope, contents, order, and style: the worlds of different families, various interest groups, diverse ethnic or state formations, various civilizations – worlds in a mutual horizontal and vertical dynamic relation whose result is a hierarchical structure in which the specific holders of dominating positions are constantly changing because no human world has so far succeeded with absolute validity in proving that it is the world common to all humans, the best, definitive, victorious world, encompassing in itself all the other worlds (differentiated geographically, historically, functionally, etc.) and surmounting their limitations and imperfections in an absolute synthesis, whose order would determine beyond any doubt which knowledge is truthful, which behavior is good and which work is beautiful. An absolute perspective of any human world – relatively individual and comparatively common – is never certain and hence it is, by and large, a matter of *faith* (and not of any reliable and definite knowledge) to decide in which world we instinctively or freely want to participate receptively and creatively.

Since each world we live in is a multilayer „overlap“ of many other worlds and a cross-section of their relations, the preservation of the integrity of our world – its continuity, style unity, and identity and existence in general – necessitates a lasting *dynamic integrity* of our faith, maintained by permanently taking decisions and choosing from many options. However, the inaccessibility of a reliable, unequivocal knowledge, the dependence on the painstaking groping of faith precisely in the most important human matters also give rise to resignation to higher, subtler levels of human life (morality, spirituality). But it is only their meaningful elaboration that accords to human life its

characteristic beauty and fullness, including the possibility of posing the question of truthfulness.

To decide about faith is no longer so difficult after the human world has been reduced to its lowest levels; it seems to be accessible to a mere calculating reason. This reason, shared with the other primates, gives us the opportunity of adroitly adjusting ourselves to any context and deriving gratification of our elementary needs without having to ask after the meaning of our own behavior. But a world reduced according to the concerns of comfort, enjoyment, ownership, eventually power is a mutilation of the humanly relevant world. The minimalism of faith in the eternity, permanence and absoluteness of these elementary values, however, fails to provide an adequate basis for communication about matters that are *specifically human* – eg. reflection of one's own faith and its truthfulness. The large-scale spread of this particular orientation makes it possible to calculate beforehand and in very great detail the elemental reactions of a crowd whose each member is isolated due to his or her primitive faith in a world underdeveloped in terms of relations, in a world whose qualitative emptiness man tries in vain to compensate by quantitative greed (Fromm, 1956).

The quality of our world therefore depends on our faith. True to say, the private world of each of us is invariably shaped also from the outside – through the impact of all the worlds to which we are somehow related and especially whose part it is. But our world is not disintegrated or absorbed by them because – just as all the other human worlds – it represents an organic structure moulded *from within* – through the living faith, which gives our own world, since its inception, its own autonomy, creating its unifying core, postulating its own intrinsic, irreplaceable and freely attainable purpose, experienced as a fulfilment of the meaning of our personal existence. Our world is not primordially given to us from the outside, rather we create it from the inside, from the vantage point of our faith in an interaction with external events.

But our own faith keeps changing and with it our world: external factors activate our innermost depths, then offering to their manifestations a multitude of various predetermined forms of expression. The more superficial layer of irrational depths of our existence, *the elemental spontaneity*, rests on a stratum of *spiritual freedom*. The actual face of our faith changes primarily in dependence on the interrelation between the assertion of our spontaneity and the attainment of our freedom. A faith which is sufficiently free can eventually open for us *the world as it really is*, gradually liberate us from the constraints and distortions of „my“ or „our“ world. That could be the „mundane“ aspect (and profit) of the truthful faith we are searching for.

Even though the question of truthfulness of faith may be addressed to any faith anywhere and at any time, it is asked genuinely and intrinsically only by a faith which is primarily concerned not with the fact *that* it believes but rather with *what* it believes in, with the opposite, with the relation to it as it is. As a matter of fact, such a question, however, emerges into human consciousness usually at the borderline of different worlds, if there are more modes of faith (religions, world views, philosophies, ideologies, or scientific beliefs) in an available cultural area. Only competition among them provides a historic and local impulse for stimulating the question aimed at their truthfulness.

The possibility of finding a genuine solution of this issue seems to be more of a civilization luxury. It is opened in the situation of an absence of the tyranny of a single faith and after the barriers of mutual communication have been lifted. Engaging in a *dialogue*, oral or written, with persons holding different views helps us in learning about their own faith and worlds *from their own rendering*, hence we are offered an immediate, undistorted account, as if at that moment their faith were ours too. In a climate of tolerance, ample information and with the possibility of introducing an unbiased mutual opening, which happens nowadays on a planetary scale (Cf. the ongoing

dialogue of world religions) in spite of the surviving ideological bulwarks, we have a chance – proceeding from an acceptance of the plurality of different worlds and from their authentic knowledge – freely and sincerely to start enquiring which of all human faiths is truthful or whether there is any at all.

An honest resolution of this question is, however, possible only if and when our civilized tolerance is a consciously cultivated product of *spiritual openness* and not a mere byproduct of *puzzled insensitivity*, in which we „choose a faith“ not because it is truthful but because it seems to suit our elemental spontaneity (as a coat bought in a department store: Is it still fashionable? Am I feeling comfortable wearing it? Is it going to last? Do I look decent or attractive in it? Do the people I care about wear a similar coat?). For people whose perception of other than aesthetic or utilitarian criteria has been blunted (Valadier, 1988) the question of truthfulness represents just some kind of a mysterious spectre. In a postmodern situation of an unsuppressed plurality, when this question could be tackled freely by any man – without streamlining pressures being applied or in spite of their paltry leftovers hanging around – , it is sometimes driven away by the elemental arbitrariness of spontaneous devotion.

Voluntary sectarianism, religious and otherwise, is, certainly, kind of an unnecessary barbarianism as soon as new possibilities of a spiritual dialogue and growth open before humans. But competitive thinking and tendencies towards rivalries in the field of faith can just as well be an expression of hopeless anxiety, ensuing from those open possibilities, which are immaturely rejected as a dangerous jungle of relativity or a desert of uncertainty. What is rejected together with them is the meek question of truthfulness, which is the only one in a position, unlike all the other criteria, to lead us safely through that „jungle“ and „desert“, open to us the vertical freedom of growth in contrast with the horizontal freedom of choice of a suitable self-provision. A faith complying solely with the elemental needs of psychological or social certainty at



any cost (Lauer, 1973), where faith is just a badly affixed label on the artificial absolute, re-introduces, at least in the eyes of its followers, the situation wherein the issue of truth is once again becoming an inadmissible luxury.

Man's material wealth and spiritual emancipation therefore manage to yield, together with external conditions of tolerance and communicability of various worlds, *solely the possibility* of tackling the question of truthful spiritual orientation. By themselves, they do not solve it. They facilitate spiritual cultivation as well as spiritual decline, a search for truthful faith as well as dependence on surrogates. Enjoying the looseness of elemental spontaneity but without the innermost free will to attain the truth, dependent on external conditions, one can manage to arrive at nothing better than a destructive hopelessness towards the relativity of „truths“ and towards the violence of „absolute certainties“, a state of bluntness – getting accustomed either to tedious coexistence or permanent hostility -, a cultivation of faith according to utilitarian, prestige, emotional or aesthetic aspects – at the cost of, let us say, total self-deception and utter mutual isolation. Paradoxically enough, today's plurality of faiths provides to many people an alibi for this kind of resignation to truthfulness. At the same time, it offers a unique opportunity for something completely different.

Interaction between different faiths (accompanied by a global interaction of their worlds) may basically crystallize into its following three types: (1) physical and psychological manipulation – with the ultimate aim of attaining *total* consent of all; (2) a noncommittal discourse – with all relativistic consequences of an anthropocentric *plurality*, (3) a shared painstaking and loving dialogical and cooperative quest whose meaningful vanishing point is *universal* human mutuality in a faith articulated differently but still being the only, because truthful, faith. The process of penetrating into that truthful and hence universal faith is inextricably linked with an opening of a *commonly shared world* of all the people and its absolute foundations. This possible

association in truth is attainable only very far beyond the borders of all „our worlds“ – as a result of a permanently shocking and demanding query concerning faith, capable of releasing us from all the „too human“ mirrors of our relatively cocooned partial worlds and their still persisting tendency to domination. A perspective of this faith opens itself up in the depth of the personal existence of each of us once we dare to penetrate into our freedom and therefore be able to *go beyond our world*, open it to the world there *is* and its absolute foundation.

### **Faith and the Absolute**

The „thing“ to which faith is related through its images, hence the specific „object“ or opposite of faith, is Absolute – an instance which, through faith, establishes and in the most general terms determines human spiritual life. Whether this „thing“ exists or not, whatever nature it has (virtually anything can become an Absolute), it is through faith that it becomes the ultimate support of human life. Faith, formulated religiously, philosophically, scientifically, artistically, or otherwise, but always personally, humanly experienced before such a formulation, therefore constitutes a relationship of supreme importance for all our other spiritual relations. Faith is that furthestmost, innermost point of departure out of which man asserts himself as a being capable of establishing a spiritual relation to anything. As a result, faith as relationship to what we regard as the Absolute is invariably the supreme regulative of our reflection, appraisal, conception, enquiry, evaluation, and decision-making. It is the profoundest expression, background and yardstick of our spiritual freedom.

Hence this or that faith constitutes a setting on which man perceives the ultimate meaning and value of anything he encounters or creates. In this way, faith shapes the most fundamental spiritual orientation and style of each

individual man, giving a certain general meaning and motivation to his creation, learning and utilitarian intentions. It brings together individual people, associating them on the platform of various common measures of life. The truthfulness of faith is starting point towards the truthfulness of entire human life.

The question concerning the truthfulness of faith is a question enquiring whether the „thing“ to which faith is related – an ideal, an experience, a material value, a personality, a principle, God or a god, hence any Absolute of faith – exists *as the Absolute* either *only as an image* of faith or still further as some „*thing in itself*“. Hence, (1) whether an opposite of faith is something that: a) somehow exists outside faith at all, outside its depicting capacity and independently of it, b) whether, in this position, it has also the quality of absoluteness, and (2) whether and to what extent it is expressed in faith, through the images of faith, as it is.

