

1. *What is faith? How do we find it?*

What is faith?—The term "faith," like most of the other terms that are likely to figure prominently in any Christian theological discussion, may be properly used in different senses; and it may also be properly used to refer to different, if also related things.

First of all, then, some of the different senses in which "faith" may be used:

(1) "Faith," properly, has both an *objective* and a *subjective* sense, in that it can refer equally well both to *what* one believes in believing and to one's *act* of believing it.

(2) "Faith," properly, has both an *existential* sense and an *intellectual* sense, and, understood in either sense, is inseparable from "faith" understood in the other sense. Faith in its existential sense is a matter, subjectively, of self-understanding and, objectively, of an understanding of existence—where by "existence" I mean not the human self in isolation, but the self as it actually is, in its relations to others—to other selves as well as to other beings generally, and to the mysterious, all encompassing Other, the ultimate whole of reality, from which all things come and to which they all return. To exist as a self is to understand oneself somehow in relation to all these others, and what one understands in doing this is some understanding of existence. But if faith in its existential sense is thus a matter of actualizing some possibility of understanding oneself and leading one's life accordingly, it necessarily implies faith in the other intellectual sense of the term. To understand oneself and others in a certain way would really be to *misunderstand* them unless certain intellectual beliefs about them were true beliefs. 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) "Faith" is properly used to refer to merely *implicit* faith as well as to faith that has become *explicit*. That a small child who has not yet learned to explicate its self-understanding in relation to its parents and siblings is nonetheless guided by it is clear enough simply from its behavior. And it is equally clear that the explicit beliefs that an adult sometimes professes—even sincerely professes—may or may not adequately

express her or his actual beliefs, not to mention such other beliefs as they necessarily imply.

This brings us to some of the different things that "faith" may properly refer to. I shall limit myself to the two things that I take to be most important for the purposes of answering the question before us.

(1) The first thing "faith" may refer to is what I am accustomed to calling "*basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life*." On my analysis, to live humanly at all is to live out of a fundamental trust that to do so is finally worth while—somewhat as it also belongs to our life to believe that the course of events generally always has a certain order, warranting our expecting of the future, by and large, what we have experienced and learned to expect in the past. For the most part, this basic existential faith is merely implicit in the various things that we think, say, and do in leading our lives; and the same is true of the intellectual beliefs that basic faith in turn implies. But even if it remains largely implied, and not explicit, it constitutes the fundamental presupposition of all our self-understanding and life-praxis, and thus also of all the forms of culture by which they are mediated. Thanks to this basic faith, we all believe (1) that there is an authentic, because realistic, way to understand ourselves and others as all parts of the encompassing whole; (2) that to understand ourselves in this way and to lead our lives accordingly is, like everything else, unconditionally meaningful or significant; and (3) that the structure of ultimate reality in itself is such as to explain its meaning for us, and thus to explain both why there is an authentic way to understand ourselves and why understanding ourselves in this way and conducting ourselves accordingly has the unconditional significance we believe it has.

(2) The other thing "faith" may refer to that is important for answering the question asked is any and all of *the several faiths, philosophical as well as religious*, through which our basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life becomes explicit. Foremost here, obviously, are all the different religious faiths, properly so-called. What is properly meant by "religion" is the primary form of culture, and thus the system of concepts and symbols, through which our basic faith in the meaning of life is not merely implied but also somehow explicated. Actually, what any particular religious faith makes explicit is some answer to the *question* that our basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life makes it

possible for us to ask—namely, what I'm used to calling *the existential question* of just how we are to understand the meaning in which we cannot but believe, and so how we are to exist authentically, in accordance with that meaning, instead of inauthentically, at cross-purposes with it. What makes this existential question urgent, however, is that the various conditions under which we are given and called to understand ourselves and lead our lives often render our underlying faith in its ultimate meaning somehow problematic—again, somewhat as a disappointed expectation of the future may appear to pose a problem for our basic faith in the general order of things. But in the one case much as in the other, we cope with our problem, not by abandoning our faith, which we couldn't do even if we tried, but by revising our expectations, or our understanding, as the case may be. And so it is that each religious faith, including the Christian faith, appears on the scene, making or implying a claim to provide the requisite revision—by decisively re-presenting the possibility of self-understanding, or understanding of existence, which, being the possibility primarily authorized by ultimate reality itself, overcomes, at last, all uncertainty and misunderstanding. Still other explications of our basic faith, however, are more properly said to be philosophical than religious. Because they are the result of more or less critical reflection on religion as well as on our life-praxis and culture otherwise, they form a secondary, not a primary, cultural system. Even so, they, too, at their level, explicitly address the existential question and thus re-present our basic faith in life's meaning as well as an answer to our question that claims to be *the* answer to it.

