
The Identity and Relevance of Faith

If it is true that the inner criterion of whether or not Christian theology is *Christian* lies in the crucified Christ, we come back to Luther's lapidary statement: *Crux probat omnia*.¹ In Christianity the cross is the test of everything which deserves to be called Christian. One may add that the cross alone, and nothing else, is its test, since the cross refutes everything, and excludes the syncretistic elements in Christianity. This is a hard saying. To many it sounds unattractive and unmodern, and to others rigid and orthodox. I will try to disappoint both.

We may want to make Christian theology reveal that it is Christian, but this cannot be done in abstract and timeless terms, or from the mere desire for self-assertion. It has a definable and circumscribed place amongst modern

1. Luther, WA 179, 31.

problems. The Christian life of theologians, churches and human beings is faced more than ever today with a double crisis: the *crisis of relevance* and the *crisis of identity*. These two crises are complementary. The more theology and the church attempt to become relevant to the problems of the present day, the more deeply they are drawn into the crisis of their own Christian identity. The more they attempt to assert their identity in traditional dogmas, rights and moral notions, the more irrelevant and unbelievable they become. This double crisis can be more accurately described as the *identity-involvement dilemma*. We shall see how far, in these specific experiences of a double crisis, reflection upon the cross leads to the clarification of what can be called Christian identity and what can be called Christian relevance, in critical solidarity with our contemporaries.

1. The Crisis of Relevance in Christian Life

The struggle for a renewal of theology and the churches began with the realization, which has become widespread and irrefutable, that Christianity faced a growing crisis of relevance and credibility. After a certain period in the post-war years in Western society, the churches and theology fed undisturbed upon their own resources. It then dawned upon many, and especially upon those on whom the church depended for its continuance, the students of theology, that a church which simply continued its previous form and ideology was in process of losing contact with the scientific, social and political reality of the world around it, and in many

respects had already lost it. Its credibility, which in Germany it had to some extent gained by many acts of resistance during the period of National Socialism and ‘German Christians’, and of which it had given proof by surviving the collapse of most public institutions at the end of the war, was irresistibly disappearing. This lack of contact and blindness to reality makes theologians and churches increasingly obsolete. Many abandon the study of theology or their ministry as priests and pastors, and their religious orders, and study sociology, psychology or revolution, or work amongst the wretched of our society, because they feel that in this way they can contribute more to solving the conflicts of this fragmented society.² The old theology which they have learnt seems to them like a fossil surviving from a previous age. Fundamentalism fossilizes the Bible into an unquestionable authority. Dogmatism freezes living Christian tradition solid. The habitual conservatism of religion makes the liturgy inflexible, and Christian morality—often against its better knowledge and conscience—becomes a deadening legalism. What began as a theoretical discussion about the demythologization of the Bible, the secularizing of tradition and the ‘opening of the church towards the world’ (*aggiornamento*), consequently led, in many places, to the practice of ecclesiastical disobedience, withdrawal from the ministry, abandonment of the church, rebellion and even weary indifference. Critical theology produced ‘critical Catholicism’ and the ‘critical church’, and

2. Cf. the ‘Candid Foreword’ in H. Küng, *Infallible? An Enquiry*, Fontana Books 1972, p. 22; R. P. McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?*, New York 1969.

all three rapidly went on to a criticism of theology and the church as a whole. The attention of many was drawn by the gospel and the frequently suppressed revolutionary traditions in Christianity, to the sufferings of the oppressed and abandoned in the world; and they began to have a passionate social and political commitment. When they followed this course, they quite often felt obliged to abandon the churches as they now exist, because they found in their institutions no possibility of realizing this commitment, and indeed often had to commit themselves in opposition to the church as a society. For them, their total questioning of the church and theology arose from their apprehension of the 'cross of the present time' in the situation of those who in this society live in the shadow of the cross, and from the wish to take this cross of reality upon themselves and to live in solidarity with and for these others. This exodus from a blinded society, which has psychologically and socially repressed its pain at the suffering in the world, and pushes people who suffer to the fringes of society, in order to withdraw undisturbed into its own small groups, consequently led to an exodus from a church which did not dissociate itself with sufficient determination from these inner and outward defence-mechanisms of its social environment, but enjoyed the religious tolerance of a frigid society, and which, in order to maintain itself in being, has made a dishonourable peace with society and become sterile.

