

Faith and History:
Theses Preparatory to a Theological Discussion

1. By "faith," in the first instance, is properly meant, not the acknowledgement of and assent to certain propositions as true, but rather, subjectively, a self-understanding and, objectively, an understanding of existence, involving trust in and loyalty to strictly ultimate reality in its meaning for us.

2. But if the primary meaning of "faith" is thus *existential*, it is also properly taken in an *intellectual* sense, either sense of the term implying and being implied by the other. (Thus if faith in its primary existential sense is a matter of actualizing a certain possibility of understanding oneself and leading one's life accordingly, it necessarily implies faith in the other intellectual sense of the term. For to understand oneself and others in a certain way would really be to *misunderstand* them unless certain intellectual beliefs about them were true. Conversely, any such intellectual beliefs, for their part, necessarily imply that some existential faith is appropriate to, or authorized by, things as they really are in a way in which other contrary self-understandings and understandings of existence are not.)

3. "History" is a double-barreled word (William James), in that it refers to both (1)*actual events of the past, or the actual course of past events*; and (2)*representations thereof*.

4. But statements expressing such representations are not all logically of the same kind; specifically, there are two main kinds of such statements that are of particular significance for correctly understanding and interpreting religious utterances generally and Christian religious utterances in particular.

5. These two kinds of statements may be distinguished as "*empirical-historical*" and "*existential-historical*" respectively—the first kind of statements having to do with actual events of the past, or the actual course of past events, in their being in themselves then and there in the past, prior to any and all representations of them; the second kind having to do with actual events of the past, or the actual course of past events, in their meaning for us

here and now in the present, as authoritatively re-presented by the normative witness of some community of faith.

6. Notwithstanding this important logical difference between them, however, both kinds of statements are properly historical because or insofar as they both have to do with, express representations of, actual events of the past, or the actual course of past events.

7. It is characteristic of religious traditions generally, and certainly of the Christian religious tradition in particular, to include both logically different kinds of historical statements—or, at any rate, what appear to be such. (By the qualification, I want to take account, also, of what are properly distinguished as "legends," because, although they do indeed *appear* to be empirical-historical statements, they are not really such after all, but rather a certain way of expressing an existential-historical representation of actual events of the past, or the actual course of past events. Moreover, even statements that are not legendary, but properly empirical-historical, may owe their place in a religious tradition, not to an empirical, but to an underlying existential, interest. This may well be true, for example, even of reports in the earliest stratum of the synoptic tradition that Jesus so spoke of the imminent coming of God's rule and of the Son of Man as to imply an extraordinary claim for the decisive significance of his own person and words [Lk 12:8 f.; Mk 8:38]. Even if such sayings could be shown by empirical-historical evidence and argument to be authentic sayings of Jesus himself, there remains the possibility that the reason they were attributed to him was not empirical-historical, but rather existential-historical.)

8. Also characteristic of at least the Christian religious tradition is that empirical-historical statements are, as a general rule, not so much asserted as assumed, while existential-historical statements are typically asserted, i.e., are statements making or implying a claim to truth.

9. As such, existential-historical statements can and must be verified—namely, by strictly existential, and therefore also metaphysical and moral, procedures of verification.

10. Their truth, however, is completely independent logically of the truth or falsity of any and all empirical-historical statements, even as the truth or falsity of empirical-historical statements is strictly empirical, and so in no way dependent on that of any existential-historical statement.

9 December 2002