The complexity of the question becomes apparent especially from a global comparison with the question concerning the truthfulness of our knowledge. Even an answer to that question was and still is difficult, complex and never complete, as documented by the history of philosophy, science and other modes of knowing. Furthermore, faith is related to that which even *goes beyond* the reach of knowing and its verification methods – otherwise it would not be a faith but knowledge. But what kinds of measures of truthfulness can there ever be? How to apply our question at all? Isn't it absolutely useless? But isn't it at the same time supremely important? Can it be bypassed? Surely, the truthfulness of faith determines, among other things, precisely the truthfulness of knowledge: it can be observed that the supreme, though not always explicit, criterion of truthful knowledge is, after all, invariably consonant with some historically determined faith – with its overall paradigmatic image of the world and relations with the world, an image whose truthfulness is simply believed in; in actual fact, the ultimate criterion of the truthfulness of knowledge always inheres in this accord with some hypothetical conception claiming that what

there is must manifest itself in that it is and that it is such and such in a specific, beforehand known manner (whose connection with the studied thing is believed in). Consistently to enquire about the human criteria of the truthfulness of knowledge – and analogously other spiritual relations too – means to come to as far as that point of departure from omnipresent and often unreflected faith. Such faith marks out the entire groundwork of each culture, offering an ultimate yardstick of human truth, which has been valid for centuries or millennia, before it is gradually demonstrated whether and where it was false and before another measure is accepted. Because in this way faith is our gateway to truthfulness, the struggle for its truthfulness is a fight for truthfulness in general, fight for the dimension of truthfulness of the entire human culture and history – naturally always as a struggle for the truthfulness, of one's own life, through which we participate in this whole.

Therefore, if all the spiritual relations (cognitive, purposeful, creative, contemplative, etc.) are subjected to yardsticks of truthfulness provided by an Absolute-focused relationship of faith, if the truthfulness of our faith – the quality of its relation with what there is – ultimately determines whether our life is enclosed into illusions or opened to the truth, then faith should be most consistently enquired about its truthfulness, regardless of the difficult nature of such a question.

For *spontaneous human faith* – faith hitherto untouched by this free enquiry which casts doubts on it – the Absolute may be identified with various instances man perceives individually or collectively as the most important for him in a given period: Mother, Father, Wife, Children, Education, Money, Drug, Sport, the Church, Party, Work, Friend, Power, Progress, Justice, Freedom, Salvation, God, State, Love, Guru, etc. The Absolute of a spontaneous faith is that „thing“ which matters most to man at a certain period of his life, which he experiences as a unique, irreplaceable and determining foundation and purpose of his own life. This can be virtually anything – ranging from things quite

„mundane“ to metaphysical ones, from tangible objects to pure ideas – anything of material or personal or supra-personal nature, all invariably endowed with this importance, with a supreme significance in one's life.

For each of us, spontaneous faith is an initial mode of faith, making it possible for us somehow to believe and thus to lead a meaningful life, to have any idea of values and purposes at all, for which it is worthwhile to accomplish something in life. Yet this initial faith does not reflect its own truthfulness.

To subject spontaneous faith *to the free question of its truthfulness* means putting aside all the other reasons for the importance of this or that Absolute and casting doubts on spontaneous faith; it means enquiring whether its Absolute is an Absolute solely for it (only within its image) or whether it is also an Absolute independently of it. Whether its Absolute has been elevated to its position of the Absolute by faith or whether it is an Absolute in itself. Whether it is an Absolute only because it is believed in or whether it is believed in because it is an Absolute.

It is in the intrinsic nature of spontaneous faith that it cannot stand the test of such a question. Truthfulness is a dimension which can be introduced into faith only after transcending the original elemental spontaneity through a free decision: to be guided not by what we uncontrollably *wish* to be the Absolute but rather by what *is* the Absolute.

To pose the question pertaining to the truthfulness of faith means to open ourselves out to the plurality of faiths: to place one's own faith side by side the faiths of others – for instance, our own spontaneous Christian faith side by side the spontaneous faith of, let us say, a Buddhist, a nationalist or an esoteric – and to see it through their eyes as well. This means to open ourselves out to other people's motivations for espousing their own different faiths. To see their faith as necessary and acceptable in a certain human situation. It means to unveil even one's own similar spontaneous motivations, which have also very little in common with a profound will to truthfulness. To see them as mere

human (cultural, situational, instinctive) „reasons“. While the only sufficient reason for espousing *truthful* faith is the genuine Absolute itself.

But which, then, is the genuine Absolute? And how is it possible to recognize it at all? – These are already the initial questions of potential truthful faith. They only seem to be insoluble.

It is evident that as an *Absolute* there can only be *one* Absolute. In relation to all the rest, an Absolute (which is the source of establishing and determining everything) can carry the only quality: *it transcends everything*. So that nothing man is capable of spiritually transcending on his own can be accepted as the Absolute: (1) none of man-made material and ideal things (naturally the ideas of the Absolute included), (2) nothing from the entire nature (which transcends man only in material terms), (3) not man himself either (since he is capable of transcending himself exactly by searching for the Absolute). This criterion generally disqualifies an innumerable series and levels of potential artificial Absolutes. Human being is capable of perceiving the infinite sum-total of everything there is, even being itself, in its limitations, enquiring about its ultimate reason, purpose and meaning – and thus transcending it on its own. But what is there left to such being who, still seeking in vain something higher than himself, finds nothing of that kind, everything he encounters crumbles down under his hands, turning into nothingness? The last thing man can do is finally to transcend himself, also transcending the nothingness, which he perceives as that in which the entirety of everything, including himself, inheres and out of which this whole has actually arisen. On his own man cannot achieve anything more.

The genuine Absolute is that which infinitely transcends man even at this moment and which can therefore encounter man only *by itself*.

Precisely at the apex of one's own abilities, and yet at the very bottom of one's own spiritual desire can man sense that he is transcended together with everything and what is it that transcends him. Only there, on the spot of the innermost freedom does he leave behind himself the limited projective wishes

and is capable of distinguishing them from the self-giving of the Absolute. Only in the clarity of this enquiring self-transcendence does the relation of truthful faith open up to man, a relationship with the Absolute which is no longer the product of believing but which, on the contrary, creates faith itself.

The authenticity of such a donated faith can, however, be deformed by relapsing into the relative matters of this world, which are still attacking human freedom; by repeatedly immersing oneself into illusions, prejudices and self-centred needs, which (in an individual and collective shape) assume power over man again and build their own image even of the Absolute itself. Nevertheless, as soon as the first contact has been made, it can be repeated, strengthened, deepened, rendered permanent – but only with the help of the „other side“. In a relationship with the Absolute You is it possible gradually to overcome lasting elemental spontaneity; and establish a free and truthful relationship even with everything that is relative – objects of the world.

As regards the true *image* of the Absolute, which could be used to distinguish it from all the „Absolutes“, we can possibly use the old, „overused“ word God. This says everything and nothing about the Absolute. This is an image which is virtually empty – and this makes it highly possible to transcend this image by a relationship.

## **God and Humans**

Is, therefore, a man who has formulated his faith as a faith in God basically spared the constraints of spontaneous faith? There are signs that he is not because spontaneous faith can have also „an Absolute“ denoted by the word „God“.

Within the framework of spontaneous faith, „God“ is whatever man expects from God most, whatever man needs God most for, whatever makes God important to man. This „God“ – the target of atheists – is only a

spontaneously ideated experience of the noblest spiritual aspirations which eventually revolve only around man himself – his consolation, sustenance, self-improvement, existential fulfilment, salvation. A spontaneously believing man strives for these matters primarily and that is why in his spiritual life he implicitly encounters always only himself as an Absolute (Lévinas, 1961; Adorno, 1966). Explicit „Absolutes“ which he worships under the name of „God“ could easily be deified under their own names: Security, Joy, Success, Drug, Power, Future, the Church, Freedom, Reason, Justice, etc.

These distorting approaches are not only a matter involving individuals (the state of personal development of faith) but also groups (integrational needs of various communities and societies, civilizational and cultural patterns, paradigms, norms, and ideas) and the human species as whole (horizontally self-sustaining tendencies and stereotypes we have in common with all animate beings). These approaches conform with the overall structure of human spontaneity, untranscended and uncorrected by relation.

The development of faith towards truthfulness occurs through the difficult disengagement from the man-created „God-for-me-or-for-us“ – as from any other „Absolute“ – and through the establishing of a genuine relation with God *independently* of what man would like to obtain from God, what he would need him for most, what God could be important for man for, etc. All this can be added to man – but only by God himself, only in a relation established with him alone, if we are concerned only with Him, primarily because He is the genuine Absolute (Juan de la Cruz; Teresa de Ávila).

As illustrated by the history of all religions and the developmental patterns of personal faith of individuals, a relation with whatever or whoever is called „God“ can also be a relationship with *image*, a relation sunk into its own organism, a surrogate of genuine relationship. At the same time, competition of images casts doubts on the genuineness of relations; the more so, the more destructive forms this competition applies, ie., the more it is precisely a mere



image that matters to man most of all. In the specifically human relation with God – unlike the links between God and beings who lack the capacity to establish spiritual relationship – it is certainly impossible to make do without an image. Even though the existence of God's relation to us is independent of our own relationship to him, we can consciously – fully humanly – return that relation solely through a spiritual image of faith. But the truthfulness of an image is commensurate with the truthfulness of relationship (Cf. also Buber, 1923).

Relation with God is non-transferrable and non-communicable. It opens itself out to each man separately. In our mutual conversation we usually do not know whether the other one speaks of „God“ or God. This can only be sensed in rare moments of our insight or his trial or on the long road of joint spiritual quest. Only God and not man can safely deliver us to God. And conversely, „God“ alone can lead us most efficiently away from God.

To cut off an image from what is to be perceived through – it is, particularly in the case of God, very easy, proportionately to the level of difficulty with which it is possible to establish a genuine relation with him. A person who is responsible for indulging in such a self-deception and in deceiving others need not have, however, originally known what he was actually doing when assuming his faith in a way faith in anything except God is assumed. „God“ is the „Absolute“ among other Absolutes, a mere toy in human hands. But: precisely the falsity of image can serve as a stimulus for seeking relation.

