

According to one of my interpreters, I represent "in fairly pure form" the option according to which "the [*sc.* biblical] narratives refer to some eternal truth which they symbolize," so that "the meaning of the story is not the story but some moral lesson or religious truth it illustrates" (William C. Placher, "Postliberal Theology," *The Modern Theologians*, 2, ed. David F. Ford [Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989]: 118). Another interpreter, in the context of an interpretation-criticism of David Tracy's theology, takes note of Tracy's "affirmative citation" of my statement that religions "provide us with particular symbolic forms through which that faith (i.e., our basic confidence and trust in the meaningfulness of existence) may be more or less adequately reaffirmed at the level of self-conscious belief" (Stephen L. Stell, "Hermeneutics in Theology and the Theology of Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 61, 4 [Winter 1993]: 685, n. 7).

Aside from the fact that any reasonably careful reader of my writings would recognize that I do not represent the view that religions symbolize "some eternal truth," i.e., "some moral lesson or religious truth," but, typically, expressly distinguish my position from any such "option" (cf., e.g., CWM: 161 ff.), such interpreters conveniently ignore the fact that my concept of a basic faith in life's meaning functions logically precisely as the "basic supposition" of religious inquiry, as distinct from a "proposal" or a "doctrinal statement"—to use the terms of William Christian's analysis of religious inquiry. This means, among other things, that, as the statement quoted from *The Reality of God* above makes clear, I typically allow for the fact that the particular religions that provide us with symbolic forms—proposals and doctrinal statements—wherewith to re-present this supposition by answering the "basic question" that it makes possible may do so only "more or less adequately." In other words, I emphatically do not take all religions to be the symbolic expressions of some one eternal moral or religious truth, or even some one existential self-understanding, except in the sense that even the most different answers to the religious question are logically such that they *eo ipso* re-present the basic supposition necessarily presupposed in asking the question as well as by any answer to it.

The other thing that such interpreters conveniently ignore is that I do not accept the analysis of religious inquiry to which I have referred solely and

simply because it is a philosophically adequate analysis, but also, and above all, because it is the only analysis consistent with Christian faith itself. My claim that human beings as such have a basic faith in the meaning of life, and, in that sense, a faith in God, is, I contend, an immediate inference from "the idea of God implicit in Christian faith" (RG: 22). I can, of course, be mistaken in this contention. But it is—precisely—a contention, which is to say, an *argument*, and unless and until this argument is shown to be fallacious or otherwise unsound, I have not been met on my own ground—on my own specifically *theological* ground.

Moreover, far from being in any way new, or even "modern," my way of thinking about this whole matter parallels almost exactly the way in which Luther, no less, thinks about it. On his analysis, "the light of grace fights and blinds the natural light of reason," which he otherwise characterizes as "the false, self-serving, self-oriented light of reason," or, more simply, "self-willed reason" (LW, 52: 78, 80, 90). Thus from the very beginning there has been a controversy, and "the controversy has always been over the true and false kind of divine worship." "[T]he entire controversy centers around the fact that the pseudo-saints are quarreling with true saints about the service of God and good works. The former say: this is serving God. The latter say: no, this is idolatry and an erroneous faith. Such controversy has existed from the beginning and will continue to the end. . . . Both sides are unanimous that one must serve God and perform good works. But in the interpretation of what constitutes service to God and good works, the two sides will never come to an agreement. The one side says it is faith that counts; nature and reason with their works are out. The other side says, faith amounts to nothing, and nature with its works is good and right. Likewise, there is unanimity in this: gross sins, murder, adultery, robbery are wrong. But with respect to the main works relating to the service of God they differ like winter and summer. The one side clings to God and his mercy and fears him. The other side runs to wood and stone, food and clothing, days and seasons, and wants to win God by building churches, by setting up endowments, by fasting, by reeling off prayers, and by shaving the head" (90 ff.).

Luther rightly recognizes that such a controversy is logically possible only because both sides agree in the same basic supposition—in his words,