All attempts to reform the church into a more credible form of life came to a halt at the point where the intimate links between this kind of church and this kind of society

could be perceived, and when it was realized that church reform without social reform would hardly achieve its purpose. Thus the critics of the church became social critics, and saw the churches as no more than fragments, offering no hope, of a society divided and in conflict. The question of the sources of the renewal of the world in society and in its churches then took a new form. Will the fatal problems of mankind at the end of this century be apprehended and solved in continuity with the critical and liberating tradition of the gospel, or will this and the coming generations, through the default of churches and theologians enclosed within their own sects, nourish their hopes of life and justice from other sources which seem to them less corrupt and more accessible?³

Although humanist Marxism is fundamentally discredited by its Stalinist and post-Stalinist practice, and has recently attracted more obloquy by the destruction of ‘socialism with a human face’ in Czechoslovakia in 1968, its uninterrupted activity is astonishing. Its vitality in face of all the factual evidence seems to lie in the analytical power of its criticism and even more in the mobilizing power of its ‘dream of the future’. The ‘homelessness’ of the Left in both West and East is only the reverse side of its certainty for the future. Much the same could probably be said of authentic Christian faith. The best of its content seems to be refuted by the vagaries and confusions of church history down to the present day.

3. C.-D. Schulze, ‘Reformation oder Performance der Kirche? Versuch einer Typologie von Kirchenreform-Bestrebungen’, *MPT* 58, 1969, 106–22. Here Schulze gives an apt description of the ideas of the ‘traditionalists’, the ‘avant-garde’, the ‘progressives’ and the ‘new left’ in the field of German Protestantism.

And yet it displays its vitality in permanent reformations, and in spite of all proof to the contrary, lives by the experience of inextinguishable hope. It is this inner homelessness which enables it to perpetuate its institutions, even when they become an established part of society.

Under the pressure to give a public demonstration of the relevance of theology to the problems of society and of individuals in it, and to manifest in a new form its relationship to a changed world, a long series of theological structures of great integrity were created. All of them provided Christian theology with the characteristics of a relationship to the surrounding world which was to make it relevant. There was existentialist theology, hermeneutic, ontological, cultural, social, indigenous, religious and political theology, and also the theology of secularization, of revolution, of liberation, etc. Because the relevance of Christian theology had become uncertain, there was and is an attempt to supply Christian theology with new categories of fundamental theology in the spirit and the circumstances of the present day. It is clear that theology can no longer find a permanent basis in the general thinking, feeling and action of contemporary society. The reason for this lies less in theology than in the fact that in a pluralist society, what concerns everyone absolutely, and what society must absolutely desire, is more difficult to identify than in earlier and more homogeneous societies. Since Hegel, it has been regarded as the task of the metaphysics of history, which 'apprehends its own time in thought', to present a 'theory of the present age', but such a theory is in practice hard to draw up, because no outline

which seeks to comprehend all possible points of view can claim to be more than provisional itself.⁴ The longing for a society with a unified ideology, or for a unified Catholic or Christian state, continues to grow, as it becomes more difficult for men to endure the plurality of different patterns of life and to use their differences for productive and fertile developments. Thus every theology must include reflections upon its own point of view in these conflicts and on its own place in the social and political situation.⁵ An attempt to adopt an absolute point of view would be equivalent to having no point of view at all. To make one's own point of view absolute would be stupidity. This does not amount to relativism. Anyone who understands the relativity of relativity, will see himself as relative to others; but this does not mean giving up one's own position. To see one's own point of view as relative to that of others means to live in concrete relationships and to think out one's own ideas in relationship to the thought of others. To have no relationship would be death. This 'relationality' can transcend the absolutism of a single ideology and the totalitarian aspect of relativism. In this sense the recent 'political theology' has attempted to transfer the old verification model of 'natural theology', which in practice was always the prevailing religion of society, from orthodoxy into a new verification model of theology in social and political 'orthopraxy'.⁶