Inadequate as it is, this will have to do for an answer to the first part of our two-part question, What is faith? I turn now to an answer to the second part: How do we find faith? If you've followed what I've said, you'll understand why, because of the two different, though closely related, things "faith" may be used to refer to, there have to be two main parts to the answer.

If what we refer to by "faith" is what I have called our "basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life," then the only possible answer to the question is that we don't find faith at all, because we always already have it as something essential to our life, indeed, as the necessary presupposition of literally everything that we think, say, or do. In the deepest sense of "our basic faith," we—all of us, simply as and because we're human beings—always already *live by faith*, and could not live humanly, which is to say, understandingly,

without it. To be sure, we may or may not be explicitly aware of this; and it seems clear that most of us, much of the time, may need to "find" faith, in the sense of somehow becoming aware explicitly of the basic faith in the meaning of life without which we could not live at all as human beings. But "finding" faith in this first use of the term is always a matter of finding what we already have—and but for having which we could not think, say, or do anything whatever, including finding—indeed, even looking for!—faith as the referent of the other thing the term "faith" may be used to refer to.

As for how we find faith in this other way of referring to it—i.e., some one or the other of what I have called the several faiths, philosophical as well as religious—there must also be two different but closely related answers.

(1) The first would be more accurately formulated, however, by saying, not that we find faith, but that *faith finds us*. That is, each of us is born into some human culture, one of the integral parts or aspects of which, is some religion, in the sense of some way of explicitly asking and answering the existential question at the level of a primary cultural system. Depending, then, on the conditions of our individual rearing, each of us will normally be socialized and acculturated into our society and culture by somehow appropriating the answer to this question, and, in this sense, the faith, re-presented by our society and culture's religious concepts and symbols. I won't go into all the possible variations or permutations of this by taking into account the complexities of socialization and acculturation, given the phenomena of subcultures, subsubcultures, and so on. The point is that we become human beings, in the sense of beings who somehow understand ourselves in relation to others and conduct our lives accordingly, only through the mediation of some human culture, and that any of the many cultures known to us includes, as an essential part or aspect of itself, what I have defined "religion" to designate. In this sense, each of us finds religion, first of all, because, or insofar as, religion, in some form, finds us and more or less becomes our own—in essentially the same way in which we are socialized and acculturated otherwise

(2) But to be human is not only to be somehow socialized and acculturated, and, as an essential part of that process, somehow to appropriate the religion that is an integral part or aspect of any society and culture; to be human is also to undergo life-experiences that more or less profoundly problematize one's cultural and religious inheritance, and

yet, precisely by means of it, also to be capable of critically reflecting on it so as to cope somehow with its problems. For this reason, one may also be said to find faith in the sense that one discovers, or is discovered by, some particular religion, or philosophy, that more adequately addresses the problems that one has come to have in trying to answer one's own existential question. In other words, one finds faith, insofar as one does so, by finding a religion, or a philosophy, that really answers one's deepest question about the ultimate meaning of one's life as a human being. This implies—and I take this implication to be important—that one finds *Christian* faith if, and only if, one so experiences Jesus as he is re-presented by the church and its witness, that he answers one's own existential question about the ultimate meaning of one's life as no one else, and no thing else, has ever answered it. And this implies, in turn, that one *continues* in Christian faith, once one has found it, as long, and only as long, as, through all of one's life-experiences and encounters with all the other answers to the question, Jesus *continues* to be *the* answer—the *decisive* answer in the light of which such truth and falsity as there may be in any of the other answers can be responsibly decided. In sum: we find Christian faith by finding, or being found by, Jesus Christ—which is to say, Jesus in his decisive significance as the re-presentative of God, decisively through whom the ultimate meaning of our lives, in which we can never fail to believe, at last makes sense and can be understood—so far, at least, as we need to understand it in order to be and to become who we really are as human beings.

*2. Some people say different religions are simply different cultural expressions of one phenomenon—God, love, etc. Can you speak to that?*

Well, I hope I can—and that what I've already said about faith and religion, their relationship and their difference, will help to clarify at least some of the things necessary to an adequate answer.

You'll recall that, as I have defined it, religion—in the sense of any particular religion or religions—is the primary form of culture, or "cultural system," through which the existential question about the ultimate meaning of our existence is somehow asked