God relates to us out of his own freedom and the question concerning the truthfulness of faith can actually be answered only by himself – or that query must remain open for his answer. There is no entirely truthful answer to be given to that question by man himself. The image of God extracted from the very bottom of collective unconsciousness and most brilliantly elaborated is always something exhaustively humanly comprehensible (if the term comprehension is not confined solely to rational performance), and that is why

such an image cannot transcend man. It is only an aid, a sign used to delineate a direction in which we establish a *relationship* with God.

That is why a theoretical concept cannot constitute a criterion for truthful faith because then we would rather believe in that concept and not in God. Nor can it be any kind of human testimony – because then we would rather believe in people and their reports and not in God. Nor can it be any of our own totally comprehensible experience – because then we would rather believe in ourselves and our limited experiences than in God.

At the same time, it is in a relation with God – and only in it – that everything which is not God receives, in return, the function of a „permeable“, transparent image (Stein, 1979; Bonaventura, 1861; Teilhard de Chardin, 1957). Nothing is the „solid“ self-purpose, everything becomes an instrument of global communication between God and man, an expression of their intrinsic dialogue. The world as (originally, in its purity) God's work and the work and life of man in this world remain to be, to the last oscillation of their being, kind of a total language used by God and man to communicate. (Man who does not particularly care about the truthfulness of faith does not know that he, too, speaks in this way independently of his own will.) Communication with God cannot be reduced to a conscious act of a intended prayer at an allotted time. For God our entire being is transparent and tells everything about us. And, in return, in our relation with God everything we encounter is transparent for us and we perceive in it a language affecting the very centre of our being.

On the contrary, outside relation with God everything is rather dim and dark: turning into a veil, an obstacle and a source of misunderstanding – a screen for projecting illusions.

In this dual human perspective – determined by whether or not our point of departure is relation to God – we can perceive even Christian Revelation. Even that can become a gate through which man will pass into a living relationship or it can function as a stumbling stone: a barrier at which he will stop in protest or in illusory piety. Just as any Divine traces, gifts and images

Revelation too represents an offer extended to human freedom. Jesus keeps referring to his Father – not only in word but through his entire being, through his whole mission. He is fully aware of the abyssmal disparity between what appears (albeit this is for man a morally and spiritually unattainable maximum) and what remains hidden and cannot reveal even in the most perfect human shape. In Jesus's intentions we cannot understand Jesus Christ in any other way but as an instruction leading us towards our self-transparency for Relation in which man can finally muster courage to abolish himself as a natural absolute point of departure and assume towards everything a relation carried by this Relation in which everything appears as it is and in which man makes himself totally available, including the most supreme sacrifice.

Our spontaneity perceives this truthful, liberating relationship primarily as a loss of the existing reliable supports, as a threat to everything we have been accustomed to and what provides a feeling of safety to us, what confirms to us our horizontal identity. In a relation of truthful faith, in which we are not the determining, dominating side, we can lose everything, even ourselves (Merton, 1955). We do not believe that this in particular could save us. We do not hear that gentle voice of freedom telling us that in relation with the Absolute there is nothing to lose. It seems more natural to us to feed ourselves with spontaneous images, to relish as the fruits of paradise the esoteric sciences, which confirm to us what we have ever known anyway, what is encoded into the depths of our self-sufficient Jungian unconsciousness as various recurrent symbols of our spontaneous faith.

It is far from easy to transcend this horizon of images, with which we have prereflectively grown together. The only thing we can lean on on our side is our freedom; human nature cannot be reduced to spontaneity. Spontaneity – which can sometimes suppress freedom – receives a natural shock in each situation of *suffering*. These situations carry their specific message. Suffering does not leave us spiritually in peace, in a stagnant cove of our illusions. Whether it is our own suffering or suffering of somebody else, it provokes our

entire personality, forcing us to start searching. It keeps returning in various forms for as long until we have internally ascended above that suffering and above ourselves. Heavily suffering man needs genuine Divine presence, an authentic relation; illusions in suffering flourish only as long as suffering has not been accepted as a new starting point of our quest, as long as man is blindly struggling for nothing but previous living standards. Once accepted and once contemplated in an unbiased fashion, suffering purifies and opens man. In a relation with God it ceases to be important, it ceases to matter. Only a truthful relation with God can make each human suffering if not insignificant, then at least bearable. Suffering is a catalyzer of the Relation.

In proportion to his dependence on God man is therefore independent; but in proportion to his independence he is committed to a cultivating service to the world, which is now being perceived in its unreduced width and complexity, in its splendour no longer made wretched by man's personal projections and in its squalor no longer made beautiful in the eyes of his self-indulgence. Relation with God results in man's fruitful *service* free from personal obstacles or reservations (Ignatio de Loyola, 1978; Doig, 1978). In it man can become so purely a life-giving force as air or water. The rate of devotion to this service is a sign of the degree of truthfulness of our faith. Only in a genuine relation with the Absolute does it occur that God, residing in his „Elsewhere“, liberates us secretly towards the productivity which no longer has any centre inside us but inheres in the truth of His absolute love. This love becomes our constantly deepened point of departure towards everything.

Thus, truthful faith does not „recognize“ God but remains with him. It does not prove his existence but loves him. It does not experience him but serves him.

It is, therefore, a faith which seems to be ceasing to exist: instead of it there appears to be God alone. It is neither understanding nor confession nor attitude; it is a relation – being given to God, adjusted according to His terms.

Truthful faith needs no proofs, testimonies, experiences; compared with them, truthful faith is „dark“ or looking out at the void; in relation with God it is „as transparent as a clean window pane“ (Juan de la Cruz).

## **In Conclusion**

Faith striving for its own truthfulness is a faith struggling with itself. The more it doubts itself the more it is becoming dependent, meek, courageous, pure, receptive – truthful. The opening of a theocentric relation is preferred to the accumulation of anthropocentric images. God's image, transcended by relation, is thus ceasing to be a rebounding board for man's attitude to himself and is rather becoming an instrument of universal communication: with God and with all the people living in relationship with Him, whether this relation is established through whatever images.

Truthful faith is a faith which has succeeded in transcending the horizon of spontaneous human needs. It is no longer motivated by man's fear for himself and his concern for his own salvation. It is carried by man's simple and free love of God and God's love of man.

While we are striving to attain a truthful faith, all other relations open out to us. We manage to activate our depths out of which we are capable of establishing a truthful relation with anything. To relate ourselves to the world as it is – to the only world which is common to all the people – is not completely possible without having an implicit relation with God. Even though we *are* in this only world (independently of ourselves), without a relation with his absolute foundation we are still captive to routine projections of „my“ or „our“ worlds. The world as it *is* can gradually open out to us only through the relation with and service to that Absolute which *is* (absolute). Enjoying this

kind of freedom, also we more *are*, from greater depths are we becoming more ourselves.

A truthful relation is, at the same time, the basis of the truthfulness of images. But since not every image is the product of a genuine relation, the production of images can actually be independent on such a relation. It can be a game involving our unrelational spontaneity. While building various reflected systems of images, such as philosophy or science, each partial criterion of truthfulness and each conception of truth certainly plays its role and occupies its own position. These criteria and conceptions have their importance at least in arranging know-ledge, in acquiring findings and in outlining a heuristic direction. But it applies to all these criteria of truthfulness that they can go barren or can be meaningful – in dependence on the kind of broader framework of human thought and experiencing in which they operate: the framework of a game or the framework of relation to what there is. Authentic *aletheia*, authentic adequacy, authentic evidence and authentic validity is achievable only on the basis of the entire-thought-activity-transcending profound human *relation to what there is*.

This relation – as we have tried to demonstrate – is not accessible immediately, by merely plunging into the imaginative game of our creative spontaneity, in which we ourselves can easily be „like gods“, without obstacles illusorily „thinking Divine thoughts“, but it is a hardly attainable goal of spiritual purification. In it, through the death of „God“, the self-absolutizing man dies, together with each ontology of his subjectivity. A prerequisite for the genuine resolution of the question of truthfulness in any sphere of man's spiritual concern is nothing less than authentic, non-poetic, practical mysticism in its innermost, demanding, „hard“ sense, which could and perhaps should implicitly underlie our entire life.

If a man was constituted as a being of a spiritual relation, then destruction of a relation inevitably leads to the destruction of man as a spiritual being. He finds himself in an immediate link to his surroundings and in a no

longer mediating linkage to his images. He becomes a non-relational slave to his spontaneous images and to the unreflected impact of the external situation. A man unable to transcend himself sinks below his constitutive ontological level. In such a distress he urgently searches for his own self but, by means of that, only deepens his self-centredness and gets entangled into his games even more. Redemption is not possible in any other way than through a relation to what there is. A primary form of this relation is truthful faith.

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL TERMS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labour in vain.

Psalm 127

A reflection of the human share in the building of the Christian faith enables, to varying degrees of accuracy, an identification and a critical assessment of elements of human speculation, imagination and inventiveness and facilitates their distinction from those preconditions of faith which basically *transcend* the human horizon, thus making possible Christian faith in the genuine sense of the word: faith not created by man but rather coming as a gift from the realm of the „supra-human“.

A detached look at Christian faith from the outside is usually associated with serious doubts whether the Christian faith really is such a gift; there are indications that this faith needs for its existence nothing more than the Scripture, tradition of orthodoxy, liturgy, and Church organization. The Christians themselves tend to persuade one another that all of this may safely be relied upon even though man lacks God's presence. The above-mentioned components and prerequisites of Christian religious life can be completed, investigated, cultivated, and improved even without God. Consequently, relationship with him is thus easily interchangeable with an attitude to religious symbols and spiritual programmes.

This substitution can be forestalled and resisted only through a consistent reflection of all the anthropological terms of faith as precisely anthropological ones, unlike the preconditions coming from „Elsewhere“, which make the Christian faith what it really is in its authentic form – a relationship to God. The key objective here is to ensure that what is human in faith should not be a crippling substitute for this relationship but rather its available tool.



Only in this way can the Christian faith be for the other people not a stumbling stone but an open view to what can be given to them as well.