4. Cf. D. Rössler, 'Positionelle und kritische Theologie', *ZThK* 67, 1970, 215–31.

5. J. Moltmann, 'Theologische Kritik der politischen Religion', in J. B. Metz, J. Moltmann and W. Oelmüller, *Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung*, 1970, 14ff. So too D. Sölle, *Politische Theologie. Auseinander-setzung mit Rudolf Bultmann*, 1971, 85ff.

6. J. B. Metz, *Theology of the World*, Burns and Oates 1969, 107ff.

Verification may mean that a particular insight can be demonstrated by what everyone can experience and check by repeating the experience. In that case it is only a matter of right *doxa* (orthodoxy). But verification can also mean to translate into act and experience, through *verum facere*, what everyone is not yet assumed to be able to experience. This is the way of 'orthopraxy'.

To translate something into action and experience, however, is possible and meaningful only in living relationships with others. Thus if Christian theology is relational, it can find a meaningful way between absolutist theocracy and unproductive tolerance, and replace the previously assumed unity of a society. Theologies which are drawn up in order to achieve a connection with the surrounding world, to which they wish to make Christian life relevant, must give serious attention to the necessity to be relational. Otherwise the value of the ready-made attributes applied to these theologies is rightly called into question. What is Christian in these new theological perspectives, which are meant to characterize some particular relationship of theology to the surrounding world? Does not theology lose its Christian identity if it is still determined to do nothing more than to adapt itself to the constantly changing 'spirit of the time'? Does it not become a chameleon, always taking on the colours of its environment, in order to adapt itself to it and remain unnoticed?

Similar movements to those in theology have come into being in the churches themselves. The more the perceptive members of the church feel themselves threatened by the

increasing social isolation of their churches and a withdrawal into the ghetto, the more they seek in practice the relevance of Christian life 'for the world', 'for others', and solidarity with man in his threatened and betrayed humanity. A church which cannot change in order to exist for the humanity of man in changed circumstances becomes ossified and dies. It becomes an insignificant sect on the margin of a society undergoing rapid social change. People ask themselves what difference it makes to belong to this church or not. Only old, tired and resigned people who no longer understand the world find in such a church a repository of unchanging ideas, the affectionately remembered past and religious folklore. Thus the ancient religious commitment of the church, that of arousing, strengthening and maintaining faith, has been supplemented since as early as the nineteenth century and even more at the present day by charitable work, social commitment in racial and class struggles, involvement in development aid and revolts against economic and racist tyranny. 'If anyone wants to become a Christian, don't send him into the churches, but into the slums. There he will find Christ'. So people say. In the present century, the ecumenical movement has brought to an end the denominational age of divided Christianity. But this breakthrough has achieved its most widespread effects less as a result of dogmatic agreement on the traditional controversial doctrines, and much more in ethical matters and in relationship to the world, in secular ecumenical action or in the 'indirect ecumenism' which results from co-operation on new social and ideological problems, for which none of the different traditions has the

correct answer to hand.⁷ The idea of a critical political theology has made a reality of the older ideas of the ‘church for the world’ and the ‘church for others’. In the face of world problems, there has come into being in the worldwide ecumenical movement the idea of offering a unified Christianity as the future religion for a mankind which is to be united and for its universal society. On the local level, it has been suggested that the churches should be subjected to a thoroughgoing efficiency control from the point of view of social therapy, in order to maximize the aid they can give to the socially disadvantaged, and to give more effective form to the assistance they can offer in the socializing of the individual, the task of giving meaning to his life and the humanization of society.