and answered explicitly, in certain concepts and symbols. But this, clearly, is already to say that the different religions are indeed "cultural expressions"—if not, exactly, of "one phenomenon," then certainly of *one reality*. I have spoken of this one reality as "existence," explaining that what I mean by this is not simply the human self, taken by itself in abstraction from its relations to others, and to *the Other* encompassing all others as well as the self, but the human self precisely *in* these actual relations to others and the whole. "Existence," in other words, is simply another term for "ultimate reality," in the sense of what all of us as selves somehow have to take account of insofar as we are human selves at all, no matter what else we may or may not have to take account of—which is to say, ourselves, others, and the encompassing whole. But I have also made, or implied, a distinction between existence, or ultimate reality, in its *structure in itself* and in its *meaning for us*—when I argued, for example, that the *existential* sense of "faith," although distinct from its *intellectual* sense, is nonetheless inseparable from it—and vice versa, that intellectual beliefs about the structure of things in themselves necessarily imply, even as they are also implied by, existential beliefs about the meaning of things for us. So, while I should very much wish to hold that different religions are so many different expressions of the one reality of our own existence, or of ultimate reality, I would also need to insist that they are existential in their proper meaning, not merely intellectual. That is, they express *the meaning of existence, or of ultimate reality, for us*, for how we are to understand ourselves and others and lead our lives accordingly, as distinct from merely expressing the structure of ultimate reality in itself—although, as I've just reiterated, they necessarily *imply* that certain intellectual beliefs about that structure also have to be true.

On this understanding, the terms "God," "love," and so on—at least as they're ordinarily used in Christian witness and theology—are but the way in which one religion, the Christian religion, thinks and speaks about existence, or ultimate reality, in its meaning for us, for our understanding of ourselves and others as all parts of the encompassing whole, and so for how we are lead our lives, given this self-understanding. So I would *not* wish to say simply and without some such qualification that what different religions are, are simply different cultural expressions of the one reality of God and love, although the terms "God" and "love" are definitely first and foremost among the

terms expressing the concepts and symbols through which I, *as a Christian*, think about the one reality of our existence, or, alternatively, the one ultimate reality with which all human beings have to do.

An observation that I have long found helpful in thinking about this and other similar questions is that of the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. "[W]hat all sacred symbols assert," he says, "is that the good for man is to live realistically; where they differ is in the vision of reality they construct" (*The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*: 130). In other words, while all religions are indeed about the one reality of our existence in its meaning for us, and while each of them summons us to live realistically, in accordance with that reality, instead of at cross-purposes with it, how each of them understands ultimate reality is more or less different from the understandings of other religions. Nor do all of these differences appear to be simply verbal or conceptual; for some of them, at least, seem to be real—such as, for example, the difference between a theistic religion like Christianity, Judaism, or Islam and a nontheistic (some would even say, atheistic) religion like Theravada Buddhism or Zen. Subtle as they're likely to prove to be the more one carefully studies them, the differences between religions are hardly less striking than their similarities. Although they are all about the one ultimate reality of our existence, and are all addressed to one and the same existential question about that reality, they also express different understandings of it in its meaning for us—for how we are to understand ourselves in relation to it, and for how, in consequence, we are to conduct ourselves as human beings.

I should perhaps add that anyone seeking a more fully developed, and, I hope, proportionately more adequate, answer to this question may want to take a look at a little book of mine, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (SMU Press, 1992). There is also an essay-length answer to the same question under the same title in my book of essays, *Doing Theology Today* (2d ed., Wipf & Stock, 2006): 169-184.

3. *How does one express [one's] faith to others when "Christian" has been kidnapped and no[w] means a very narrow view?*

I've taken the liberty of slightly reformulating this question, so as to make clearer what I take it to be asking. But if I'm mistaken in my interpretation, and the questioner would like to make the necessary corrections, I'll be more than happy to receive them—trusting everyone to understand that my prepared answer, in any case, is to the question as I've understood it, not as the questioner asked it.

Here, too, I hope that what I've already said will be helpful toward answering the question. But let me say, first of all, that, on my understanding of what it means to express one's faith as a Christian to others—or, as I'm accustomed to think and speak of it, to bear Christian witness, implicitly as well as explicitly, by what one does as well as by what one says—on my understanding of this, to express one's Christian faith is always to make or imply two claims to validity: that one's expression, or witness, is *adequate to its content*, and that it is *fitting to its situation*, which is to say, to the situation of the person(s) to whom it is expressed or borne. I also understand the first claim—to be adequate to the content of witness—to involve two further claims: to be *appropriate to Jesus Christ*—in the sense of expressing what *he* means for us instead of some other self-understanding—and to be *credible to human existence*—in the sense of being worthy of being accepted by any woman or man simply as such as the truth about her or his existence as a human being.

The second thing I would say is that just what expression of Christian faith, or Christian witness, satisfies, or fails to satisfy, the criteria implied by these claims is never settled, but must always be determined anew in each new situation in which faith is to be expressed or witness is to be borne. In other words, this question is never closed simply by what Christians in the past have thought, said, and done in expressing Christian faith, or bearing Christian witness, in their earlier, more or less different situations. Given the incontrovertible fact of unceasing change from one historical situation to another, what may be adequate or fitting, appropriate or credible, in one situation may or may not be so in another. But although the forms of expression, or the formulations of witness, are therefore not constant but variable, the obligation to express Christian faith, or to bear Christian witness, remains ever the same, as does the obligation always to bear this witness validly, in accordance with the criteria implied by the claims that expressing Christian faith, or bearing Christian witness, itself necessarily makes or implies.