The generally welcomed Christian movement towards the world and towards man, launched at the dawn of the modern era, sometimes happens as such a process of making the Christian faith more accessible which reduces it to the various horizontally graspable elements; this can eventually bring the earthly institution of the Church (and its conceptions focused on the world) closer to man and to this world but only at the cost of a gap between them and the authentic Christian faith getting ever wider. From this point of view, too „humanized“ a Christianity appears as supremely inhuman: it denies man his basic relationship. It reduces his spiritual motion to a mere contact with the palpable and understandable religious realities, which can be perceived and contemplated as any other realities of the world. Anything beyond that appears to be inaccessible, begins to be regarded as unnecessary, and eventually as unreal. The liberalistic fears of unpredictable claims of the sovereign Divine authority (which cannot be incorporated into any human ideal, programme or experience) lead to efforts at shunning anything that cannot be subjected to the immediate criteria of plausibility. But this is where Christian liberalism commits the same mistake as dogmatism, against which it raises its critical edge: both tend to limit the Christian faith to a mere human, immanently controllable matter.

Confining faith solely to its „safe“ anthropological terms – one-sided justification of faith from „below“, from the natural horizon of experience, a „non-violent“ way of building bridges to faith from the generally accepted self-evident realities of life – in no way leads to the intended goal of approaching reality in its authentic entirety and profundity. After all, the same principle, namely that the Christian faith perfectly links up to *human* reality, that it is an ideal way of meeting utmost human aspirations, wishes and dreams, was already pondered by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Using precisely

this correlation, they accused the Christian faith of resorting to illusions and being alienated from reality. Their critiques demonstrate that just that faith, which has been carefully and perfectly justified in anthropological terms, constitutes only an imaginary and self-serving way of satisfying the human need to believe. Horizontal substantiation – by saying that to believe is humanly possible and rewarding – has been viewed since the time of the Enlightenment as undermining the Christian faith. If it is nowadays presented as a support of the faith, one may ask whether we are still concerned with faith in the true sense of the word – a faith which is given by God.

Therefore, what kind of an alternative approach – besides easy-going consent – can be reasonably assumed towards the anthropological terms of faith?

First and foremost, they can be neutrally reflected. Given below is one of the simplest possible modes of systematizing them.

(1) Rationality. This structurizing element of each faith, handed down in words, has its self-acting inner dynamics, aiming at the ideal of comprehensibility and coherence. Whether this or that claim refers to reality or not, rationality is principally capable of convincingly reconstructing such a relationship in our consciousness. Furthermore, it is capable of grasping any matter, even the one existing independently of us, in a way to be assimilated by our always limited thinking and living-world, regardless of the genuine shape of that matter.

(2) Experience. This is often accentuated in spiritual life on the basis of disappointment proceeding from the „Tower of Babel“ of rationality. It denotes human attitudes more or less through passivity: through an open perceptiveness based on predetermined structures of anticipation, which stipulate what and how man perceives. Applied here are the unconscious filters and projective mechanisms grounded in latent wishes, apprehensions, established social and cultural stereotypes, etc. Especially as far as purely

inner experience is concerned, this does not provide any orientation as for distinguishing between the product of one's own inner self and an independent spiritual reality.

(3) Morality. Its significance can often emerge only after a person has sobered up from the process of „roaming“ through one's own experiences. Its objectivity (attachment to generally valid rules) and practicability has an integrating character. The focus on it is man's focus primarily on himself (on his own virtues, performances, work, consequences of his own actions).

The noticeable ambiguity of merely human terms of faith may lead us into adopting the position of a creatively critical detachment from such preconditions – if we really want to achieve that these do not block faith but rather serve God's work within and through this faith. One can reliably deal with their unreliability by first experimentally discarding all these solely human terms – attempting, so to speak „over our own corpse“, to find out whether God is merely what and how they prefer to present or whether... Naturally there arises the fear we might come to the recognition that without our human faith there will be nothing left to us. And exactly the fear of this risk seems to imply that the only things we believe in are probably solely our human constructs. If we are afraid of casting them off and critically reflecting their hot-bed, we presumably do not trust in anything outside them and independent of them. (We believe only in ourselves.) In such a situation, however, there is nothing to be lost anyway.

This *immanentism of faith*, which is not concerned primarily and mainly with God but which will manage solely with itself, with an inherent dynamism of a faith that is not given but merely conditioned by thinking, feeling or decision-making, can be surmounted only through a certain step into the void. But this should be no analogy to the ambitious step down from the temple Jesus was tempted to take in the desert. The objective here is not to verify in any self-centered manner whether we will be saved but rather to forget

ourselves. Nothingness into which we are stepping by detaching ourselves from all the constraining anthropological terms of faith does not have to be a destructive, hateful, devilish nothingness (as we may apprehend, guided by our own human points of departure), in which we would stay enclosed and only in a defiant emptiness we would lay self-centred claims or lapse into apathy and disintegration. It is up to us whether this is an innermost nothingness of transcending love, a nothingness opened heavenward, a nothingness of humility, a liberating nothingness wherein gravitation towards „I“ has been replaced by gravitation towards „Thou“, a nothingness wherein this abandonment is followed by a given recognition that this is Thy nothingness, a nothingness caused by Thou, a Nothingness of an undisturbed encounter through which Thou introduce us into a relationship with Thyself. Within this relationship we can by no means become anything more than precisely nothing. This awareness radically transcends mere rationality, experience and morality and constitutes a turning point in our relationship with our own humanity. „The dark night“ of John of the Cross, Francisco of Assisi's „poverty“, Jesus's „*kenosis*“ mean exactly that. Jesus himself is, in a certain sense, an abyss which leads to his Father. If we „die unto ourselves“ – just like him, because of our love for him – his love will start living inside us. He can take hold of our nature without us preventing him in this with automatic self-centredness; only in a dialogue with our freedom with which we have overstepped our original vantage points can his grace work with all our anthropological terms just as he himself wants to. Our rationality, experience and morality, and generally everything we are, begins genuinely to serve him.

Linking up to the thousands-year long – and probably generally valid – spiritual practice, even today's theory could and indeed should reflect the anthropological terms of the Christian faith not with an immanentistic (and – as a result – atheistic) carefree nodding, thus gathering worldly fame, but rather with a critical detachment – intrinsically anchored in Transcendence.

The anthropocentric-motivated *fear* – so typical of the present times – of the inscrutable, incomprehensible God, on the one hand, and of the menacing world, on the other, lead to an estrangement from God and a servile conformity towards the world. On the other hand, theocentric-motivated *love* leads to love of everything. Guided by this love, the intrinsically service-oriented theory is in a position to provide a pastoral, liturgical and similar practice with basic criteria of productive distinguishing between a faith which is genuinely dependent, first and foremost, on an absolute extra-human reality and a faith in which (to the detriment of its subjects) the projection of cultural, social or psychological issues seems to predominate. The key criterion of ascertaining the absence of transcendence in human faith is a permanent absence of a vivid awareness of that abyssmal, seemingly „destructive“ *difference* between the Divine and the human, an awareness which forms a paradoxical precondition of the genuine unification with what is *really* (not in human imagination alone) absolute. Domestication in human terms renders impossible the establishing a genuine *relationship* with what defies them. Only such a relationship can guarantee the *authenticity* of faith – ie. not a mere earnestness or sincerity, which can just as well be a mark of the simple experiencing of any illusion, but the authenticity in the sense of truthfulness.

Along this path faith is helped towards truth – and hence towards life – only by the theory which aspires not so much to incorporate God in the human world but rather to open man to God. Obviously, such an opening is impossible without liberating reflection of the anthropological terms of faith.

## FREEDOM AND RELATION

(On the Demands and Dangers of Spiritual Life)

As human beings, we usually want to know what we do, and preferably do what we are convinced has any meaning. In other words, we try to *live „from the spirit“*: from that inner space in which fundamental human questions emerge. This is a space far more abysmal than outer space. It opens up inside everyone of us, and the extent of our own penetration of it is, in turn, reflected in our attitude towards anything we encounter. Seen in this light, spiritual life inheres in seeking and finding an *absolute* coordinating starting point, from which we could best develop our own life in freedom and in intrinsic relations.

### **Growth**

Humans lead their spiritual life since childhood, being born not only with the capacities of perception and of responding but also of thought. We do not have to be content with external sensations, with the way we associate and communicate with others, with the way we engage and divert ourselves; we can listen in to the diverse echoes of all this resounding in our innermost self; we do not have to shun solitude; we can enjoy our own ideas, fantasy and plans, and primarily that innermost silence and tranquility in whose meditational transparency everything that is around and inside us emerges in its true shape; then we tend to discover the correct course and direction of our lives, the genuine inspiration, the true values.

The gamut of all existing layers and levels of spiritual life is immense; ranging from self-serving gravitation to unlimited prospects and horizons via the creation of a work of culture to that day-to-day struggle for good in human relations. Nonetheless, its backbone lies in certain spiritual constants whose specific contents tend to vary in our own eyes as our spiritual maturing

progresses: good and evil, order and chaos, movement „upwards“ and movement „downwards“, etc.

Our spiritual life commences as soon as at least a germ of what we call the human inward nature has been born: when passages of autonomous experiencing begin to settle inside man in between clashes and intersections of animal impressions and instinctive reactions. A conscious preservation of impressions and retention of responses constitute a condition of the establishment of this „other“, inner life; they generate its constitutive content. This is instrumental in introducing an element of „inner time“, wherein ideated impressions mutually interact and arrange themselves into a structure, thus creating the orderliness of human reactions, and an element of „inner space“, structuring itself according to its own original laws, adapted for the movement of pure meanings. This leads to the emergence of humanly specific modes of communication, which may serve the constitution of relatively common worlds for whole large groups of people – realms of particular spiritual cultures.

The first task facing individual spiritual life is to master that spiritual heritage preserved and cultivated in the social milieu into which the given individual has been born. The child is insatiably inquisitive about the causes of each and every thing, grasping and appropriating with guileless purity all the positive values (suffering from their devaluation), and eventually (in its sixth year at the earliest) realizes the inevitability of death. Built on this groundplan, outlined primarily by the infinitely rich semantic forms of myth (that is fairy tales, various sorts of adapted information and independent children's imaginations), rises the edifice of the entire future spiritual life, developing according to prescribed education, personal experiences and free decision-making.

