

# THE WITNESS OF NATURE TO GOD'S EXISTENCE AND GOODNESS

Diogenes Allen

I wish to show how the existence and order of nature may function as a witness to God's existence and goodness. Although "witness" is a theological term, the argument is a philosophical one.

## I

My starting point is William L. Rowe's book, *The Cosmological Argument*. Rowe examines two major criticisms of the Cosmological Argument which were intended to refute that argument even should the Principle of Sufficient Reason, upon which it relies, be true. He shows that these criticisms fail and in doing so shows that the question, Why does the world exist?, is a meaningful question. As he puts it, a dependent being is one which has the reason for its existence in the causal efficacy of some other being. By world Rowe means the aggregate of dependent beings. It is assumed that dependent beings are infinite in number and extend back in time without end. To explain the existence of each dependent being in terms of a previously existing dependent being or beings does not tell us why we have any dependent beings at all. Of course there may be *no* reason why there are any dependent beings at all. It could be that this aggregate of dependent beings "just is." Were the Principle of Sufficient Reason true, we would know that there *must* be a reason for the existence of the aggregate of dependent beings. Were the Principle false, we would know that there does not *have to be* a reason. But we do not know whether the Principle is true or not. In addition, there *might* be a reason for the world's existence even were the Principle not true; that is, there *might* be a reason for the world's existence even though there does not *have to be* a reason. So both because of our present ignorance concerning the truth of the Principle of Sufficient Reason and because there might be a reason for the world's existence even if the Principle is false, the existence of the world poses a question for us, since the existence of the aggregate of dependent beings which constitutes the world is unexplained by its members.

Richard Swinburne's procedure for answering this question in his book *The Existence of God* is to combine arguments based on the existence and order of na-



ture with an argument about the likelihood of the validity of religious experience. He claims that on their own the arguments based on the existence and order of nature have too low a degree of probability to render belief in God rational, but when they are combined with religious experience, the probability of the existence of God is sufficiently increased to make belief in Him rational.

Rowe himself recommends that the theist find reasons to believe that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true. The theist then, on the basis of the Cosmological Argument, would have reason to believe that there is an independent or necessary being which causes the world of dependent beings.

I like the idea of combining lines of reasoning which have different bases, such as the existence of nature; its order; and religious experience. But I will reason differently from Swinburne and I will make no claims about probability, as I am uneasy about arguments of probability on such a matter, and in particular about Swinburne's reliance on Carl Hempel's view of scientific explanations.

Furthermore, I believe we can make use of the existence and order of nature to make a case for belief in God without reliance on the Principle of Sufficient Reason. By doing so we can perhaps help correct a false impression created by the large amount of attention given to the traditional proofs of God's existence by philosophers of religion—the impression that the truth of the Christian and other theistic religions turns on the truth or falsity of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This is a far more significant matter than it may seem at first; for it affects the conception of the nature of proper evaluation of religious truth-claims. In spite of the recognition of the multiplicity of “language-games” and “forms of life” there is still a marked tendency to reduce religious beliefs to non-religious contexts and thereby fail to make a proper evaluation of their grounds.

Consider, for example, Milton K. Munitz's opening remarks in *The Mystery of Existence*, in which he contrasts the ancient Greeks, who did not raise the question of why there is a world at all, with the ancient Hebrews who, Munitz claims, did.

Why need we vacillate, or be under tension, between choosing either a “Greek” way of looking at the world, as something to be understood in itself, or a “Hebraic” way of looking at the world, as something made by a Power that transcends it? Both modes of thought are trying, each in its own way, to satisfy the human drive for rationality and intelligibility. Both operate with some form of a Principle of Sufficient Reason.<sup>1</sup>

It is assumed by Munitz that the reason the ancient Hebrews thought there is a God is that they sought to explain the existence of the world, that they were motivated by “the human drive for rationality and intelligibility,” and that they operated with some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

We cannot be sure why the ancient Hebrews believed in God, and a creator God, but on the basis of historical study of the Old Testament, it appears that Munitz is

far from the mark. Gerhard von Rad in his widely respected *Old Testament Theology* argues that the oldest credal statements of ancient Israel do not contain a reference to creation but to the call of Abraham.<sup>2</sup> When, later in their development, the Jews confess such a belief, it is apparently in order to affirm the universal sovereignty of their God, Yahweh. He is not only their God, but the God of all peoples and Lord over nature itself. The mode of this affirmation is a creation story. There is no evidence to suggest that they were motivated by a desire to account for why something exists rather than nothing.