The third thing I would say is that, from all we know from the long history of expressing Christian faith, or bearing Christian witness, there has never been—repeat: *never* been—one such expression, or one such witness, but only many—each making the same claims to be adequate and fitting, appropriate and credible. In some cases, the differences between the several expressions, or witnesses, have been, if not merely verbal, then at most conceptual as well. But in other cases, the differences have proved to be more serious, because they are *real*, amounting in many cases, in fact, to outright contrarities or contradictions. Withal, those who have expressed the different expressions, or borne the different witnesses, have claimed, implicitly if not explicitly, to be doing what any expression, or any witness, of Christian faith, is obliged to do—and, in this sense, have laid claim to the label "Christian," even if they have not necessarily advanced an *exclusive* claim to it, which may be quite aptly described metaphorically as "kidnapping" the label. But that and why any such exclusive claim is, in the nature of the case, entirely out of place should be clear enough simply because, whether or not any expression, or witness, of Christian faith, is or is not valid in the several ways in which it claims, and is therefore obliged, to be so is, as I've said, *never* a closed question, but *always* an open question. It is, to be exact, the properly *theological* question that Christian theology ever bears the responsibility of asking and answering as best it can in *its* historical situation, with its limits and its possibilities.

But now to come directly to the question: How does one express one's Christian faith to others when the term "Christian" is claimed exclusively for only one of many expressions, or witnesses, of Christian faith, and "a very narrow" one at that?

Among the considerations that, in my opinion, need to be kept in mind, having steadfastly forsworn from the very outset any exclusive claims for the validity of one's own expression, or witness, of faith, the following seem to me the most important.

First of all—and that means, *above* all—one needs to remember that what one is obliged to express, or bear witness to, as a Christian is *Christian faith itself*—not what someone else, however sincerely, takes Christian faith to be or mean. There is the most important distinction, in other words, between Christian faith itself and all the many formulations of it that have come down to us in Christian tradition from the original and originating witness of the apostles. To be sure, it is only by ever and again recurring to

the apostles' witness, as it is attested in the New Testament writings and in the subsequent traditions of the church, that we can have any confidence that our own expression, or witness, of faith is, as it must be, appropriate to Jesus Christ. But the fact remains that the Christian faith itself is one thing, while all expressions, or witnesses, of it—including the constitutive, and therefore formally normative, witness of the apostles themselves—are something else. To the first—Christian faith itself—we as Christians are bound indissolubly, but from the second—all expressions or witness of it—we are free unqualifiedly, free to make use of any formulations insofar as they remain adequate and fitting also in our situation, but also free to set them aside in favor of more adequate expressions, or witnesses, given the possibilities and limits of our own situation today.

But, then, the second thing one must keep in mind, obviously, is that one must oneself—precisely as a Christian obliged to express Christian faith, or to bear Christian witness—be sufficiently engaged in critical theological reflection to be able to make this important distinction and to proceed accordingly. I do not mean by this, of course, that every Christian witness is *ipso facto* obliged to be a professional theologian, whether ecclesial or academic. No, I take for granted that not all, but only some Christians, are specially called to be theologians in this sense of the word. But all Christians *are* called, precisely in their call to be Christians, to be *lay* theologians, just as certainly as each of them is also called thereby to be a lay minister. Because one is called as a Christian to bear valid witness to Jesus Christ, one is therewith also called to do theology—in the very general sense of critically reflecting on one's own witness and the witness of one's church to test whether, or to what extent, it really is, or is not, valid in the several ways in which it itself claims to be so, i.e., adequate and fitting, appropriate and credible. So, in this sense, doing theology is a necessary condition of expressing Christian faith or bearing Christian witness. This is sufficiently evident, I take it, simply from realizing that, without doing theology, so understood, one could neither responsibly judge—as the questioner does—any other Christian view to be "a very narrow view" nor have even the least justified confidence that one's own view was anything else.

Thirdly, one needs ever to keep in mind that the life-situation of particular individual others is never simply the same as that of persons generally who live in the same historical time and place. To do theology, as we have seen, is, among other things,

to test the claim of witness to be fitting to its situation. But that is a task that can be reasonably assigned to Christian theology only if the situation in question is more or less general—the situation in which most people in a given time and place find themselves. But, as the poet, e. e. cummings, reminds us, you and I—and, as he clearly implies, everyone else—is not "most people." We are, each of us, a unique individual whose existential question about the ultimate meaning of our existence takes a form more or less distinctively different from that of anyone else. And so if I am to express Christian faith to others, I have to go beyond anything that doing Christian theology, as such, can be reasonably expected to yield. I must take care to understand the others I would address for what they are individually, lest I fail to do all I possibly can so that the gift and demand of Christian faith really come home to them and they can make a responsible decision for or against its claim

Finally—and, I trust, obviously—one must remember that, in the nature of the case, no one has an exclusive right to the label "Christian," pending the theological reflection ever required to vindicate the right. Since theological reflection, as has been said, is always both unconcluded and inconclusive, and since the validity of our claims to validity is never a closed, but always an open question, one may proceed to express Christian faith, or to bear Christian witness, without being in the least intimidated by anyone who kidnaps the label. This assumes, of course, that the three preceding considerations have indeed been kept in mind and that one has proceeded accordingly.