‘But if the church adopts this course—where is it leading the church?’ asked R. Augstein in *Der Spiegel* in 1968.⁸ Does not the departure made by the church from the traditional and established forms into social and psychotherapeutic commitment not mean bidding farewell to the church itself? Will the so-called progressives found a new church, perhaps ‘the coming church’, or are they moving into no man’s land, to be taken over in the course of time by other groups and parties, who alone can give rational and institutional and effective organizational form to that necessary commitment? But the same question can be asked of the so-called conservatives. If, with their anxious concern for their own identity, they cling to the form of the church received from

7. J. B. Metz, *Reform und Gegenreformation heute*, 1969, 33.

8. R. Augstein, ‘Das grosse Schisma’, *Der Spiegel* 18, 1969, 166.

the past, opt for religion against politics and associate themselves with the forces of social and political conservatism, then they have chosen a particular form of relevance, of which similarly no one can say whether it is Christian or not. The church of the old religion is as much subject to the prevailing social concern for self-justification and self-assertion as is the new alliance of those who are critical of the churches with the forces critical of society. By the way in which they assert their relevance, both are led into a *crisis of identity*.

If social and political commitment is necessary, what is 'Christian' about it? If religious commitment is necessary for fulfilling the religious needs in a society, what is 'Christian' about that? In the critical theological thought in which a theologian uses and applies the critical scholarship developed since the Enlightenment, as a historical critic in exegesis, as an ideological critic in dogmatics, as a social critic with regard to the church, and in the political commitment which brings a Christian into solidarity with a non-Christian—why is one a Christian, why does one believe? Or is one no longer Christian, so that belief or unbelief make no difference here? It is not criticism that makes one a Christian, because others practise it. It is not social commitment on behalf of the poor and wretched, for this is fortunately found amongst others. It is not rebellion against injustice that makes one a Christian, for others rebel, and they often protest with more determination against injustice and discrimination than Christians. Is it necessary to give a Christian justification for

these actions at all, or is it sufficient to do what is reasonable and humane? But what is reasonable and humane?

The *Evangelische Studentengemeinde* (the German Protestant Student Association) and the World Student Christian Federation are in a particular sense experimental areas in Christian existential life, in one of the most disturbed points in our society, the universities. What is true of the churches in general, in a way that is not always visible, is here attempted and suffered in a radical way. A Christian student community or group forms an outstanding example of what we have called the identity-involvement dilemma. The tension that is inherent in all Christian life, between identity in faith and public solidarity in living and struggling alongside others, has led here to polarizations and divisions which have had a paralysing effect upon many student communities. Since the world-wide student protest movement reached Germany—and this clearly dates from the day the student Ohnesorg was shot in Berlin in 1967—many student communities have identified themselves with this political movement. They understood themselves as part of this protest movement, and abandoned the traditional assertion of their Christian identity. ‘On the basis of its democratic principles, the Protestant Student Association believes that it may legitimately use the power at its disposal to bring about the changes which a critical analysis of the present situation shows to be necessary’. This raises the problem of political association with others: ‘The bid for power naturally assumes that one associates with others for certain purposes, for it is usually only such an association which gives the power to

bring about what one desires. Fundamental changes in the university field can only be achieved in co-operation with other groups'. This use of power, albeit limited, is necessarily also applied against those from whom the Protestant Student Association receives the means of exercising power: 'A change in political institutions remains a question of power, because it can never be carried out except against the will and the power of those to whose advantage they work'.⁹

Even more dramatic was the symbolic action of the Christian student task force at the Meiji-Gakuin University in Japan. The first barricade in the university was erected in the university church, and sparked off a general conflict. The students wrote:

So we have put our own faith at risk in protest against the university authorities and have barricaded the church, although we ourselves suffer as a result. By making our church a refuse dump we want to proclaim to the university authorities and our fellow students that Christianity and worship can become symbols of the absence of humanity and contempt for it. We want to create true Christianity in the midst of this stormy struggle within the university by common action with all our fellow-students . . . God does not exist in this church, but rather in the living deeds of a man involved in human relationships. We want our actions to be understood as a question, as a

9. *ESG-Material*, NF, vol. 3. I take these three quotations from the essay by W. Kratz, 'Wege und Grenzen christlicher Solidarität. Beitrag zu einer aktuellen Diskussion in den Evangelischen Studentengemeinden', in *Christliche Freiheit im Dienst am Menschen. Festschrift für M. Niemöller zum 80. Geburtstag*, 1972, 199, 202. The worldwide questionnaire conducted by the World Student Christian Federation concerning this polarization is summarized only briefly by R. Lehtonen, 'The Story of a Storm. An Ecumenical Case Study', *Study Encounter* 18, vol. VIII, I, 1972. For the whole problem see also L. Gilkey, *How the Church can Minister to the World without Losing Itself*, New York 1964; R. Ruether, *The Church against Itself*, New York 1967.

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request, for which we have *risked our whole life*. For us Christians studying at Meiji Gakuin, this is *our cross*.¹⁰

Theoretical and practical solidarity with the general student protest movement has in fact brought these Christian student communities and groups to the point of effective action in a situation of political conflict. They have carried out their theological theory in practice and have taken their faith to the point of an existential testimony which is ready for sacrifice. But by doing so they have inevitably fallen into a crisis of identity, and have consciously risked this, as is shown by the symbolic action of the Japanese students in destroying the Christian chapel and ‘taking the cross upon themselves’, in a specific act of resistance.

This crisis of identity exists at several levels. The question whether Christianity is abandoned by solidarity with others in a particular political situation can be the question of those who stand on what they suppose is the firm ground of the Bible, tradition and the church, and bewail the abandonment by revolutionary youth of everything that is sacred to themselves. Here the question of ‘what is specifically Christian’, to which an appeal is so often made, is posed in Pharisaic terms, and would not in fact have been acceptable to Jesus. It is much more the question of a man’s own personal identity and integrity, for every self-emptying in historical

10. Cf. Toshikazu Takao, ‘An Alliance of Egoists’, *Japan Christian Quarterly*, Fall 1969, 225, and U. Luz, ‘Japanische Studenten und christlicher Glaube’, *EvTh* 32, 1972, 70ff. The view of P. Beyerhaus, ‘Die gegenwärtige Krise von Kirche und Theologie in Japan’, *EMZ* 29, 1972, vol. 11, 13: ‘This is in fact the disappearance of theology in thorough-going humanism’, is not true. Rather, it is a prophetic symbolic action.

action is a venture, and a way into non-identity. A man abandons himself as he was and as he knew himself to be, and, by emptying himself, finds a new self. Jesus's eschatological saying tells us that 'Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it'. Modern anthropology has made this the basic principle by which man becomes human, in accordance with the couplet in Schiller's *Reiterlied*:

'Unless you place your life at stake,
your life you will never win'.

Gehlen has called this 'the birth of freedom out of alienation' and he regards idealism as an error, which holds that the ideal possibilities which he admits to be present in man can be the object of direct subjective experience.¹¹ Only by self-emptying in encounter with what is alien, unknown and different does man achieve selfhood. If Christians empty themselves in this way in a situation of political conflict, then in fact they abandon the traditions, institutions and opinions, accepted in faith, in which they previously found their identity. But this includes what Christoph Blumhardt once called 'the ceaseless prayer for the spirit of persistence'. That is, trust in the hidden and guaranteed identity with Christ in God (Col. 3.3) makes possible the self-abandonment, the road into non-identity and unidentifiability, which neither clings to ancient forms of identity, nor anxiously reaches out for the forms of identity

11. A. Gehlen, 'Über die Geburt der Freiheit aus der Entfremdung', *Studien zur Anthropologie und Soziologie*, 1963, 232ff., esp. 244.

of those one is fighting in common. This, as the Japanese students said—whether rightly or wrongly in their case does not matter for the moment—is really ‘to take one’s cross upon oneself’ in imitation of the one who abandoned his divine identity and found his true identity in the cross (Phil. 2).