It may be, then, that the issue of whether this world is all that there is, is not only or even primarily a matter of accounting for the existence of the world. Belief that the world is dependent on another reality may have grounds besides the fact that the existence of the world is unexplained by its own members, and adherence to the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This possibility very much affects one's view of the nature of the Christian claim that this world depends on God for its existence. This *religious* claim may not arise from the context of explanation, as do our claims in science and philosophy.

This difference in context does not mean the question of why the world exists is irrelevant to Christianity. As we shall see, the very existence of the world has a role to play in the Christian claim that the world is a dependent reality. Religious beliefs have an explanatory role. But the context of Christian beliefs is primarily one of the need for guidance, redemption, and fullness of life.

So I shall consider the question, Why does the world exist?, within a context which though itself not religious is nonetheless harmonious with the nature of religious beliefs. We shall then see what sort of basis we can give for the claim that the world is dependent on God.

It should be noted, moreover, that a difference in context does not imply that one context is irrelevant to another. It seems to be incorrect to think that the ancient Hebrews believed in a creator because they were motivated by "the human desire for rationality and intelligibility," and that they used some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. But, on the other hand, it must be the case that a universe of caused beings is unexplained by reference to its members. Were the existence of the universe explicable by reference to its members, or were the question, Why does the universe exist?, meaningless, then it would be incorrect to affirm that there is a creator God, regardless of the context of that affirmation. The universe must minimally be something which might have a reason for its existence, and whose reason has not been supplied by its own members, in order to claim that God is its creator. The world's existence, then, may not produce belief in God, but that it might have a reason for its existence is a *necessary condition* for belief in a creator God. We would know that the world did not have a Creator were it meaningless to ask, Why does the world exist?, and it would be false to say, "God is the cause of the world's existence," were its existence already explained by its own members.

## II

Many people have experienced awe and wonder at the existence and order of the world. This may be reason to make a serious effort to find out whether the universe is ultimate or not. But how is an inquiry to be carried out? Without the Principle of Sufficient Reason, we simply have the facts that the world's existence is not explained by its members, and that its existence and order produce feelings of awe and wonder in some people, but still the world might have no reason for its existence. If our *only* purpose is to explain or account for the world's existence, then we can make no advance beyond these facts. But there are other reasons to ask whether the universe is ultimate besides the desire to explain or account for its existence. We shall first give these reasons because they will put the question of the status of the universe in a context in which its existence and order may act as a witness. Then we shall show the grounds for a rational affirmation that the universe is created. This will exhibit the distinctiveness of a *religious* claim that the universe is dependent in contrast to such a claim made on the basis of the Principle of Sufficient Reason or some theory of probability.

There are at least five reasons for asking whether the universe is ultimate or not. The first one we have already noted: One may ask because the world's existence is not explained by its members. This reason to ask about the status of the universe quickly runs into a dead end, as we have seen. Nonetheless that the world's existence is not explained by its members is a necessary condition for the other reasons to ask about its status. Were the world's existence explained by its members, then the other reasons, which we are now to examine, would be misguided, since we would know already. So even though this reason, *taken on its own*, runs into a dead end, yet taken in conjunction with other reasons for asking about the ultimate status of the universe it is a necessary condition for their soundness.

The second reason for asking whether the universe is ultimate is the need to make choices. Human beings are goal-seeking and, because our goals are numerous and in some instances conflicting, we must attempt to order them into some rational priority. This is true for us both as individuals and as members of various groups.

To order our goals rationally, we must look at our own interests and desires and also consider what ends our natural and social environments allow us to attempt with some chance of success. This estimation is greatly affected by whether the universe is ultimate or not; for an estimate based on this world as ultimate is significantly different from an estimate based on the view that there is a deity (as conceived in various religions). So the need to direct and order our lives is a reason to ask whether or not the universe is ultimate. This need renders the question con-

cerning the status of the universe *inescapable* for rational agents.