*4. Why does the Bible say, "because Christ died for us, our sins can be erased" (paraphrased)? Why couldn't God just do that before? He's all-powerful, right? Who said that he had to kill his only Son to forgive us? (Who said He only got one Son?) Or am I missing the point of the story? Maybe we can understand that God loves us through Jesus' suffering, and somehow that gets us forgiven.*

This is a complex question—in fact, multiple questions—and I won't be able to do full justice to it—or to them. But here are some things to keep in mind in continuing to think about an adequate answer.

First, to say "the Bible says" is always to oversimplify, because the Bible is not so much one thing as many things, not simply *a* book, but rather a whole *library* of books, or, even better, *two* libraries, two collections of writings, which we respectively distinguish as the Old Testament and the New. So, while something like the paraphrased statement is indeed to be found in the Bible, we are less likely to be misled ourselves, or to mislead others, if we recognize that where it is found, more exactly, is in one or another of the writings included in the New Testament, and, more exactly still, in one or another of the many traditions redacted, or edited, in one or another of the New Testament writings. In short, statements asserting the sacrificial character of Jesus' death, although definitely to be found in the Bible as well as in later Christian traditions, are one way, but nonetheless neither the only nor necessarily the most adequate way, of expressing Jesus' decisive significance for human existence. In fact, they are but one of many ways in which Christians have formulated the assertion concerning Jesus that is constitutive of Christian faith. To say this, of course, is to make use of the all-important distinction I introduced in answering the last question, i.e., the distinction between Christian faith itself, which alone is constant, and its many different expressions, which are—and, in the nature of the case, have to be—variable, and whose validity, as I argued, can never be a closed, but is always an open, question.

The more specific questions the questioner asks in asking the main question indicate some of the reasons why many theologians, including myself, seriously question the adequacy of any statement asserting or implying that Jesus' death is, as has been said, the "meritorious cause" of the forgiveness of sins, and thus of our and all human beings' salvation. If Jesus had to die on the cross in order for humankind to be saved, then the love of God appears to be a conditional, not an unconditional love, and either God's unsurpassable goodness or God's unsurpassable power—or both—clearly seems to be called into question. But, aside from reasons of this kind, there are also other—to my mind, at least as important—reasons for questioning the adequacy, and specifically, the appropriateness of any such statements. I refer to the fact that one of the surest conclusions of New Testament scholarship is that the earliest Christian witness<sup>es</sup> accessible to us through our own historical methods and knowledge have nothing whatever to say about the saving significance of Jesus' death. On the contrary, so far as these earliest

traditions are concerned—I refer to the traditions lying behind and redacted in our synoptic gospels, i. e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke—what is significant about Jesus is, not his death, but his life—his own ministry of word and deed, in its immediate impact on those who encountered him and were open to his claim to bear God's decisive word to them in the last days of the world, before the imminent coming of God's reign. Moreover, it is clear beyond reasonable doubt that, if some Christians then later expressed Jesus' decisive significance for us by making use of the sacrificial imagery of the Old Testament and Judaism to interpret his death, not all later Christians did so, or, if they did, they also made use of other, very different means for making the identical point. Thus Paul, for example, can focus, not on Jesus' death, as he certainly does in many places in his letters, but rather on Jesus' birth, as the decisive saving event. "But when the fullness of time had come," he writes to the Galatians, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (4:4 f.). Not a word is said here about Jesus' saving death, nor is it either asserted or implied that his birth is merely preliminary, simply the necessary condition of his subsequently having to die in order to achieve our salvation. No, this is another, totally independent way of making exactly the same point that is made—by, among others, Paul himself!—by talking about Jesus' dying, or having to die, in order for us to be saved.

I would like to pursue this line of argument. But I trust I've said enough to indicate my answer to the main question. As for the more specific question, Who said that God has only one Son?, the answer, I think, must be that many, if not, indeed, most, of the writers whose work is accessible to us in or through the New Testament writings either said, or clearly implied, something that could be more or less adequately expressed by saying this, or something very like it. In other words, the assertion, implicitly or explicitly, in some terms or other, of Jesus' decisive significance, and therefore of his uniqueness as a human being, is in no way peculiar to this writer or that, but rather the common witness of all the New Testament writers as well as of the still earlier traditions, both oral and written, that they appropriated and made available. This is to imply, of course, that saying Jesus is God's only Son is but one of many ways of making the identical point about his decisive significance for us—by which I mean, not only for us as

Christians, but for all humankind. But whether, or in what sense, this claim about Jesus is an exclusivist claim is another question that I cannot go into now, although I would certainly welcome its being pursued later in our general discussion. I may also refer you again to my book, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*, which has not a little to say relevant to answering it.