That in following his Lord a Christian should place his own identity at stake without reservation when it is a matter of helping his fellow men in distress, is not disputed. But what limits a Christian community must draw if it is to be associated with other groups to work in common with them to help men in distress, is another matter. Here it is not the identity of the individual Christian which is at stake, but that of the Christian community, its faith and its ethical values.¹²

This would be better expressed by saying that what is at stake is their strangeness and difference with regard to their old and new allies. Solidarity with others in meaningful actions loses its creative character if one no longer wishes to be anything different from the others. Bonhoeffer’s ‘existence for others’, to which so much appeal has been made, becomes meaningless if one is no longer any different from the others, but merely a hanger on. Only someone who finds the courage to be different from others can ultimately exist for ‘others’, for otherwise he exists only with those who are like him. And this is not much help to them. Thus we must say that, ‘as the result of the debate about [political] organization, these communities are faced with the theological question of their Christian identity as churches’.¹³ Because this question

12. W. Kratz, *op. cit.*, 197.

13. R. Thoma, quoted in W. Kratz, *op. cit.*, 200.

is posed not merely by the ancient traditions and institutions from which they have separated themselves, but also by those others with whom they have associated themselves in solidarity, it must be taken seriously and answered. The identity in question here is the identity of the object of faith, for the sake of which individuals and whole groups have accepted self-emptying and non-identity and a solidarity which allows no distinction. When a Christian community feels obliged to empty itself in certain social and political actions, it must take care that its traditional religious and political identity is not exchanged for a new religious and political identity, but must sustain its non-identity. Otherwise a church which, seeking for an identity and not preserving its distinctiveness, plunges into a social and political movement, once again becomes the 'religion of society'. It is of course no longer a conservative religion of society, but the progressive religion of what may perhaps be a better future society. It then follows those who criticize the old religion from a political point of view, only to make a religion of their new politics.¹⁴ But can a Christian community or church ever become the 'political religion' of its existing or future society, without forgetting the man from Nazareth who was crucified, and losing the identity it has in his cross? Moreover, true Christian existence can only be present in the best of all possible societies, or, in symbolic terms, can only 'stand under the cross', and its identity with

14. Thus L. Feuerbach, *Die Notwendigkeit einer Reform der Philosophie*, 1842, Werke II, ed. Bolin and Jodl, 1969, 219: 'For we must once again become religious—politics must become our religion . . .'

the crucified Christian can be demonstrated only by a witnessing non-identification with the demands and interests of society. Thus even in the 'classless society' Christians will be aliens and homeless. Where solidarity is achieved, this distinction must still be observed. It is a criticism of the traditional solidarity of the established churches with authority, law and order in society. But it is also a criticism of the more recent attempts to establish solidarity with democratic and socialist forces. Not of course in the same way, because the cross does not make the world equal by bringing down the night in which everything looks alike, but by enabling people to criticize and stand back from the partial historical realities and movements which they have idolized and made absolute.