The third reason to ask about the status of the universe is closely related to the previous one. Not only are human beings goal-seeking, but the magnitude of human aspirations, needs, and desires seems to be greater than the world can satisfy. This is a far more forceful reason to ask whether this universe is ultimate. The need to direct and order our lives because of the number of goals and the irreconcilability of some of them makes the issue inescapable; this need makes it an important and even pressing issue. For we have to decide whether to *reduce* our aspirations and *deny* some of our needs and desires because the world cannot satisfy them. Such measures are rational only if we have examined the status of the universe, and indeed examined it seriously and carefully, since our aspirations, needs and desires are very important to us. Their reduction or denial is not easily accomplished. Should this world *not* be ultimate, perhaps many of them can be met. It is rational to try to find out whether there is more than this world and, should there be reason to think there is, to try to find out what it is.

Human aspirations, needs, and desires are so extensive that it would be a prodigious task to set them out and defend the soundness of a particular account. But for our purposes, it is only necessary to show that we have aspirations, needs, and desires of such a nature that it is unlikely that they can be satisfied if this world is self-contained. We will then have given a reason for raising the question concerning the status of the universe and also have shown that the question is an important and even a pressing one, since to be rational we must decide whether or not to reduce and even utterly deny some of our expectations.

Spinoza in his essay, "On the Improvement of the Understanding" tells us that as a young man he decided to forego comforts, the pursuit of wealth, sensual enjoyment, and fame in order to seek our true end and good. In his *Ethics* he claims to have found it. He argues that, although nature is indifferent to many of our aspirations and desires, a knowledge of nature and a contemplation of that knowledge will give us happiness. But it is important to note that with Spinoza's conviction that the universe is all that there is, one must accept death as final; accept that most people are not able to gain a knowledge of the universe such as he claims leads to happiness; and accept that the desire to be unconditionally loved is not included as part of human fulfillment.

It is of course possible to accept death as final and to accept that the route to fulfillment is limited to people of sufficient intelligence and education to follow it. But that it takes strenuous effort to come to terms with one's own death and the death of others indicates that we do in fact aspire to continue to live, if not forever, certainly for longer than we do. That a particular kind of knowledge of the universe gives happiness, but only to those few endowed with the capacity to acquire it, means that if this universe is all that there is, most people will not find their fulfillment.

Spinoza is not a pessimist. He is optimistic about the possibility of some human beings finding fulfillment even if the world is ultimate. It should be noted, however, that the element of elevated joy which Spinoza evinces comes from the exercise of the intellect, and the qualities of the objects known by the intellect. But only the intellect finds such positive satisfaction. For the rest, there is the contentment which can come to a person with the *renunciation* of the aspiration to live longer, if not forever, and the contentment that may result from the *renunciation* or even denial of non-intellectual desires and needs. Such contentment is not the positive joy which comes from their fulfillment.

Marxists are also optimistic about human fulfillment. They claim that people in capitalist economies are alienated, especially from their labor. Work should be creative expression and a person should find fulfillment in work and in the object of his work. People in capitalist societies, however, work at enforced tasks and the product of their labor is money. This and other forms of alienation can be corrected by a new social order.

For an orthodox Marxist, death is final. Most of those who live before the new social order is established have no hope of fullness of life. Unfortunately, there exists no truly socialist society, so that we cannot determine empirically what is the case. There is, however, an easily recognizable phenomenon which bears directly on the point.

As human beings we seek to satisfy our desires. No matter how much we get or whatever it is that we get, sooner or later we want more or something different. We never seem to be satisfied permanently with what we possess or have achieved, but we are restless and crave what is new and novel. As Plato put it in his dialogue, the *Gorgias*, we are like leaky jars (493b-d). It is as if we were containers into which things are always being poured but which never get filled because there is a hole in each container and something is always leaking out. We often think and feel that if only we had more, we would be satisfied; or if we had or did something different, our potential would be realized, our happiness assured, our fullness achieved. Yet we are at peace for such short periods, and even then it takes but the news that someone has attained some recognition, some honor, some praise, for us to feel a pang of envy, a pang of discontent.

This phenomenon is easy to recognize, but it takes courage to keep it before one's attention and admit what it shows us about us. One of Jean-Paul Sartre's merits is the persistence with which he calls it to our attention, brilliantly analyzing the tenacity with which we deceive ourselves about it. It is extremely painful to face squarely and to retain fully as part of our outlook the truth about our incapacity to find fullness in anything that is part of the universe. Each thoughtful person's reflections on his own experience and observation of others supply him with ample reason to be skeptical of the Marxist's social order.