### 5. *When is war appropriate?*

Like the notorious prosecutor's question, "When did you stop beating your wife?" this question appears to be what logicians call "a complex question." That is, it really involves two questions, because in asking one question, it assumes the answer to another. It assumes that war is appropriate in asking when it is so. Or is this only an appearance, because the questioner in asking the question really is open to, among other responses, "Never! War is never appropriate"?

Perhaps the questioner will in due course tell us. Anyhow, I assume that the context presupposed in asking the question is the context of Christian witness and theology, so that it could be more explicitly asked by asking something like, "When, if ever, is war appropriate, according to Christian witness and theology?"

Before speaking to the question, I should probably tell you that, being a Christian *systematic* theologian, I'm only, in part, a Christian *moral* theologian. Although, even as a systematic theologian, I naturally have to concern myself with Christian action as well as Christian belief, I do not need to go into all of the details of particular moral questions, such as the question before us, in order to carry out my part of the theological task. So, in this answer, otherwise than in my answers to the preceding questions, I must be content, for the most part, to refer you to places where you may find the answer that I shall barely more than adumbrate in my brief comments.

Students of the matter typically distinguish two main answers in traditional Christian witness and theology to the question, When, if ever, is war appropriate? One is the so-called *pacifist* answer, which is precisely an unqualified "Never!" because of God's commandment, "You shall not kill." Thus it is like the answer of some so-called pro-life

Christians (Sarah Palin, apparently, among them), who hold that abortion is never appropriate even in such extreme situations as have involved rape or incest. The other main answer is that developed in what is usually referred to as "just war theory," which I shall call, simply, the *just war* answer. Unlike the pacifist answer, it is not an unqualified "Never," but the qualified, "Whenever war is just, but only then." The whole point, then, of the just war theory in which this answer is elaborated is to spell out carefully and thoughtfully the conditions that have to be met in order for a war to be really a just war, as distinct from a war naturally claimed to be just by its proponents, so as to pay the tribute that even unjust action pays to conscience, with its demand that we shall do justice and only justice in everything we do.

I should perhaps add that, although the pacifist answer has been given by Christians from an early time and has continued to be the answer of particular Christian communities and churches—as well as, of course, individual Christians—right up to the present, it has been and continues to be the minority, not the majority answer, of the Christian community as a whole. Most Christians and churches at least since the fourth century C.E. have given some version or other of the qualified answer most fully worked out and argued for in just war theory. This is true, specifically, of the Reformed Church tradition, which includes the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as well as my own United Methodist Church, although it has to be said that both churches have also had important pacifist minorities, especially at times when the power struggle between nations has made the issue of war and peace a burning issue. I'm thinking especially of the late 1930s, when World War II became ever more inevitable, and all of the mainstream Protestant churches in the United States, including the Presbyterian and the Methodist, had large and very influential pacifist minorities, if not, as it often seemed, at least, majorities. At that time in our nation, the burden of representing and arguing for the just war answer over against the near-dominant, if not dominant, pacifist answer of many Protestant Christians fell almost solely on the great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose work on this whole question is probably the richest resource I can refer you to if you wish to pursue an answer to the question. Of particular value in this connection is the book edited by Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good, whose title tells you everything you need to

know about it: *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Explained in His Writings* (1960).

I cannot go into the arguments, for and against, these two main answers to our question. I must settle for a brief further word about just war theory and then refer you to a couple of other resources for your further thinking about the question. You may infer from this, correctly, that my own answer to the question, were I do develop it, would not be a pacifist, but rather a just war, type of answer.

Just war theory is ordinarily developed in two main parts, traditionally called by their Latin titles, *Jus ad bellum* (which may be somewhat freely translated, Justice in Going to War) and *Jus in bello* (or Justice in Conducting War). The dominant concept in the first part is "just cause," since having a just cause is *the* condition that a nation has to meet if it is to go to war justly. But other important conditions include the war's being declared by a proper authority, the nation's having a right intention in going to war, its end's being proportional to the means employed, and there being a reasonable chance of its being successful. In the second part, then, the concern is that justice also be realized in conducting the war, by minimizing, so far as possible, its ferocity and its destructiveness, to both life, property, and resources. Thus the dominant concepts, or principles, in this part are "discrimination," "proportionality," and—in formulations of the theory since the Nuremburg Trials after World War II—"responsibility." The first is concerned, above all, with discriminating between combatants and noncombatants; the second, with using no more force or causing no more destruction than absolutely necessary to attain the war's end; and the third, with individual combatants having to take responsibility for their actions regardless of the commands of their superiors.