Thus, human culture – in the broadest sense of the term, ranging from time-tested traditions of practical behaviour, personalities we can look up to as our models, norms of commendable attitudes towards other people, via works

of art, discovery of natural beauties to philosophical and scientific quest for the truth as far as religious faith and day-to-day Church life etc. – assists us in our inner growth. In all these branches, culture or education constitutes a kind of depositary of various modes and components of spiritual life. For its part, fine art offers a source of inspiration through its own methods of non-descriptive, ie. spiritual perception. A similar case in point is music and its relationship to innermost experiencing. Together with literature it succeeds in developing a plethora of themes which tend to refine feeling, thinking and believing... And this list could be extended to cover many other fields of human creativity.

Each work of culture (in the broadest sense of the term) proceeds from a certain order which represents a unique form of the author's spiritual freedom. Art, religion, philosophy or science – all these tend to capture and inspire our imagination particularly because of that vast space of innermost freedom developed and modelled within them. They assist us in not losing our bearing within our own self, they can provide a „scaffolding“ or a „map“ to our spiritual life. But, as a rule, they constitute neither an authoritarian „railing“ nor do they prevent us from conducting experiments or making independent choices; they are only in a position to forestall certain negative experiences. Within the space of inner freedom it is likewise possible to lose that freedom quite tacitly, one may even get lost in the depths of one's own human soul: to lose oneself in the labyrinth of its more superficial layers, to sink into the marsh of one's own ill-conceived identity, to forfeit one's own life to idle values, to miss the finer and more supreme calls which come up from the bottom of the soul to meet our ears.

The biggest danger posed to one's spiritual life lies in its flattening or simplification into a mere inevitable function of outward survival and adaptation. In this, human being usually takes advantage of his free and unlimited oversight only to the smallest extent – in order to cope with his social milieu, in order to prove how successfully conformous and conformously



successful he can really be. Owing to this attitude man is being cut off from the deeper roots of his inwardness, struck quite spontaneously since his childhood, he loses the possibility of individual growth. He thus becomes only a more complex „automaton“ than an animal. His muffled and forgotten potentialities, from which he has thus cut off his conscious life, can then draw attention to themselves in various uncontrolled manners. To a man who has long lost contact with these in-depth potentialities an automatic emergence of these will inevitably appear as something „numinous“ and utterly alien. By rendering his spiritual life superficial, man therefore paves the way towards a mental pathology, which is correctible solely by a re-integration of unconscious contents – either of a personal or generally human nature – into the whole of one 's inner life.

Therefore, in its first, „positive“ phase unblocked spiritual growth takes the shape of a gradual discovery of one's own self, of creating one's own world and of independent decision-making for a certain life orientation on the basis of mastering the spiritual heritage of the given culture. The sufficiency of this mastering is not conditioned by an individual's intellectual abilities or an ideal access to education; one may state that it is sufficient to get acquainted with the universally accessible and traditionally acknowledged works from the field of religion, arts or philosophy in order to find out what is at all humanly feasible in spiritual life and to confront one's experiencing with that.

And precisely at that very moment, as man stands in utter awe before the limits of the human mind and spirit, can he discover its reverse side, which renders its extreme possibilities relative and trifling. One individual resuming the extensive experiences of his or her mature age, another in the split second of clear-cut intuition may one day come to the realization which will virtually struck him down but which will at the same time give him a chance with the same amount of adequacy – of finding out what actually transcends the experienced human limits.

He will come to the full awareness of the spontaneous human spiritual *enclosedness* – an experience which is usually fragmentary and which is blunted by pretentious banalities.

He will sober up into realizing that a spiritual life lived however fully but *solely from the human vantage point* is, after all, as hopelessly terminal as physical life, whose mere ornamental pendant the former appears to be. He does fully realize that death is the absolute ruler over *everything* human: Even if each and everyone of us were a Goethe or a Beethoven, even if truth, goodness and beauty prevailed all over the world, and even if we all could fully fathom the truth about everything and solely enjoy everything, even if we all had the best available ideas of the absolute, in spite of that (and together with that) „dust we are, and unto dust shall we return“.

Man irrevocably realizes that until he is prepared thoroughly to admit this fact to himself, everything he fills his life with is suspected of being a mere facade of absurdity. He is given an insight which he would have never arrived at on his own because it seems to deny all human endeavours or to make them futile. This insight is profoundly personal and, at the same time, carries an alarming universally human validity: if we do not accept the truth about ourselves, we will remain for ever closed to that truth, which could eventually be instrumental in *transcending* our limitation. Seen from the viewpoint of that inner experience of *human spiritual limits*, even the most supreme ideals seem like empty glitter, designed to distract one's attention and help somehow while away the limited time; in reality – this spiritual experience tells us – there is nothing to live for when we are bound to die anyway and all our works will disappear since mankind and universe will disappear as well; our awareness of this seems to be the only difference setting us apart from animals... But human being feels that sticking to this truth is somehow just as cowardly an act as trying to avoid it; after all, the paramount goal is not just changing the contents of a persistent spiritual enclosedness – exchanging „too human“ a hope for

equally „too human“ despair – but rather abolishing that spiritual enclosedness.

Therefore, at the beginning of this „negative“ phase of spiritual growth everything man has hitherto built his elementary personal identity and meaning of life with will inevitably seem like cheating, vanity, escapism, illusion. Just as Dostoyevsky's Kyrillov expresses it with absolute consequentiality: „Man did nothing else but time after time tried to reinvent God so that he could live and would not have to kill himself.“ (But to kill oneself is not, in the given situation, any more honest than living on; man feels that this would be a mere continuation of the tactic of escaping before the full awareness of reality.) God (or another spiritual Absolute) as a mere infinite background to the world and to the sacred things man encounters in the world, God whose purpose is just only this world and human bliss, will become irreversibly suspicious as nothing but a projection of the deepest background of the human soul. God, if inseparable from the world, has no independent life of his own; he is just drafted on to the world through human artifice.

This poses to man a key option. Without obscuring confusions, a possibility offers itself to grasp the difference between an approach through which I merely ensure that in my faith I shall not somehow go astray and thus attain salvation (being guided by doctrine, liturgy, moral rules etc. and instinctively avoiding all doubts because even if my faith were a mere illusion it is still more pleasant to cherish an illusion) and between an approach whereby my intention is not just to make it probable that I shall not sometimes barely miss God (for my own benefit) but whereby just here and just now I yearn for him with my whole being (because I feel I cannot give him anything less), whereby I simply cannot honestly live any longer without the genuine assertion whether God exists and without a genuine encounter with him (without which nothing is meaningful and which I do not want to confuse with an encounter with anything else). A person who has grasped that anything else (including

religious practices and theological reflections) is valueless and futile without that has opened himself to the possibility of contacting God independently of anything in the world, running even the risk that he might contact a mere nothing. (But a truthfully discovered, genuine nothing is infinitely more than the unreal, paltry nothing of our illusions.)

Such a person has decided not to proceed any longer „through the world towards God“ but rather „through God towards the world“. In actual fact, without a primary relation with God it is impossible to distinguish with any reliability what is there in the world, so to say, genuinely God's and what just affects to be. To be sure, if we really yearn for God, we must realize quite clearly that *genuinely* wanting to recognize God through the world and in the world, if I have not discovered him „separately“ before, is actually incomparably more difficult (if not impossible) than an internal exodus towards God himself, who is worth being accepted not only in the world, in that undignifying mixture with everything else, but in my quest for him – only him and only because of him – outside the world.

In this stage a hitherto „unbelieving“ person is concentrated on the same absolute matter as a „believing“ one, even though he does not automatically use the word God but – let us say – the absolute, meaning, etc. What all the people have in common on this „negative way“ is that they commence promoting their spiritual life in terms of the seriousness of life and death, that without any attempt at escaping they have descended to the rock bottom of their authenticity and they will not be content with anything relative, approximate or second-hand. *Primum philosophari, deinde vivere* – by reversing the classical maxim it is possible to describe their spiritual attitude – wherein „philosophari“ rather denotes such an enquiry with which the framework of philosophy has already been overstepped.

Such an inquisitive mind will hardly let itself be hoodwinked even by the strongest of narcotics – mysticism of an inner concordance of everything there

is; the question of the absolute meaning is not solved by simply transferring it on to something greater than ourselves and dissolving it in its „mystery“; on the contrary, it gets all the more urgent as a result of this; we therefore ask on behalf of this mysterious whole. This question cannot be solved neither by trying to drown it in spiritual emotions; even an authentic inner experience of unity of all gives man nothing but a feeling of supreme spiritual delight, which is, however, not identical with an awareness of meaning. In this respect, man remains unfulfilled even face to face with the purest reality that „being exists“ at all. He does not know why he should stand in sacred awe and wonder philosophically. Such a self-sufficient „divine“ being could only be a supreme example of utter and universal meaninglessness. Man poses a question enquiring about something more: whether there is any *meaning* in that there is anything at all. And he considers such a question – which appears to be destructive when viewed from a conventional angle – to be his greatest treasure, even more valuable than his own life. From the very first moment he, therefore, sets his sights on it, trying not to lose it.

He does leave artists and thinkers, whose works at that moment look almost like children's fairy tales; natural and human beauties, which suddenly appear like silly stage props covering up an abysmal void of universal death; all the teachings of faith and spiritual paths, which now seem to be a dangerously easy way of bolstering up ever more thoroughly contrived human self-deceptions. Man begins to sense in the lifestyle of all the people around him (a lifestyle he has shared in good faith up till now) all the animally inventive methods of not knowing about the fundamental human thirst and yearning. He perceives it as a foolish case of escapism and illusion, as a drug, as a theatre performance. He does not want to have anything in common with it.

On many occasions he just vaguely feels that his innermost attitude embodies the „classical“ instruction: Search for the Kingdom of God – and all the rest shall be added. Man enters his spiritual maturity, giving up everything; it is a hallmark of authenticity if he does this without aversion and violence and

not as if he were forced himself into it or as if he practised or rehearsed it; finally, he can no longer act otherwise. Whatever he takes up – including the most sacred and spiritual matters – will, facing his quest, crumble into intrinsic relativity and nothingness, into „dust and ashes“.