It may, of course, be impossible for human beings to find fulfillment, whether

this world is self-contained or not. The nature of human fulfillment is so difficult to determine that the very notion of it may be incoherent. But this does not affect the fact that human beings seek to be happy and that they find death to be a very serious barrier, to say the least, to the possibility of fulfillment. The fact that considerable effort is needed to accept death shows that there is an aspiration which we cannot hope to have fulfilled should the world be all that there is.

It may be that usually only people who are either highly successful or unusually unsuccessful in attaining their goals and in satisfying their needs and desires persistently wonder about whether this world is all that there is. The successful ponder because they have gained so much and still are dissatisfied, the unsuccessful because they have so little hope unless there is more than this world. For both of them, if fullness of life is to be found, it is not going to be found in this world. The issue of the status of the universe may be a *pressing* one only for such people, but it is an *important* one for thoughtful people who have recognized the magnitude of their aspirations, precisely because what we want is important to us and the examination of the fit between means and ends is a rational activity.

The particular character of the universe is raised explicitly by the next two reasons we are to examine. The order of the universe is beautiful, especially to our vision and intellect; but the very same order which delights us also causes us to suffer pain. We shall now see how these effects of the order of nature lead us to ask about the status of the universe.

The order of nature produces an experience of beauty by means of our eyes and brains. This effect can be called "subjective" in the sense that it is the result of the action of objects and light upon our sense organs and brains. But this does not mean that the beauty we perceive is subjective in the sense of a delusion (there is nothing abnormal about us), nor in the sense of an illusion (as in the case of the appearance of a bent stick in water). Given our perceptual nature and the nature of light and the objects of our world, we correctly perceive the world as beautiful.

The fact that sensuous beauty is the result of relations between our brains, sense organs, light, and the natural world makes the beauty we perceive all the more noteworthy. Things are so ordered that we receive the effects of immense beauty from many perspectives, and at various levels of magnification by microscopes and telescopes, even though the appearance of the objects we perceive changes drastically through perspective and magnification. Parts of our planet seen from mountaintops and also in photographs taken from various distances in space are radiantly beautiful to us. That such beauty is the result of the relations between our organs, light and the natural order, all of which could have been different, renders the situation all the more remarkable. Such experiences of beauty seem to add nothing to the biological evolution of the race. That we are bathed, so to speak, in beauty from so many perspectives and magnifications by the relations between our organs, light, and the natural world renders the negative connotations of the word

“subjective” inappropriate.

Although the enjoyment of the beauty of the world can be an end in itself, this experience can suggest to us that there may be something beyond this world and lead us to ask whether there is. For if we attend to an experience of the beauty of nature, we may find that it suggests to us some finality, some completeness, some wholeness of immense value and importance. What the finality or completeness is always eludes us, and we cannot clearly say what it is. It is as if the world promises to give us some unspecified fulfillment, and it fills us with expectancy of something to come; yet it never comes.

Beauty thus reveals to us that the magnitude of our aspirations is even greater than we have so far noted by the fact that we are goal-seeking and are like Plato’s leaky vessels. Beauty enables us to recognize even more profoundly that what we seek is not here but, if it is at all, it is beyond the universe. The beauty of the world, by suggesting some finality, completeness and fulfillment which it itself does not give, gently points us beyond itself.

The order of nature which results in the experience of beauty is the very same order which causes storms, disease and accidents. These evils are usually called “natural evils” and they are frequently used as counter-evidence to a theistic worldview. My concern is not with this, but to show how a specific form of intense suffering, can lead one to raise the question, Is this universe ultimate?, with a particular urgency. This specific form of suffering is called affliction. Since each of us is vulnerable to the possibility of affliction, this reason is not limited to those few who actually have been afflicted.

The substance of my analysis is dependent on Simone Weil’s essay, “The Love of God and Affliction.”<sup>3</sup>In this essay Weil delineates the nature of affliction as a specific form of suffering. It can be caused by physical suffering, if that is very prolonged or frequent; and it has physical effects, for example, difficulty in breathing at the news of the death of a beloved person. But the source of affliction is primarily social. Weil seems to have had in mind the condition of refugees of whom she herself was one during the Second World War. A person is uprooted from the fabric of social relations, so that he or she no longer counts for anything. There is social degradation, or at least fear of it. Even more horrible, psychologically the afflicted person inwardly feels the contempt and disgust which others express toward one who is socially of no account. One may even feel guilt and defilement.