So sketchy an outline does scant justice to the complexity and depth of just war theory. And it gives no idea whatever of all the many questions that can and do arise not only in understanding exactly what it is that a particular condition of just war requires, but also, and most importantly, in actually applying the concepts, or principles, of the theory to the circumstances and possibilities of particular situations. But this is the best I can do, other than to refer you to some additional places where you may profitably pursue the question if you have an interest in doing so, as well as, of course, the time and the opportunity.



One such place, not surprisingly, is the Internet. Of the several things I checked, the best I found—and certainly a good place to begin—was the entry on Just War Theory in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ([www.iep.utm.edu/j/justwar.htm](http://www.iep.utm.edu/j/justwar.htm)). So far as books are concerned, one of the best, almost certainly, is Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977). But there is a much shorter, more generally accessible book that you may well find to be more suitable to your needs—namely, Joseph L. Allen, *War: A Primer for Christians* (1991; rev. ed., 2001). I commend this book to you most heartily as simply a splendid book, written by one of the genuinely well-furnished moral theologians I know. Among its other merits is that it distinguishes (and critically appropriates), not just the two traditional answers I have referred to, the pacifist and the just war answers, but also a third answer, which Allen calls "the crusade approach." Although taking account of this third answer does not, I think, significantly qualify anything I've said, it is characteristic of Allen as the scrupulous scholar he is to consider *all* the answers that could conceivably be relevant to answering the question responsibly.

6. *Would you like to speak about the afterlife?*

The honest answer, I suppose, is "Not particularly!" But I hasten to add that this is not in the least because I do not recognize questions about the afterlife to be questions that any Christian theologian, not to say, any Christian, ought to be willing to go into, if anyone sincerely asks them. The simple fact of the matter is that talk about the afterlife, in one understanding or another, has been a part of the Christian tradition from its earliest stages, as well as of the wider Western cultural and religious tradition by which all of us in our society and culture have somehow been shaped. Moreover, Christian witness and theology both have traditionally formulated the implications of Christian faith in ways involving—again, in one understanding or another—belief in an afterlife as an essential element in Christian belief. Withal, it's clear from the historical record that the real use and meaning of talk about the afterlife has all along been more or less seriously problematic, so that questions about it can hardly fail to arise in any thoughtful mind, including, I should think, any thoughtful Christian mind. But this is all by way of saying

that any such talk, as well as any properly theological talk about its meaning and validity, is bound to be difficult, particularly in the concluding minutes of any single, all too brief, theological conversation such as this.

Recognizing this, I shall respond to the question in two main parts. In the first, I shall simply state—all too summarily and dogmatically, I fear—the main things I try to keep in mind in thinking theologically about any talk about the afterlife, including the talk that I take to be typical of traditional Christian witness. In the second part, then, I will accept the opportunity the question as asked gives me of speaking—again, all too summarily—as I myself as a Christian am accustomed to speaking about the afterlife, in the straightforward sense of such life after death as I myself, as a Christian, hope and expect to be mine, along with any and every other creature of God, nonhuman as well as human.

The first thing I try to keep in mind is that, from at least the time of the New Testament writings on, there have been, not one way, but two ways—in fact, two very different, not to say contrary, ways—in which Christians have thought and spoken about the afterlife. The earliest such way is that of Jewish apocalypticism, with its talk about resurrection from the dead, or resurrection of the body, as well as a new heaven and a new earth when this old evil age has come to an end and the new age of God's coming reign has begun. Some such understanding as this is simply taken over, more or less uncritically, by most of the New Testament writers, following most of the still earlier writers whose work they somehow appropriate in their own. But in some of the New Testament writings—notably, the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine epistles—this apocalyptic way of envisioning life after death as resurrection of the body is displaced by another, non-Jewish, Hellenistic, specifically Gnostic understanding for which the key concept is, not resurrection of the body, but immortality of the soul. The remarkable thing, however, is that both of these very different understandings in which different early Christians thought and spoke about the afterlife were eventually worked together into what became the understanding of Christian orthodoxy. On this third, highly problematic understanding, the soul, being immortal or undying, goes immediately upon death either to heaven, where it rests in the hands of God until the final judgment, or to hell, where it already tastes the torments of God's punishment. (I should explain that I'm

here following the Protestant version of the narrative, which intentionally rejects the third "receptacle" of purgatory so important in Roman Catholic piety and theology as well as the other two receptacles referred to as "limbo," i.e., the limbo of infants and the limbo of the fathers, meaning the righteous of the Old Testament, who prophesied Christ's coming, but died before its fulfillment.) But, then, with the coming of Christ and the last judgment, the bodies of all the dead, righteous and unrighteous, are to be raised and united with their souls, wherewith they will be consigned irreversibly either to everlasting blessedness or everlasting torment.

