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# Did Jesus Believe in God?

## Some Reflections on Christian Atheism

R. F. ALDWINCKLE

**D**ID JESUS BELIEVE in God? No doubt this question will strike many readers as odd, if not fantastic. To the ordinary Christian it will appear to answer itself. The unbeliever will see in it another evidence of the peculiar pass to which modern Christian thinkers have come. To the sophisticated theologian, nurtured in the two-nature doctrine of Chalcedon, other problems may suggest themselves. If Jesus is truly God, as the creeds assert, then is not the question badly put? Does it mean that Jesus believed in himself since God can only believe in God? But what can it mean to talk of God in this very anthropomorphic way as believing in himself?

It would obviously be unprofitable to get ourselves involved at the start in subtleties of this nature. Since the two-nature doctrine, as John McIntyre has pointed out, is only one, albeit time-honoured, theological "model"<sup>1</sup> attempting to do justice to the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ, it would seem desirable, as well as theologically correct, to start with the New Testament itself. The soundness of this approach is not affected by the fact that the New Testament has to be interpreted. The creeds and confessions of the Church, which emerged from the worshipping community, may be important pointers to an adequate hermeneutic. The fact remains that such creeds do not stand alone. They only make sense as attempts to articulate the meaning of the New Testament and the experience of the Church as the worshipping community which acknowledges Jesus as Lord.

However, for the purpose which we now have in mind, it would be legitimate to practise the detachment or the "suspense" advocated in other connections by the philosophical phenomenologists, and leave on one side for the time being technical problems of Christology and the validity of the credal confessions. Our question could be rephrased to ask: Does the New Testament show us a Jesus who took for granted certain affirmations about the nature and character of God, rooted in the Hebraic and Jewish tradition? To this question only certain alternative answers seem to be open to us. Either Jesus accepted and built upon the foundation of Judaism or he did not. If he did, then the further point may be raised as to whether the Jewish understanding of God is possible for modern men. If he did not, then he must either have repudiated the Jewish concept of God root and branch, or have modified it beyond recognition, or have obtained an idea

1. Cf. J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

of God from some other source. That idea of God either came from the religious, philosophical, and cultural environment of the ancient world or he evolved it out of his own peculiar self-consciousness without any reference to outside influence of any kind, whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

Until recently, it would have been accepted by the overwhelming majority of biblical scholars that Jesus built upon the religious and theological assumptions of Judaism. Whatever his view as to his own role in the working out of the purpose of God, or whether the theological "models" used to interpret his Person in the New Testament were influenced by the mystery religions, or Hellenistic philosophy and religion, or even indirect Oriental influences, few questioned that Jesus stood fairly and squarely within the Jewish faith and accepted its basic premise concerning the transcendent Creator-God. The radical theologians, with their attack upon transcendence, are at least gnostic to this degree, that they raise again the question of whether the Old Testament has any significant place in the thought of Jesus, and therefore in any modernized version of the Christian faith. Their attack is directed, not only against classical Christian theism but against the Old Testament understanding of God which lay behind it. It is important to be quite clear about this, for there have been many criticisms levelled against Christian theism on the grounds that in some of its historic expressions it represents an illegitimate fusion of biblical and philosophical ideas of God. Those who have attacked it for this reason have usually done so in order to free the biblical idea of God and to present it again in its purity undisturbed by an alien metaphysic. The radical theologians are obviously going beyond this position. They are not only questioning this hybrid theology composed of biblical and philosophical elements. They are questioning the fundamental doctrine of God which is Judaism's legacy to Christianity, and which Jesus himself shared. Any adequate reply to them must involve a rehabilitation of the Old Testament at this point.

It is just conceivable that someone might even try to show that the Old Testament does not speak of the transcendent God, but this is obviously not a very promising line of approach. The radical theologians do not try to argue that the Old Testament does not teach the transcendence of God, but only that the radical self-emptying involved in the career of Jesus makes such a belief no longer desirable or compelling. However, in order that nothing may be taken for granted, let us raise the question again: Does the Old Testament faith in Yahweh really depend upon his transcendence, and what precisely does this latter signify? To answer this question we are compelled to consider the subject of creation, and even to ask whether the Old Testament has a "doctrine" of creation. "When early Christianity speaks of the relation of God and the world, it begins with the ideas and concepts of later Judaism. . . . The God of the New Testament is neither in the world nor outside the world, but above the world."<sup>2</sup> The modern

2. G. Kittell (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III, ed. and transl. by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 116.