Affliction poses a problem because, unlike other kinds of suffering, no purpose can be found for it. Our position in the physical and social world, Weil points out, is that of but one reality among many in a system of interconnected events, most of which are utterly beyond our control. What is beyond an individual’s control can sometimes injure wealth, social position, the body, and even bring utter destruction. In such circumstances an individual’s only real freedom is the manner in



which he responds to untoward events beyond his control. He can complain about his misfortune; or he can bear whatever comes, even death, without degradation by seeing its necessity and yielding to it courageously and magnanimously. So even though all does not go well for human beings, we can make use of untoward events without being degraded. We may, because of this capacity, also enjoy the other aspect of nature, its beauty.

But affliction is an exception. It degrades. It fills a person with self-contempt and disgust. What use could be made of it? What could be the point of it? Weil claims that this is the question that a person suffering affliction asks with persistence. "...so soon as man falls into affliction the question takes hold and goes on repeating itself incessantly. Why? Why? Why?"<sup>4</sup>

The afflicted man naively seeks an answer, from men, from things, from God, even if he disbelieves in him, from anything and everything. Why is it necessary precisely that he should have nothing to eat, or be worn out with fatigue and brutal treatment, or be about to be executed, or be ill, or be in prison? If one explained to him the causes which have produced his present situation, and this is in any case seldom possible because of the complex interaction of circumstances, it will not seem to him to be the answer. For his question "Why?" does not mean "By what cause?" but "For what purpose?"<sup>5</sup>

The events that occur can give us the causes of affliction but not its purpose. Other adversities enable us to actualize or exercise noble qualities. A good can thus always be realized in face of all other adversities caused by the physical and social order of the universe, and realized in the very person who endures the adversity. But events which cause affliction provide no occasion for good to be realized in the victim. So to the victim's question, "Why?", a reference to the workings of the universe only specifies causes of the affliction without giving the victim any purpose for it.

So there can be no answer to the "Why?" of the afflicted because the world is necessity and not purpose. If there were finality in the world, the place of the good would not be in the other world. Wherever we look for final causes in this world it refuses them. But to know that it refuses, one has to ask.<sup>6</sup>

If then affliction has a purpose, and not just a cause, this purpose must reside outside the universe.

Beauty and affliction are two aspects of the natural world. One is lovely; the other is horrible. Yet each leads one to look for a finality or a good which the universe itself does not have. One who is greatly moved by beauty or who suffers affliction is open to receive an answer. But the answer is not sought in terms of the

satisfaction of a mere intellectual interest. It is a craving for a good as a fulfillment of a longing or as a relief for misery. That is the nature of the answer which is sought to the question, Is this world ultimate?

These, then, are five reasons to ask whether the universe is ultimate. That the world's existence is not explained by its members is a reason to ask, and also a necessary condition for all the other reasons. Together they make the question a desire not merely for a reason for the sheer existence of the universe but also for guidance as to which among our goals to pursue, so that we might order our lives and determine whether our aspirations are realistic.

These reasons show that the issue of the status of the universe is an inescapable, important, and pressing one for rational agents. To treat the issue as though it were raised simply because the world's existence is not explained by its members and thus as a desire simply to satisfy our curiosity, is to isolate it *artificially* from other concerns we have as rational agents. Its context is quite naturally and appropriately that of a pilgrimage. It is as though human beings are on a journey and must look for guidance in their search for a full and significant life. The passionate intensity and urgency of this quest is especially evident in the case of intense suffering. Our next step will be to see how we may satisfactorily answer this inescapable, important, pressing and even urgent question concerning the status of the universe.

### III

The structure of my argument is fairly simple. Its foundation is that the world's existence is not explained by its members. It may or may not have a reason for its existence. At this juncture there are two possible alternatives: either the universe is ultimate or it is not. Although we can clearly recognize the disjunction, how we are to proceed beyond this point is unclear. For once two possibilities become evident, they seem to lead no further.

One option at this point, as we have seen, is to recognize that we do not know whether nature is ultimate or not, but since it does not matter for our work in the sciences, we can ignore the issue. Another option is to consider other reasons we have for asking whether or not nature is ultimate. We have done that in the previous section. Now let us see what difference they make.

I shall argue that the five reasons we have for pursuing the question, Is the universe ultimate?, enable us to view nature as a *witness* to another reality, and also open us to the possibility of receiving *another* witness, that of the Christian community.