It follows from these reflections upon the concrete political problems of Christian life, that the question of identity comes to a head only in the context of non-identity, self-emptying for the sake of others and solidarity with others. It cannot be established in isolation, but only revealed in contact with others. In exile one seeks home. In alienation one seeks identity. Love is revealed in hatred and peace in conflict. Thus the place where the question of identity can meaningfully be asked is the situation of the crisis of identity, brought about by meaningful self-emptying and solidarity. 'Temptation teaches us to pay heed to the Word', said Luther. These temptations can be suffered passively, where, as in Luther's hymn, sin, hell and death swallow man up and human existence is called into question. But temptations are much more often actively suffered. A man's mettle is tried

only in the front line, not back at base, even supposing that the sufferings of others do not leave him in peace there. But in the front line, he is put to the test because he is struggling to do his utmost; the more he tries, the more he is tried. Anyone who does not put himself to the test is hardly tried or tested at all. Only when, with all the understanding and consistency he possesses, a man follows Christ along the way of self-emptying into non-identity, does he encounter contradiction, resistance and opposition. Only when he leaves behind the circle of those who share and reinforce his opinions in the church, to go out into the anonymity of slums and peace movements, in a society 'where the absence of peace is organized', is he tempted and tested, inwardly and outwardly. Then the crisis inevitably comes, in which the identity of that for which he involves and commits himself comes into question, and a decision has to be made about it. It is these active trials and temptations which at the present day teach us to pay attention to the word of the cross.

2. The Crisis of Identity for Christian Faith

While the question of identity comes to a head only in the context of non-identity, the question of relevance arises only where identity is a matter of experience and belief. When something can be identified, it is possible to ask whether it is relevant to anything else and whether it has any connection with anything else. Where the Christian identity of faith is abandoned, this question no longer arises. One is simply a fellow human or a contemporary or an adherent of other

institutions and groups, and they supply one's identity. But where the Christian identity of faith is asserted, the question of its relevance arises.

Where does the identity of Christian faith lie? Its outward mark is church membership. This, however, takes us no further, but merely moves the problem on. For the Christian identity of the church is itself questionable, when the form it takes is affected by so many other interests. One can point to the creed. But to repeat the formula of the Apostles' Creed is no guarantee of Christian identity, but simply of loyalty to the fathers and to tradition. One can point to particular experiences of vocation, conversion and grace in one's own life. But even they do not guarantee one's identity as a Christian; at best, they point to what one has begun to believe in such experiences. Ultimately, one's belief is not in one's own faith; within one's experiences in faith and one's decisions, one believes in someone else who is more than one's own faith. Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ, to the extent to which one has accepted the proclamation that in him God has identified himself with the godless and those abandoned by God, to whom one belongs oneself. If Christian identity comes into being by this double process of identification, then it is clear that it cannot be described in terms of that faith alone, nor can it be protected against decay by correct doctrinal formulae, repeatable rituals and set patterns of moral behaviour.

The decay of faith and its identity, through a decline into unbelief and a different identity, forms an exact parallel to

their decay through a decline into a fearful and defensive faith. Faith is fearful and defensive when it begins to die inwardly, struggling to maintain itself and reaching out for security and guarantees. In so doing, it removes itself from the hand of the one who has promised to maintain it, and its own manipulations bring it to ruin. This pusillanimous faith usually occurs in the form of an orthodoxy which feels threatened and is therefore more rigid than ever. It occurs wherever, in the face of the immorality of the present age, the gospel of creative love for the abandoned is replaced by the law of what is supposed to be Christian morality, and by penal law. He who is of little faith looks for support and protection for his faith, because it is preyed upon by fear. Such a faith tries to protect its 'most sacred things', God, Christ, doctrine and morality, because it clearly no longer believes that these are sufficiently powerful to maintain themselves. When the 'religion of fear' finds its way into the Christian church, those who regard themselves as the most vigilant guardians of the faith do violence to faith and smother it. Instead of confidence and freedom, fearfulness and apathy are found everywhere. This has considerable consequences for the attitudes of the church, faith and theology to the new problems posed by history. 'Why did the church cut itself off from cultural development?' asks R. Rothe, whose messianic passion in the face of the modern age can speak for itself here:

I blush to write it down: because it is afraid for faith in Christ. To me, it is not faith in Christ if it can be afraid for itself and for its Christ! To me, this is not to have faith, but to be of little