philosophical analyst will no doubt immediately want to know precisely what significance is to be given to the prepositions in, outside, and above, with their spatial connotations. There seems little doubt, however, that the intention is to assert a basic difference between God and the totality of heaven and earth which depends upon him for its existence but is not to be identified with him. "Transcendence means, and always has meant, *difference*; God's transcendence means that his being cannot be simply identified with the being of the universe. God's transcendence opposes pantheism, not intimacy."<sup>3</sup> That the faith of Israel is not content with the mere assertion of transcendence is obvious. God's presence and his activity within history are everywhere stressed. It is, however, somewhat misleading to state with Mr. Jacob that "faith in God the creator holds a less important place than that of God the saviour, and the God who made the heavens and the earth is less often and less directly the object of faith than the God who brought his people out of Egypt."<sup>4</sup> In so far as this language implies a repudiation of a merely metaphysical doctrine of transcendence, not rooted in the living and redeeming God of Israel's historical experience, then there is no reason for dissent. It is obvious, however, that Yahweh could not have brought his people out of the land of Egypt unless he had been in effective control of natural forces, and this implies his transcendence of such forces as well as his immanent activity in and through them. That the Jew interpreted the activity of the mysterious God who created the world in the light of his covenant purpose may be accepted without demur. It may also be true that the full implications of God's transcendence were not fully articulated until the time of the Exile and Second Isaiah, and even then not in what would today be called metaphysical terms. This, however, does not mean that there are not important metaphysical implications in such language as:

The creator of the heavens, he is God,  
The former of the earth and its maker, he established it;  
Not chaos (*tohu*) did he create it, for dwelling did he  
form it (Isa. 14:18).

The significance of the Old Testament history for this matter has been well summed up as follows: "The creation is so closely linked to conservation and control that all dualistic deism is irrelevant, whilst there can be no pantheistic absorption of such a Person in the immanent energies of Nature."<sup>5</sup> The important point for our discussion is that this is the underlying assumption from which Jesus himself started. Whatever additional factors need to be added in the light of later apocalyptic and eschatological development or Jesus' own unique self-consciousness in relation to the Father, God in this sense is assumed. Jesus prayed to "Our Father, which

3. A. A. Vogel, *The Next Christian Epoch* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 78.

4. E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), p. 136.

5. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 21.

art in heaven," addressed him as "Father, Maker of Heaven and Earth," and interpreted his own role as that of the bringer of the realm and rule of God among men.

On what grounds, then, would it be possible to argue that the significance of Jesus can be understood apart from belief in such a God? The options would appear to be limited:

(a) The basic Hebrew and Jewish intuition as to the nature and character of God was mistaken; (b) Jesus accepted the Old Testament teaching about God and was mistaken in so doing; (c) Knowledge of the "mind" of Jesus of Nazareth is so limited or infinitesimal that we have no means of knowing how much or how little he accepted of his Jewish heritage. (a) or (c) would seem to be crucial; (b) is simply a logical consequence of (a). The only question to be asked is whether, if Jesus was mistaken on a point as fundamental as this, he can really be trusted on other matters. In any case, could such a Jesus be seriously offered as the object of adoration and worship, or made a central figure in any religion of the future still claiming to be Christian?

Let us, then, turn to (a) and the Hebrew and Jewish conception of God. It could be maintained that this conception is true because it is the teaching of the Bible, and the Bible is authoritative. This is a widely held view, not confined to literalists and fundamentalists, but equally assumed by those who claim full freedom of literary and historical investigation. "Yet it is not sufficient to declare that the Old Testament is a book *about* God. It would be more correct to say that the Old Testament is the book through which God speaks and reveals His will. Thus we note that this fact renders a discussion of whether God is, both academic and pointless."<sup>6</sup> It is not easy to be sure what exactly Professor Knight wishes to imply by this statement. Perhaps he simply wants to affirm that there is something self-authenticating in the biblical disclosures of God's reality, nature, and purpose which does not require any buttressing from natural theology or philosophical theology of any kind. He does not appear to assert this on the basis of a doctrine of verbal inspiration, but would presumably maintain that a critical approach to the Scriptures does not destroy the reality of the biblical history or the revelation of God disclosed in and through certain events and persons there described. If one asks to whom the biblical understanding of God is self-authenticating, then the answer again must obviously be, not to the unbeliever, but to the man of faith in whom the Holy Spirit has made possible the kind of response which can discern the presence of God in the biblical history. This is the thesis so brilliantly defended by Helmut Gollwitzer. While theism is a suspect term because of its metaphysical associations, Gollwitzer nevertheless admits that the Bible is theistic to an unprecedented degree,<sup>7</sup> that the Christian must not be ashamed of

6. G. A. F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), p. 17.

7. Cf. H. Gollwitzer, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965), p. 42.

his theism, even though he must never forget that his is the theism of the personal God of the Bible, not of the highest being of the metaphysician. Faith must confess that God is, even if his existence must not be treated as that of an object which can be grasped by man's scientific or philosophical reasoning. Faith may question metaphysical arguments for God's existence but cannot deny his reality. There is no transcending of theism in the sense of "going beyond" or "leaving behind" the living God of the biblical revelation. Karl Barth speaks in similar terms. Knowledge of God is not given and cannot be given apart from biblical revelation, and when thus given, it is human knowledge. But this knowledge, by virtue of its source, is given to us "in insurpassable and incontestable certainty."<sup>8</sup> "Given to us" means given to those of us who have faith, and its source guarantees its certainty because it comes from God, and the Bible is by definition and canonical authority the medium of God's revelation. Thus, the truth of God's transcendence is guaranteed both by the authority of Scripture and the insight granted to faith. We can leave on one side for a moment the question whether the Bible itself is hostile to any knowledge of God not mediated through history and apprehended by faith.