In Christianity "witness" has at least three elements. First, a witness is something which reveals a junction, indicating at least two directions to follow. Second, a witness makes it incumbent on a person to act: either to follow or not to follow a particular direction. This may be done unconsciously or consciously. Our practice

indicates the nature of our decision. Third, a witness is often expressed verbally. In the Old Testament prophets frequently chastised the people of Israel for some specific evils, and called upon them to return to the ways of the Lord.

The existence and the order of nature do not address anyone verbally. But this does not disqualify them from being a witness. Consider, for example:

The heavens are telling the glory of God  
 and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
 Day to day pours forth speech,  
 and night to night declares knowledge.  
 There is no speech, nor are there words;  
 their voice is not heard;  
 yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
 and their words to the end of the world.  
 (Psalm 10:1-4, RSV)

It is my claim that the very existence of nature is a witness. We cannot tell whether it “just is” or has a reason for its existence. It thus places before us two possibilities: either nature is ultimate or it is not. But this can easily be ignored as unimportant. The fact that the world’s existence is unexplained by its members is insignificant to one who considers only what we need in order to do science, and to one who thinks the issue of the status of the universe turns only on the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

But the very existence of nature forms a witness when we note that rational agents need to decide how to satisfy their needs and desires, and what to do about aspirations which are greater than a self-contained universe can satisfy. The fact that the world’s existence is unexplained by its members can become the occasion for a person to recognize (1) that there are two paths, one of which points toward the possibility of another reality, and (2) that it is incumbent on people, and vitally important, to make a choice between them. This world is either all that there is, or there is a reason for its existence. To a person who seeks to order his goals rationally, the issue is inescapable. It is, moreover, as we have seen, important and even pressing since we crave for more than a self-contained universe can supply. It is what William James calls “a forced and live option.”<sup>7</sup>

The other two reasons to ask whether or not nature is ultimate, though not essential, reinforce my claim. Some people may recognize the witness of nature through beauty or through suffering. The recognition that should there be a good which gives us fulfillment and relief from distress, it is beyond this world, shows that nature has functioned as a witness. An alternative has been seen and, once seen, a choice must be made; for a craving has been awakened and we must seek either to satisfy it or deny it.

Although the concept of “witness” is a Christian theological one, my argument

is a philosophic one. It relies on a reasoned account that the status of the universe is unknown to us; that the universe may have a reason for its existence; and that because people are goal-seeking, with great aspirations, in a universe whose beauty is suggestive and whose order causes suffering, alternatives are posed for a rational agent. A rational agent is faced with the necessity of making an important decision. The criteria for something to be a witness are satisfied by nature's existence and order.

But how, in the face of such a witness, is a decision between alternatives to be made rationally? What reasons can be given for responding one way rather than another? The alternative which points toward the possibility of another reality seems to be only that, a pointing. The situation is analogous to that of Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*. He sees that a decision must be made, but the path is not overly clear and only part of the distance toward the goal is indicated.

Do you see yonder wicket-gate? The man said, No. Then said the other, Do you see yonder shining light? He said, I think I do. Then said Evangelist, keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto: So shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.

To see that the existence of the universe is unexplained by its members, and then to ask persistently, Is this all? because one sees that the issue is inescapable and important, is *actually to be following one of the alternatives* as far as it presently can be followed. *The reasons to ask the question are the reasons to follow the path.* One can have moved onto that path and have reason to do so, without being able to see one's way very clearly or to see one's final destination, any more than Christian could when he set out on his journey. One follows it, however, not as one committed to the reality of something beyond this world, but as one *exploring* that path.

Sound reasons to explore one alternative are then available. To be on that path is also to desire to have more of it illuminated. One wants to be shown how to progress further. That is to say, to have responded at all to the witness of nature for the reasons I have given is to be open to the consideration of *another* witness. We shall for the moment consider the Christian witness, even though there are other witnesses.

The content of the Christian witness needs only to be given briefly for our purposes. It claims that there is a Creator and ruler of the universe, and that the people of Israel and the Christian community have come into existence as a response to God's initiative. They are the bearers of and witness to God's redemptive intention. Christians as a community are one of the means whereby God is affecting his redemptive intention. They claim that God has in this revealed a path to be followed which leads to fullness of life.

It is the task of spiritual theology to describe the path which Christianity claims leads to fullness of life. We need not examine it to present our argument. Here we only indicate that one who has embarked on a path because of the witness of nature may look to the witness of Christianity for an account of more of the path which may lead to another reality.