Philosophically speaking, this is a direct opposite of phenomenological *epoche*: everything that can exist and be examined *solely as a mere humanly experienced* meaning is placed outside the sphere of any spiritual interest even if nothing were to be left to man. All the immanence has been shelved, „bracketed“; man becomes pure openness. He oversteps the boundaries of the general narcissism or autism of human culture, its enclosedness in „natural“ self-deceptions, whose rich mutual reflections occupy the minds of generations with new and new interpretations of more and more involutory derivatives of the changing „meaning“.

At the same time, this conscious distancing from all human certainties, from the entire individual and collective memory marks no regression, no nihilistic return to „bare living“, but on the contrary it comes as a result of detaching oneself from that bare living, which has been identified as the determining core of its cultural wrappings. This is a distancing into the „emptiness“, „darkness“, „nothingness“ of the pure spirit, a distancing into freedom. (Freedom is given to us not by external possibilities of expanding our spontaneity but rather by the level of our abilities to control ourselves independently from within.)

It is, therefore, in freedom that man succeeds in distancing himself from all the oases of human consolations, on which it is unwise to rely if one is genuinely bent on searching for the truth. Nothing shall ever force him into an inward sharing of the worlds wherein meaning is not sought after for its own sake but rather it is feigned as a prop geared to secure satisfactory survival. Man no longer means anything to himself but a yearning for the absolute meaning. In the remotest, quietest and most open spot of his soul, as if perched on an astronomical observatory, he looks out for that without which only one

thing has a meaning: to stay here until something opens up to him (or possibly until he dies). Only waiting on this top of one's own freedom can man unequivocally refer himself to that which under no other circumstances is purely and credibly accessible in its own, genuine form. Only on this top of one's freedom is man able to refer himself unequivocally to God.

There is nothing here that would have any meaning, and yet – or *precisely because of that* – there is Meaning. Unconnected to and with anything, unconditioned by anything. It is *irreplaceably* hidden exactly in situations of utter absurdity. Unbound to anything immanentistically „meaningful“, it binds to itself everything.

*The God that cannot be thought up or dreamed up* is the only genuine reply to all the absolute questions. God's absoluteness can be encountered in virtually everything – but only if man can fully perceive the absolute relativity of everything.

Only seen from the viewpoint of the God-filled emptiness, is it possible – with hindsight – to discern in the human culture free works, which authentically proceed from this very encounter. Similarly, only looking from this „other side“, is man able to discover some people capable of that loving detachment, so characteristic of free relations, essentially carried by God's relation to us.

## **Reflection**

While the positive stage of spiritual growth usually lasts for many years, the length of the negative phase may be in a reverse ratio to its intensity (if sufficiently dynamic, it can take only several weeks for man to cleanse and open himself up). The third, synthetic stage, whose precondition consists in this „negatively“ mediated process of establishing the transcending Relation, is a complex process of interpenetration of positive and negative approaches, with

the ultimate aim of not losing the established relationship, of promoting it and making use of it *in the intentions of the „counterpart“*. The synthetic phase does not appear to be limited in time; all the signs are that it is as inexhaustible as the real relationship between God and man. Reflection is its vantage point as well as its constant key moment.

Reflection is something that can lead us, in our spiritual life, completely astray or can become the most powerful human source of genuine dynamics.

A protective vantage point is the realization that there is virtually nothing to reflect or interpret. Our relationship with God may, indeed, be lost as soon as we try to convert it – through our own endeavours – into „something“; into a „sensation“, into a would-be situational matter of fact; into uncritically posed ready-made thought structures, which would overshadow it; into private ideas and explanations people like to attach to it so that these images eventually replace the relation we may stop being dependent on only to our own detriment. This homocentric, objectifying mode of reflection signifies the loss of respect towards the fact that the relationship with God exists – in the strongest sense of meaning – *otherwise*. Unwittingly, we convert this relationship precisely to the dependences through the *abandoning* of which man gets to it. We adjust this relation to something it is not commensurate with, we expropriate it from itself, we destroy it. This is the „extinguishing of the spirit“ by John of the Cross or Kant's „uncritical use of rationality“. While during the previous negative phase of our spiritual life we emancipated ourselves from all the false positive certainties of life, now, after the supra-positive event of establishing a relationship with God, we may be very busy freeing ourselves from permanently proffering false certainties of the spirit, which has a tendency to fix for itself even things that cannot be fixed at all.

A lifelong adherence to one's relationship with God may be maintained only in a manner consonant with this relation. Having finally left ourselves as a kind of windowless house, it would indeed be foolish to return to it, trying to



illuminate it by bringing light inside in sacks. After all, it is much better to stay outside and let the sunshine permeate us. To expose *ourselves* to reflection whose vantage point seems to lie *outside us*, penetrating us and transcending us. That is the safe, spiritually authentic and fruitful reflection, which is liberating because within it our own petty human viewpoint has been doomed to extinction. Such a „synergistic“ reflection in no way overshadows or disturbs our attitude to God, on the contrary it puts our whole life quite uncompromisingly into his spotlight, enabling us to work on its transformation. It serves to dynamize us in several correlative directions.

Our independence becomes deeper. Man, thus brought through his relationship with God to the free core of his being, is capable of „standing alone“ in that core. He is capable of not being subjected to superficial situational links, maintaining his freedom towards intrinsic relations.

Our open-mindedness grows. Man approaches his fellow men with a keen realistic perceptiveness. He does not allow himself to be constrained by the straitjacket of previous experiences, he is free from positive as well as negative illusions.

Our faithfulness becomes more solid. Man is capable of giving himself intrinsically to another person. He can maintain a relationship independently of situational impacts and of the mutuality of the relationship (of course, provided the freedom of the other person is preserved).

Our creativity has been released. Man is capable of attentively listening to his own inward inspirations and that is why he can freely, fruitfully and constructively control himself and anything at his disposal.

Our authenticity becomes more explicit. Man no longer lives in mere assumptions, ideas and concepts but rather in relation to what there is. His acts have the nature of a compassionate service rather than a noncommittal game.

Our disinterestedness is strengthened. Man is capable of self-forgetting and sacrifice, his love has no situational limitations and does not need any situational support.

Our whole life is thus gradually structured according to the lines of an intrinsic, from within lived order, which roots and grows inside us through the theocentric mode of reflection, which does not extinguish what has commenced flowing through us but rather – in a humbly critical attitude – stimulates this flow. That reflection, which is not an observer but a *direct component* of our relationship with God, thus assists us in each and every moment in freely living from the absolute vantage point. It makes possible constant penetration of what we have come to be intrinsically anchored in and what turns out to be the culmination of our freedom, into all the situations of our life.

It stimulates and maintains in us the never-ending struggle with oneself; with one's outlasting and ever more sharply highlighted rootedness in various situational dependences, with one's reverting tendency to create new inconspicuous illusions and idols, with one's insurmountable fear for oneself, with one's tiredness and apathy, with one's wilfulness. All this – however subtle it may be – tends to block our attitude to God (and all our relationships) with a slowly settling layer of „dirt“. Thus, a thin wall may arise between us and God, a wall on to which we might again easily start projecting our images. This is the same old wall which – in its general „hereditary“ shape – has been passing through all human situations since the dawn of history, which is anchored deep in human unconsciousness, ranging from the most vulgar passions to the most subtle – and hence most proficiently view-obstructing – religious symbols. Having broken through the wall with the „negative path“, we have established an elementary relationship with God. Thanks to the reflecting maintenance and expansion of that free and unhindered space of the ambiguous „nothingness“, „emptiness“ and „darkness“ between us and God, we succeed in restoring our genuine relational attitude.

Spiritual life is a struggle in which everything is at stake at every single step and no one situation is ever repeated. With the passage of time, consequences of each of our minor choices are multiplied. It is, therefore, crucial to be able to *distinguish* in practical terms between various spiritual alternatives, ideally already in their inconspicuous, initial shape. At the same time, it is useful to draw on the heritage of classical leading lights in spiritual life and not to shun a dialogue conducted in the spirit of the intrinsic mode of reflection.

A key issue in the Christian tradition of this „distinguishing of spirits“ is how to maintain an orientation towards the Absolute, towards God, towards good, how to avoid being led astray and swallowed up by relativity, „Devil“, the evil. Proceeding from the assumption that being in relationship with God signifies absolute good, evil may then be grasped – unsubstantialistically – exactly as an act of violation of this relationship: as an involvement, entanglement in a mere situational relativity, against whose power man protects himself with self-centred wilfulness, which, however, only further deepens his unrelatedness. A situation could, however, never dominate us in this manner if our subjugation were not mediated by a specific „transmission gear“ – our habitual self-centredness. Our dependence on situations is its function. The promotion of freedom, which is eventually anchored in the Divine absolute – so that man ceases to be a centre for himself – turns man's originally unconditional situational dependence into merely conditional. Man learns to prefer making use of situations – according to their supra-situational meaning – rather than be used by them, thanks to his desire for pleasure and his aversion to suffering. He maintains a detached attitude towards his spontaneity – even his own death figures just as one of the meaningfully applicable items in the order of an intrinsic life, with situations having virtually nothing to „catch him by“. After all, through them man no longer serves his own purposes. He is free to serve God in whatever situation. The key – literally lethally significant –

crossroads in spiritual life are tests of our ability to distinguish our own spontaneous self-centredness in its various garbs.

During this distinguishing process we are guided by some sort of a compass, which is built-in directly inside us. It is located deeper than our rationality, our emotions and our instinctive leanings, and unlike them its exclusive magnetic pole is the Absolute. This „organ“ of spiritual orientation is traditionally called the „heart“. This is something inherent in us (independently of the extent of all the other abilities) but also something we cannot entirely control inside us; something we can safely lean on to if concerned about something more than ourselves. The voice of the „heart“ may be partially drowned, not heard, misinterpreted, but it cannot be changed by ourselves. Nobody needs looking hard for it; if you really want to hear it, it is next to impossible to miss it.

Furthermore, in the negative phase of his spiritual life man is guided in his distinguishing by a possibly yet more drastic but more direct mode. He walks in the dark, „taking the tough with the smooth“, but he goes directly, as if guided by stars, whose reliability is, after all, infinitely greater than that of any map or any roadside signpost: it is impossible to rely on any religious tradition or any Scripture *more* than on God. (A yardstick of reliability cannot be provided by something whose credibility arises only in the light of what it should lead to.) Faith as a suggestive convergence of habit, reason and wishful thinking will no longer succeed here.