I can't go into any more detail, but I trust I've said enough to make two further things I try to keep in mind clear. First, neither of the understandings of the afterlife worked together into the eventual understanding of Christian orthodoxy is in any way original with Christian faith, but was simply taken over by Christians from the larger cultural and religious environment, Jewish or Hellenistic, in order to formulate their own understanding as Christians of the ultimate meaning of their lives. Then, second, there can be no doubt that, by contemporary standards of judgment, both understandings are properly classified as mythical or mythological in literary character. This in no way implies, I hasten to add, that they're simply false. It means only that, in speaking about what they're really about—the ultimate meaning of our existence as human beings—they speak in terms appropriate enough to talking about the immediate realities of our ordinary experience, but hopelessly inappropriate to talking about the ultimate reality of our existence, of ourselves, others, and the whole. They are just as misleading, indeed, as talk about God's transcendence as though it were a matter of immense spatial distance, as though God were simply another being among others, exalted only by being simply higher, or spatially "above" them. Here again, I have to be brief. My point, very simply, is that all traditional Christian talk about the afterlife, on any of the traditional understandings, is undoubtedly mythical, or mythological, and therefore has to be—in the term used by my revered teacher, Rudolf Bultmann—*demythologized*. That is to say, it has to be critically interpreted so as to bring out the self-understanding, or the understanding of existence, that it is really concerned to express, but that it as myth manages to express only most inappropriately.

But, then, so far as Christian witness and theology are concerned, the criterion by which Christians must judge the self-understanding, or understanding of existence, of any myth, including any myths about the afterlife, is the self-understanding, or understanding of existence, of Christian faith itself. I ask you to recall yet again the all-important distinction I introduced early on in our conversation, between *Christian faith itself*, on the one hand, and *its various, always only more or less adequate, forms and formulations*, on the other. As bound as we are to the first, I insisted, we are just as free from the second—free to make use of them or to set them aside, depending on whether, or how adequately and fittingly, they allow us to bear witness to the boundless love of God decisively represented to us through Jesus Christ. So far as Christian faith is concerned, then, it is solely this all-encompassing love that is both the beginning and the end of our lives and of everything else. And this means, I hold, that it is this love *alone* that is both the ground and the object not only of our trust and our loyalty, our faith and our love, but also of our hope. In other words, God's love alone is not only *why we hope* as Christians, but also *what we hope for*. But, then, all the traditional understandings, or formulations, of Christian hope have to be judged by their appropriateness for expressing what Christian hope itself actually hopes for, not only in life, but also after life—namely, the pure, unbounded love of God, by which our lives and everything else, present as well as future, actual as well as possible, are everlastingly embraced and preserved.

This brings me to the second part of my answer to the question, in which I have promised to speak about the afterlife as I, as a Christian, am accustomed to speak about it. I cannot help but recall in this connection a story my friend, the New Testament scholar, Willi Marxsen tells toward the end of his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*. It is about his own theological teacher, Heinrich Rendtorff, who, when he was dying, asked his wife to listen quietly to what he had to say and then went on: "The last nights I have been thinking over and testing everything that we can know and everything that we have been told about what will happen to us when we die. And now I am certain of one thing: I will be safe." To which Marxsen adds: "Nobody could call Heinrich Rendtorff a representative of 'modern' theology. But he was a level-headed man who always tried to confine himself to statements which he could justify. The only thing he was sure of on his deathbed was: I shall be safe" (188).

In somewhat the same way, the only thing I'm sure of, and therefore the only thing I speak of in speaking about the afterlife, is that I shall be safe—indeed, that all things shall be safe within the all-inclusive, never-ending love of God. This in no way implies, on my understanding, that I myself will somehow survive death as a subject and continue to enjoy for either a shorter or a longer future both myself and every other creature's being embraced by God's love. My *objective* immortality, or resurrection, in God's love is one thing, my own *subjective* immortality, or resurrection, or even my survival of death for some unspecified time, something else. But to avoid any misunderstanding, I neither deny our subjective survival of death nor have even the least interest in denying it, however problematic I continue to find all affirmations of it, especially affirmations of subjective immortality in the strict sense of the words, as distinct from merely subjective survival for some limited period after death. No, the only thing I would deny is the oft-heard claim that our subjective survival is in some way essential to the hope that is Christian hope itself, as distinct from some of the understandings of it in the Christian tradition. In my view, any such claim, fully thought out is quite simply idolatrous—setting up something besides God, instead of obediently surrendering to God alone as what we as Christians hope for. Whether or not we subjectively survive death, what we hope for, insofar as our hope is Christian hope, is not our own subjective survival or immortality, but solely God's love for us, and, because of it, our objective immortality, or resurrection—our being safe—in God's love.

There's more I could say in speaking about the afterlife as I'm used to speaking about it. But such "more" as I could say would only be by way of elaborating upon what I have already said, which is the only thing I can say and, as a Christian, would ever want to say—namely, what I take Paul to be saying to the Romans in the fourteenth chapter of his letter: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (vss. 7 ff.).