But on what basis can one believe or trust that the path presented by a religion is a reasonable one to follow? To answer this fairly, it is vital to recognize (1) that a religion such as Christianity is not merely a matter of ideas, and (2) the appropriate way to evaluate a religious claim about the status of the universe.

Christian claims are not merely a matter of ideas because the very character of these claims requires that they be embodied in people and communities. Christianity claims that it is a community which is in contact with a reality who communicates his nature to it. One who participates in the Christian community and is aware of the kind of power that it mediates, believes the testimony of that community because of the power he finds there. It is the redemptive power of love. It is a love which clashes with our hatred and selfishness, and unmask as evil what is often mistaken for good or innocence. It is a power which holds them and others in bondage away from the kind of life that is tasted only now and then.

The significance of this point for the rationality of belief is as follows. Let us recall the basic foundational point: The existence of the world is not explained by its members and so it is possible that the world's existence has a transcendent explanation. What is a mere possibility and easily set aside becomes a *live* possibility (in contrast to a speculative one) because of our rational need to order our goals and to treat realistically our great aspirations, desires and needs. That is, a person starts searching to determine whether the world is ultimate or not, and by that search is actually launched along one of the alternatives. To turn to the Christian community for more guidance and to participate in its corporate life may lead to a recognition of the kind of power which the Christian community claims is the ultimate reality and which it bears in its corporate life. So we have three stages: a mere speculative possibility, which under the pressure of our needs can become a *live* possibility, and which can in turn lead to an awareness of the nature of "divine love." That is, one understands what is meant by Christian agape, which is a distinctive kind of love. One experiences it in the relations between people in the Christian community, and as a factor in one's own life and in self-examination and reflection over one's motives.

This brings one face to face with the question, Am I to yield my allegiance to that power which has thus become evident to me? That is, Am I to commit myself to live in accordance with agape, yield to its sovereignty? One does not know that it actually rules the universe, but by answering Yes, one affirms that it *should*. That it not only should but in fact does, and that its rule shall become evident at some unspecified future time, is a matter of faith. It is not a blind faith, however, for it is a

faith awakened and largely sustained by one's knowledge of agape, both as an idea and as an experienced reality within the Christian community. To give one's allegiance to that power that thus becomes evident to one is to have faith that it is sovereign.

So Christianity shows a path to one who has responded to the witness of nature. By following it one can come to have faith that this path indeed leads to a transcendent love which is sovereign, and which can give one the fulfillment one craves.

But we have only described how one might, through the witness of nature and the Christian community, come to faith. How are we to evaluate the truth of the Christian community's witness? This brings us to our second point, the appropriate way to evaluate Christian claims, in particular that the universe is dependent on a Creator.

It should be evident that to treat Christian claims as ideas only and to assess them solely in terms of such notions as, Nature *must* have an explanation, is to ignore the specific character of the claims. The approach misses the point of Christian claims which are concerned with *a reality mediated to people by a community* and with such things as giving people the guidance that is needed to order goals, giving people hope for the fulfillment of their aspirations, and giving purpose and relief to suffering. That the ultimate status of nature is irrelevant to scientific explanations is not a reason to ignore or dismiss the Christian claim that this world is created. To do so is to ignore the other concerns we have as rational agents and the various reasons we have to ask whether or not this universe is ultimate. Above all, it is to ignore the possibility of the existence of another kind of reality, which in the present case is knowable only by venturing on a path, since it is a reality which is to be experienced in a relation of love. This feature is absolutely essential to the reasonableness of claiming that the universe is dependent on another reality. To allow oneself to be persuaded to venture on a path, that is, to attend to the Christian witness and practice its injunctions, is legitimate only because of the possibility that there is a kind of reality knowable by some such venture. Were the religious claims that nature is dependent on a Creator only an explanation of nature's existence, this means of approach and basis for affirmation would be improper. But in the context I have described, Christian claims need only to withstand critical scrutiny. They do not need to be established as true in order to be affirmed reasonably. As long as they emerge successfully from attempts to show they are false, they may reasonably be affirmed, given their particular character as a witness, i.e., showing a path to be followed that leads to a transcendent reality.

Christian claims, however, do have an explanatory role, and this is relevant to our assessment of their truth. Let me illustrate this with the biblical story from Genesis 2-3 concerning the Fall. The story explains at least two things. First, that life is wonderful. There is a quality of pure joy in being alive. This is related to a sense of gratitude and wonder at the existence of the world and particular things in

the world. Second, that life is wretched. We are aware of conflict within ourselves, between one another, and loneliness, monotony and boredom. Both of these phenomena can be much more carefully analyzed and presented. But what we have said is enough to make our point, which is that the story of the Fall is an explanation of both our joy at being alive and our wretchedness because we are not properly related to the giver of life.