In any stage of spiritual growth it is vital to distinguish whether – under this or that situation – we are being guided by God (and our hearts) or by something different. If rejecting something, the question is whether we do this to ourselves or to God, and heading somewhere, the question is whether we give ourselves to God or something (anything) different. This is a truly abysmal difference.

Jesus's „My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?“ is a prototype of a reliable way of really establishing relationship with God. God is „semper maior“;

particularly on the cross – possibly only there – is it possible to find out that something man has lived and died for may be something which – face to face with the truth of death – dies earlier than he does; but God is always greater than God. Definitively abandoned by God, we are definitively led to abandon ourselves to God. A self-giving outside the situation of the cross carries with itself – whether we like it or not – always a certain risk of self-deception. The „God“, to which we abandon ourselves in a different situation than that of inner emptiness, is always a bit suspicious of being something that is to serve us a specific purpose. Only under a painful situation which offers no prospects whatsoever, do we begin to fear enough to abandon ourselves really to God. Only this fear is bigger than the fear of death, with which the powers smaller than God eventually blackmail us. „My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,“ prays Jesus before his long journey towards death. He experiences the anxiety of a mortal being. „Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.“ Only in self-giving through death is it possible to give everything up to God without any claims whatsoever. This „koan“ may be experienced in any extreme situation but it may be shared with Jesus also independently of all the situations. It is something which – owing to human finality – permanently underlies our spiritual existence and through which a true relationship with the genuine absolute may open up for us.

Standing before this narrow gate, we still give ourselves up to something smaller than God – although it may be „God“ as Being, a universal principle, a noble idea or a profound emotion, a great personality, cosmic energy, „Super-Self“ etc. – what is always somehow consonant with something inside us what we do not want to abandon on behalf of God and because of what we even let ourselves be somehow abused or destroyed. In this way, we only increase the futility of our own life: we sacrifice ourselves to something which is „God“ only out of a human desire. Playing with such a prop is a natural product of our still not very thoroughly reflected interests, inclinations, emotions, and prejudices.

A distinguishing mark of self-giving into the right „hands“ is the presence of selfless love. This is a synthesis of all the dimensions of intrinsic life (of that independence, open-mindedness, faithfulness, creativity, authenticity, disinterestedness). It flows through us in proportion to the extent we have been cleansed of private barriers to its universal influence. According to the extent we have „died“ with Jesus and to which Christ lives in us. Love is life which has overcome death and which has thus transformed itself into an intrinsic relationship. Through the prism of love we are in a position to perceive everything as it really is, as it is not and as it could be. Love is a creative service. It gives regardless of whether anything will be ever „returned“, it leads man towards giving even though he himself is in need or even if his approaches are rejected. It learns to co-experience the misery of others as if it were our own misery. This understandably causes man pain. „Aut pati, aut mori“ (Either suffer or die) is the succinct expression Theresa of Avila coined to describe an unswerving decision never to give up that love whose hallmark of genuineness is exactly that meaningful suffering – as well as the joy derived from the flame which has burnt down to the roots that useless and redundant spontaneous self-love.

The basic distinction which lies at the heart of spiritual life may then be formulated as a distinction between the „*I*“ principle and the „*You*“ principle. Starting from either vantage point, it is almost possible to embrace the entire universe: to expand the sphere of „my“ or „our“ ad infinitum or to open it out. „Not as I will, but as thou wilt“: a relational unification with the Absolute (hence, neither an illusory identification with it nor its manipulative illusory objectification) is possible solely from his „will“ and according to it. We give ourselves at its disposal the more we want it but also the less we simultaneously suppose it operates through us. All the more we are in unity with God, the greater difference between him and ourselves we are able to perceive. In this spiritual openness towards his activity lies the paradox of

salvation, an awareness of which may be retained inside us through the little key word „You“ (neither „I“ nor „it“).

On the contrary, the point of departure from the principle „I“ is marked by an enclosedness towards any spiritual relationship; an utter submersion into situation. „God“ is just a supreme human idea – emotionally experienced, doctrinally elaborated – which should be believed because of many situational reasons, ie. should be empathized that an indoctrinated idea really exists and that by having faith in it and by practising faith-conditioned religious life our own self-centred „salvation“ will be facilitated. „God“ is thus man's rightless undercarriage, an artificial prop for various individual, group, national and „Church“ interests which provide vantage points for a kind of thinking and behavior weighed down with guilt – from private self-deceptions via sectarian brainwashing to religious wars. However, a mere atheistic cleansing from that illusion offers no solution; it casts away the last remaining obstacles to an unbridled application of lies and violence in the name of the lowest idols. Nevertheless, this is instrumental in introducing, quite overtly and extensively, such a profound spiritual poverty wherein any mere illusion loses its validity. The strong nihilism of this situation should be accepted: as a given vantage point of the authentic „negative way“, the truthful self-opening towards a genuine, reflectively distinguished primacy of the Divine „You“ (to which everything else has merely been „added“).

## **Unity**

Our self-centred bias is gradually dissolved in our encounter with God and a new partiality is born: partiality for genuine being – mine, yours, of all there is – for genuine being to which we can help anything there is, help in God's engagement. By deed, word, attitude, by what we are.

The manner of being whose point of departure and also destination is our synergism with the Absolute is identical with total, intrinsic prayer, which is no longer a mere (oftentimes just autosuggestive) speech act or just a (similarly monologous) meditation but rather an authentic effort by man and God steadily to approach one another as much as possible. For man this is a road to freedom, for God it is a form of self-giving through relationship.

Needless to add, such a unifying prayer is impossible without man and God struggling against everything intrusive, everything that stands between them. This is a renewal of a relationship, which is otherwise severed by what is in Christian tradition grasped as the primary sin: human self-stylization into the role of god who knows well, on his own, what is good and what is bad. This preference of knowledge („gnosis“) to a love-filled relationship is closely associated with the overt and covert greed for power. Indeed, this is a vantage point for any life activity wherein prayer may be left out or wherein it can be turned by us into a mere instrument for implementing our own intentions. Attempts may be made to overcome the contradictions between thus oriented I and what contradicts it by external violence but also in a purely spiritual manner; by the means of an escapist submersion to the depths of one's own „Self“, which is no longer „lowly egotistic“ but to which it „suffices“ that it somehow spiritually encompasses everything, that it somehow gives rise to the whole world and – in turn – absorbs it. This illusory play-acting of a Divine part (which has nothing to do with the classical forms of neither of the world religions) sets man apart from God more than any mean and hateful struggle with reality. This is a quest to attain „higher levels of consciousness“ without a relationship. Unlike the realization of what we really are in the deeper layers of our own being, which may be given to man as a byproduct of the promotion of his own relationship with the Divine „You“, this self-contained self-serving search for one 's Self ends, quite demonstratively, in a blind alley.

On the contrary, man's violent struggle with reality may eventually lead to a cleansing through suffering. The resistance of reality may lead us to a



desire for order and harmony, which we ourselves – as we gradually come to see – shall never be able to introduce because our vantage points will always be limited. This ending of enmity towards what opposes our self-serving power, this desire for coexistence in dialogue with everything different according to an order which would be more universal and powerful than the greatest human power – this process of humbly stepping out of oneself – is a prerequisite for a renewed unification with God.

Prayer means a guileless act of giving our entire being to the one who has given it to us. Giving only to him; not to „inspirations“ or „signs“ merely coming from our unconsciousness. (These are always primitively more palpable than God's imperceptibly slight and profound influences.) The pathology of prayer in its diverse arrangements proceeds from a single core: from the inadequate concept of prayer as kind of a special activity whose purpose and form may be stipulated beforehand. In this way, a certain ritual detachment from God is maintained, a zone in which our own narcissistic emotions, ideas and feelings flourish. The appellation „God“ may just be nothing but a coping stone in a vault with which we actually cut ourselves off from genuine transcendence. There also exists a sort of praying, which really sounds like articulation of utter alienation between man and God; this happens when we thank and ask for things we can now easily enjoy precisely because we have been shunning a genuine relationship with God or when we thank and ask for something we should have rather sacrificed and also when we thank and ask for something God would never give us anyway. When we thank for various spiritual enjoyments any dead idol and a shared relation to him can afford to us. To trifle with prayer without feeling genuine thirst is both dangerous and pretentious. In this way, we insinuate into our minds the unreal, our „prayer“ becoming the biggest obstacle between us and God. We indulge in the self-sufficient process of self-clarification, practised against the background of a habitually put up screen – „God's face“. We search for external recipes for prayer, we „learn to pray“ on our own. As a result, something more profound, gentle, genuine and

perspective is torn up and blocked inside us. Man is strengthened in his self-assurance and externality. He „knows“ about God all he needs to know and he affects him; he is ready to accept as God's activity and God's gifts only what he himself is prepared to adore; he passes his own inward movements off as God's „answers“. In this way, man grows to be a mere idolater of pleasant inward states he himself regards as the presence of Divine grace. He remains to be enclosed inside himself.

Without You I do not want even myself, without You I want nothing – this is the way out (in the purest form given to man during the negative phase of his spiritual development). Prayer is an act of liberation whereby we find out that we have no rights to whatsoever; that we have no right even to be. However, the cleansing goals of prayer – independence of the impact of anything else than of God and the exclusion of the overall manner through which our self-centred spontaneity deceives us – cannot be accomplished by God (acting inside us) without our own free and undivided cooperation. At the same time, these „negative“ goals serve as a mere prerequisite. In prayer man dies unto himself and receives a more profound life from God. He rids himself of all the elemental motivations, of anything that is „his own“. He vacates his soul for God.

God will assume the place we have thus emptied for him but he will immediately depart as soon as we stop distinguishing between him and us or as soon as we try to appropriate him in any way. He cannot be assimilated by any means. He is abysmally Different, and he wants to shape and use us as he himself wants to, even without this having to pass through our understanding. He escapes our direct look, affecting us in the innermost starting point of our perceptions (and behavior), deepening it infinitely. „It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.“ As if we have entered new (but never definitive) inner ground; its purity gives us inner strength for humbleness: for independently seeing ourselves.