that "one must serve God and perform good works." If we ask, then, whence this supposition, or how is it possible for both sides to make it, his answer is "the natural light of reason." "[N]o man exists in whom there is not the natural light of reason; this is the sole ground for calling him human and for his having human worth" (60). "I know full well that the light of reason is everywhere kindled by the divine light and, as I have said of the natural life, that it is part and beginning of the true life, provided it comes to the right understanding. The light of reason, too, is a part and beginning of the true light provided it recognizes and honors him by whom it is kindled. However, it does not do this by itself, but remains within itself and becomes corrupt, and also corrupts all things along with itself; and for this reason it will be extinguished and perish. The light of grace does not destroy the natural light. It is entirely clear, according to the light of nature, that three and two equal five, even as it is clear that one should do good and avoid evil. The light of grace does not extinguish this. But the natural light cannot reach so far that it could determine which things are good and which are bad. The same thing happens to the natural light as happened to the man who wanted to go to Rome and went in the opposite direction. He knew very well that he who wants to go to Rome should take the right road, but he did not know which one that was. Natural light does the same thing: it does not follow the right road to God, it does not know it and is not acquainted with it, although it knows sufficiently that one must follow the right road" (57 f.). "The natural light is like the other members and faculties of man. . . . although by nature it is enlightened enough to know that only good should be done, it is so corrupt that it never succeeds in choosing the good; rather it calls good whatever pleases it, settles for it, and does not hesitate to conclude that what it has chosen as good must be done. . . . Reason knows very well that one should be godly and serve God; . . . but when reason is called on to act and to show how and in what way we should become godly or serve God, then it can do nothing; it is as blind as a bat and says that we must fast, pray, sing, and do the works of the law. It continues to fool around in this manner with works, until it has gone so far astray and thinks we serve God by building churches, ringing bells, burning incense, reciting by rote, singing, wearing hoods, having tonsures, burning candles, and by other countless foolish acts of which the world is full. Reason parades around with such great and blind error and yet always remains 'the clear light': one must be godly and serve

God. Now when Christ, the light of grace, appears, he, too, teaches one must be godly and serve God. He does not extinguish this natural light, but he opposes the manner and the means that reason uses to teach how one should become godly and serve God. He says: To become godly is not to perform works but first to believe in God, without any works, and afterward to do works; without faith no work is good. Then the battle begins. Reason rages against grace and cries out against its light. . . . Behold, there you have in brief the cause and origin of all idolatry, of all heresy, of all hypocrisy, of all error; this is what all the prophets deplored and why they were killed, and against this all Scripture takes a stand. All of this comes from the stiff-necked, self-willed pride and delusion of natural reason which is puffed up because it knows that we must be godly and serve God; moreover, it does not want to listen to or tolerate any teacher. It is of the opinion that it is sufficiently informed and that it can find out on its own what it means to be godly and to serve God and how one should do it. This sort of arrogance divine truth cannot and must not suffer from reason; for it is the greatest error and is against God's honor. In this way controversy and misery arise" (58 ff.). Thus "the bright natural light which correctly asserts that we must be godly" is not something that the light of grace has to bring; for "this is already here, and Christ did not come in order to bring it, [but] in order to blind the false, self-willed pride and to dim it and to place the light of his grace, faith, in its stead"(60). But if Christ did not come to bring the natural light of reason with its correct assertion that "one must serve God and perform good works," he nevertheless does not extinguish this light, but, because it is "a part and beginning of the true light," teaches exactly what it teaches, that "one must be godly and serve God," for this is the basic supposition of the controversy between "self-willed reason," on the one hand, and God's truth, on the other, and, therefore, must be re-presented by the one as well as the other.

Clearly, Luther's "light of nature" functions as an almost exact parallel to my "basic faith in the meaning of life." In fact, the only differences between our two positions are (1) that I do not presuppose the validity of theism in making the point that we are both concerned to make, but, rather, try to recognize that the assertion of theism is itself controversial, not the basic supposition of the controversy; and (2) that I allow, as Luther does not in this context, although he does in others, that the light of reason not only knows

*that* there is a God and that we are to serve this God with good works, but also *what*, or *who*, this God is and what we are to do if we are to serve or worship as we should. Without such an allowance, one would have to admit that the predicament of the natural man could only be ignorance rather than sin, and Luther's own characteristic teaching elsewhere that the Decalogue and the evangelical law are re-presentations of the law of nature and of reason would not be true but false.

Allowing for these differences, however, I maintain that my way of thinking about this matter tracks very closely the way in which Luther, for one, thinks about it.

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### *Addendum*

I have always been puzzled by Placher's distinction between saying that "the meaning of the story is the story," as he would presumably say, and saying that "the meaning of the story is some moral lesson or religious truth it illustrates," as he supposes I would want to say. But only recently have I realized that what is almost certainly at stake in his distinction is what I would characterize as a distinction between a constitutivist and a representativist understanding of the event(s) that the story, or "the narratives," are about. Whereas in his view the event(s) in question is(are) constitutive of the possibility of salvation, in my view they are merely representative of this possibility. So what is really at issue is not, in the first instance, the meaning of the story, but the significance of the event(s) of which the story is the story.