The explanatory character of the story—or Christian claim—has as an intrinsic ingredient, a practical thrust. *It calls upon one to act*—to submit oneself to the Lord of life. So, although it is intended to explain our condition, it is an explanation which is a witness because it places before one alternatives to which one must respond by acting.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of truth needs to be examined, but not in this instance in terms of the historical truth of the story. Rather, its evaluation is to be along these lines. Consider an example given by William James in his essay, “The Will to Believe.” James says, just as we have stressed, that to test religious truth-claims, a person must venture because the grounds for their truth are forthcoming only with such a venture. That is part of their nature: to be a witness, requiring a person to respond. But not all such truth-claims are effective. To be effective, they must present live options. We may be faced with the option: believe Mahdi or be damned. We have here only two alternatives, says James, so the situation is inescapable between belief and non-belief. But this is not for most of us a live option. This example suggests that some claims cannot be *witnesses*. The claim on behalf of the Mahdi is not a witness, says James, because though the option is forced, it is not live for many hearers. It is not a witness for them.

I think this is helpful but I want to make a much stronger claim. Some things fail to be a witness *because we find them untrue*, and others are effective *because we find them able to call unnoticed matters to our attention and faithfully represent them*. The story of the Fall calls to our attention matters with which we are all familiar: joy and misery. It tells us to concentrate on them as experiences of central importance. It describes each uncompromisingly so that one finds in that story of a Fall images with which to reflect on one’s own life and the lives of others with profound illumination. One can begin to find relief from one’s own agony and turmoil by reflecting on and with those images, and by following the story’s recommendation to begin to experience a fuller life under an (alleged) Giver of life.

This is a very telescoped account, but it shows the logic of the situation. A story such as that of the Fall, to be a witness, has to be able to withstand examination for its faithfulness to both the joy and the misery of life. A path can be rationally evaluated in this way to see whether it evades difficulties, or is superficial and incapable of giving guidance.

Such an examination does not establish the truth of the story, or of Christian claims, but it can *exclude* some claims as witnesses, or as paths which might be fol-

lowed. It can do so, not because they fail to be live options for us, but because they lack sufficient faithfulness to very widespread human phenomena. A witness therefore can be rationally tested. Indeed all the reasons which I have given for raising the question, Is this universe all that there is?, can be rationally evaluated along the same lines, for their verisimilitude to our experience. They enable the world's existence to be a witness. Should their description of our situation be inadequate, then the existence and order of nature would fail to be a witness.

To be subject to rejection does not establish the truth of a claim. But the ability to withstand critical evaluation shows that it is held rationally. I claim to have shown that nature is a witness and also the way in which the witness of Christianity may be connected to that witness so that a person may rationally affirm that there is a good and wise God.

Other religions also may be viewed as witnesses indicating alternative paths to be followed. This raises matters far larger than I can discuss. I shall say only that different religions at present provide Christianity with a fruitful tension, which promises to bring welcome illumination both to it and to its rivals. By the examination of other religions, we may be able to see more clearly the road or witness of our own religion, and to view other faiths as related to our own in perhaps less exclusive categories than "true/false," "correct/incorrect." Other faiths need not be dismissed as utterly misguided or unrelated to Christianity even though their precise status and relation to Christianity are presently unknown. One is reminded of Simone Weil's remark that when she reads passages in Sophocles' *Electra* about Orestes but with Christ in mind, she is overwhelmed.<sup>10</sup> Is this so utterly out of line with reading Psalm 23, a Jewish psalm, with Jesus Christ in mind? Christianity may be a sound witness without its being necessary to show that it is the *only* witness.

*Princeton Theological Seminary*

#### NOTES

1. Milton K. Munitz, *The Mystery of Existence* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), p. 6.
2. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 121-28 and especially pp. 136-53.
3. Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 170-98.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 196.



7. William James, "The Will to Believe," reprinted in many places including *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. John Hick (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

8. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Pocket Books, 1957), p. 11.

9. This idea was suggested to me by an unpublished paper by Sebastian Moore, read to the 1980 Lonergan Workshop at the University of Notre Dame.

10. Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 12.