One can pray constantly. While doing or thinking about anything. A prayer will be prayer if sustained by God and not only by our habits and order. Only then is it the domain of our communicating freedom: nothing external can forestall it if man really wants to pray, and nothing external can help it if our will is lacking. But God does not wait for us to attain this freedom in its entirety. He interferes with our blunderings. Quite imperceptibly he gives us surprising courage; and he himself leads us towards genuine prayer, which constitutes no „alternative life“ but extraordinarily deepens common experiencing. He teaches us not to dream but to perceive; not to sleep but to live. He shows us that the real, free „I“ is nothing but being in a relationship. In this way, he gives us a life as prayer and prayer as life.

For all that, our relation with him remains – in a sense – indirect. Everything we can directly unify with (truthfulness, order, strength, freedom...) remains – however transcendent it may be – a mere reference to him. Not even unwittingly can we unify with this in the manner as if it were he himself. Everything he activates inside us – including even the vastest ocean of love – is a mere reaction to him, it is not him. Inside as well as outside us he shows to us things surprising and infinite, but it is not him. We are sober and do not blunder only when knowing that between God and anything that we may perceive there lies an abyss which *only he* can bridge. He gives himself to us in his absolute, sovereign freedom. This Divine freedom is subsequently liberating to us; thanks to it we are able to give him freely the only thing we can ever give to God: that we are concerned with nothing else and nothing less than himself. As to the rest, only in this way can we actually maintain our openness to prayer carried by him.

God is a mystery that escapes us, opens us, attracts us, cares for us, but has no symmetrical connection with anything. Seen from our side, he is no „extension“ even of the noblest of his gifts. He is Outside. But from this „Outside“ he is with us more than if he were our very selves. „Unmixed“ yet „undivided“ – these particular terms, used by theologians in an attempt to

understand the relationship of „Divine and human substance“ in Jesus Christ – can possibly indicate his mode of relationship with us. This is also expressed eg. in the following Buddhist *koan*: Imagine two countries of which only one borders with the other. Paradoxically speaking, we may say – and only in a relationship which is in *his* hands can we understand it in the correct sense – that the less we want to bind God to us, the more he can bind us to himself.

He can anchor us in pure openness, in spirit, in freedom, in truthfulness, in love. Beyond all the emotions, reflections, intentions. This anchoring seems to be inaccessible to us, we cannot see its bottom. The arrangement of our soul will emerge from it. In this anchoring we do not need any another supports.

To turn to the world and to act in it in a spirit of this anchoring means, however, trying to approach everything with the same „*unmixedness*“ of *freedom* and „*undividedness*“ of *relationship*, with which God approaches us. On the other hand, human spontaneity, sustained by the mere archetypal furnishing of our soul and by our partial experiences, tends to „mix“ us externally with the world, while internally „dividing“ us from it. In spontaneity we establish contacts predetermined only by the restraining and limiting special conditions out of which we grow. Spontaneity, however loose, can never be turned into freedom and make genuine relationships possible. It grows merely out of our coalescence with everything that immediately conditions our limited situational existence. It only gives our life a certain individual colour, a certain particular dynamics and specific incorporation in horizontal contexts.

On the other hand, we grow into freedom by realizing and transcending our spontaneity, which for us – just like any other circumstance of our existence – ceases to be a determining breeding ground and rather becomes an instrument. Rooted in freedom, we are in a position to cast aside those confining dependences, particular filters and individual preferences, and establish differentiated yet unconditionally based relationships tending to universality. Thus we enter dialogical unity with what is the opposite of all the

limitations and contingencies, and into that unity we draw everything we have established relation with.

The universality of this unity with God cannot be grasped by any general idea; it is attainable solely through a relationship. Human simulations of the universal unification can always proceed merely from a spontaneous, limited assumption. They cannot rid themselves of the hidden elements of idolatry or narrowed-down interest. That is why they inevitably have to back up their arbitrary claim with totalitarian violence or pluralistic illusions. Unity without freedom towards transcendence, without relationship with the Absolute can never be universal. Entirely dependent on human points of departure, we can never really attain what is possible solely from the standpoint of spirit, of freedom, of „nothingness“ given from „elsewhere“: to be, to meet and to work for the benefit of genuinely universal unrestraining unity.

At the same time, it proceeds from its nature that nothing partial inside or around us provides an automatic guarantee that we really serve this unity. Only by denying all seeming supports can we maintain our free openness and availability towards it. Freedom is the only safe „bridge“ of universal togetherness in relationship with God. In a sense, one can say that freedom is as if identical with this relationship. It is a freedom towards him, it is a void for his fulfilment, it is an expression of his impact. If man is really free, he finds himself in relationship with God and vice versa. Even in all the other things he tends to seek and stimulate tendencies towards free universal unity.

This is a unity different from that in the common self-enclosed position of „our own“ versus „other people's“, an attitude which is naturally initial for our life: unity with one's mother, with one's home, with one's employer, with like-minded people, etc. This is not even that sensually gratifying unity enjoyed in sleep, sex, during concentration on one's work, sport or recreation, during profound aesthetic, emotional or meditative experiences, a unity which lacks permanency and unconditionality, a unity wherein „our spirit remains parched“ (John of the Cross). This is not a unity attainable through any image or

speculation – eg. Hegelian or Jungian. Universal togetherness does not arise through the mere realization and conciliation of all situational contradictions. It is not a kind of internally ambivalent immanent wholeness, which has come to the conclusion that its situational contradictions have been perfectly equalized and which has, therefore, completed its life dynamics with death elegantly called „everything is the same“ or in a Nietzschean vein „everything is eternal return of the same“. Divine universality is not a principle of madness, but a principle of redemption. It is not a principle of unifying and enclosing of the ambivalent situational immanence; on the contrary, it is a principle of its internal opening to intrinsic transcendent unambiguity. Love prevails over hatred, good over evil, truth over lie, creation over destruction, justice over lawlessness, relational unity over mechanical or biological totality. Many events, which may – in terms of situations – appear to be mere elements of the situation involved, equally incidental as their opposites, seen in a definitive perspective, will manifest themselves in their true shape: as an indestructible foundation stone for „the Kingdom which is not of this world“.

No specific spiritual path will take us further in maturing towards this unity than the course of life itself; if we want to mature in it. From the pleasurable situational unity with our mother's body to the meaningful and being-ful unity with the Divine Spirit; from the tiny unconscious zygote towards a human being which is able – with humble detachment – to accept even death as a process of departure from a major focal point of its dependences.

Possibly, it does not only matter in which particular categories man realizes the overall meaning of his spiritual life. It certainly matters whether he actually lives it.

## GRACE

Everything I do is love.

John of the Cross

However widely we examine the diverse modes of human self-transcendence, each will reveal the selfsame principle which ultimately makes each and every mode possible: only through the activity of „the other side“ is it possible to surmount, in a non-illusory manner, the opposition existing between our immanency and absolute transcendence.

As a result of the threat posed in extreme situations we are virtually forced to turn receptively to the intrinsic sources of our existence: finding ourselves at the end of our possibilities, being in a position of abandoned awaiting, we tend to open ourselves up to an unknown meaning, being, love. Initially we encounter only what is called „Divine silence“: and precisely that can draw us into the mystery and dynamics of a concealed, selfless absolute love. Deliverance from our own selves, to which such a love challenges us, also encompasses an awakening of the sense for the truthfulness of our own faith. We are guided by this sense beyond the horizon of various images of faith, towards faith as a relationship. Only in that are the limited human terms of the faith transformed from a crippling barrier into something we can place completely and totally at the disposal of this relationship. God, within whom we – standing at the very peak of our liberty – „die unto ourselves“, thus becomes a point of departure of our life. Having explored all the blind alleys to which man repeatedly strays after sheering off his main course upwards, we come to realize quite clearly that any attempt at attaining human self-transcendence, if not called forth by Transcendence itself, is only an illusion, a vicious circle wherein man keeps on encountering only himself.

Grace – absolute Divine initiative – overcomes all human obstacles; opening disappointment to hope, piercing self-complacency through with the

pang of emptiness, redeeming despair with liberty, knocking looseness down with the experiences of weakness and powerlessness, embracing dying with acceptance. This is the touch of the Other, who is neither an inner continuation of our subjectivity nor an outward extension of the world, nor their harmonizing vanishing point. Grace permeates everything without any limitations whatsoever, without being an extrapolation of anything natural. An encounter with it offers a freezing experience similar to the anticipation of death but at the same time it manages to fan up inside us the flame of genuine life. The captivating glow of its love sweeps us away on to the firm ground of truth and humility, transporting us from ourselves. We genuinely find ourselves only in a loving detachment from ourselves.

Left to our own devices, we cannot hope to attain grace ourselves to any reliable extent. Only grace itself may bridge the gap between us and itself. But we can go out to meet it. However, while searching for the absolute so that the world should be rationally conceivable to me or so that life should have a meaning to me, then I only want to find what in my view meets these conditions and not what is independent of them. On the contrary, I go out to meet grace if, because of it, I tend to accept what there is, even if this meant doing away with all the rational conceivability and all meaning, to which we are routinely not entitled and which are sometimes a mere illusion anyway. Although Divine grace is capable of entering even through a closed door, we can at least straighten out its path towards us (after all, this is the only thing we can do for it) by opening up all the human horizons. By giving ourselves up to it into the „void“, we are prepared for its giving to us. It is in this attitude that we can understand the figure of Jesus Christ in particular: as a penetration of the furthest point where Divine grace goes out to meet man and the furthest point where man opens out to Divine grace. In his life – and particularly in his sacrifice – God and man „embrace one another“.



Therefore, all the indications are that respect for and openness towards the activity of the Absolute is a criterion of genuine aspiration towards Him. This criterion cuts across all religions and all modes of spiritual life. Without activity coming „from elsewhere“ we are invariably „let down“ – we are left only with our own imagination, rationality, tradition, unpermeated, unchallenged, unsupported, unenlightened, unstrengthened by anything higher than ourselves.

Grace does not prevail over anything through violence. It offers, opens up, attracts – and disappears if we only reply by attempting to adjust it to ourselves. It guides man much earlier before he puts a name to it but it guides him in a subtle way so as not to disturb or infringe on his freedom. At any single moment it gives him the opportunity of longing for it as well as an opportunity of staying with himself and with many possibilities of immanence. After all, there is basically only one possibility of transcendence.

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