Why is it that the radical theologians have reached their negative conclusions about the transcendence of God in the biblical theistic sense? Presumably Scripture is not self-authenticating to them, at least on this point. Shall we go a step further, therefore, and say that they lack faith, that they lack the humility before the Word of God which alone could make possible their true understanding of God? This is a searching question which can hardly be avoided, even though one rightly shrinks from giving the impression that one is substituting abuse for theological argument. It is far from our intention to defame the character of the radical theologians in order to discredit the sharpness of their criticisms. Nevertheless, the question has to be asked, not only of them, but of countless modern men. If the Old Testament does speak of the transcendent Creator, and if Jesus built on this foundation, then why can modern men not come to accept its truth? Are the reasons scientific, moral, metaphysical, existential, or what have you? Or are the roots of the modern attitude to be found in moral failures and sin? Or is it our technological society which has for the time being obscured modern man's awareness that neither he nor his world is self-created or self-sufficient?

In fact, all these influences have contributed to creating that peculiar modern inhibition against the recognition of transcendence. In the case of the radical theologians, and of Dr. Altizer in particular, the primary factor is the passionate demand for a form of Christianity which will be relevant and effective in every sphere of human activity. They desire to escape from the stuffiness and timidity of "church" Christianity, to share to the full the doubt, fear, bewilderment, and religious perplexity of modern men, to claim the whole baffling realm of man's life in this present world

8. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 180.

and transform it by agape-love into a significant, positive affirmation of existence here and now. Nothing human is alien to them. The barrier between sacred and profane must be broken down and the secular must become the area where holiness and love again gain their triumphs. It is hardly possible to question the legitimacy of the motives here at work. Even orthodox Christianity has never denied that God sent his Son, not only to save the church, but to save the world. Jesus himself was a layman and a man among men. The question raised by these thinkers, however, is whether it is possible to have this creative approach to human life in its totality and still accept a transcendent God. Is not the only way to achieve this "worldly" holiness to be found in a doctrine of radical immanence which finds God wholly and completely in our present form of human existence?

As a matter of historical fact, it would be difficult to show that the early Hebrews combined their faith in Yahweh with a negative approach to human life here and now. It has often been pointed out that a belief in an after-life worth the having was a comparatively late development in the Old Testament. The Hebrews evidently found it possible to combine the affirmation of the reality, holiness, and steadfast love of the transcendent God with the conviction that this life was the only existence man had. Altizer accepts this claim that early Hebrew faith was world-affirming and only capitulated to yearnings for personal immortality after the Exile.<sup>9</sup> This world-affirmation of early Yahwism, however, gave way in course of time to a world-denying ethos, and at this point biblical religion approximates to the radical Indian rejection of the claims and values of "reality," that is, of present human existence in this world.<sup>10</sup> When the prophets pronounced doom upon their contemporary society, and demanded obedience to the will of an absolutely holy and righteous God, they logically implied, even if it took some centuries for the full implications to be made plain, that this present world must in the end give way to a supra-mundane existence where alone such ideals of perfect justice and love could be realized. In being committed to a new creation, they were impelled to disvalue the present created order, and man's life within it. Altizer would seem to regret this development, and would prefer to build upon the world-affirming character of early Hebrew faith. He is convinced, however, that this can only be done by getting rid of Yahweh as a transcendent Creator and Sustainer of the world. Somehow he must become wholly identified with existence in the body here and now.

If the radical theologians wish to accept the full implications of this position, so be it, but it is worth pointing out the consequences. Their natural affinity would appear to be with some kind of modernized millenarianism which hopes for a permanent establishment of the rule of justice

9. Cf. T. J. J. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), pp. 57ff.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 67f.

and love on this earth, but a millennium without God in the transcendent sense. The eternity of the world, and in some form of this earth, is required to give substance to this hope. It is interesting to note in passing how closely this view approximates to the secularized Marxist eschatology of a perfect community on earth when the dialectic of history reaches its inevitable goal. This revival of optimism is an astonishing psychological fact at a moment of history when mankind's confidence in its future on this earth has been so badly shaken. William Hamilton has left us in no doubt at this point:

This is not an optimism of grace, but a worldly optimism I am defending. It faces despair not with the conviction that out of it God can bring hope, but with the conviction that the human conditions that created it can be overcome, whether these conditions be poverty, discrimination or mental illness. It faces death not with the hope of immortality but with the human confidence that man may befriend death and live with it as a possibility always alongside.<sup>11</sup>

What these thinkers never seem to have seriously considered is whether it is possible to accept the essential incompleteness of existence in this world with a relative optimism about our future prospects, together with the conviction that God is real and transcendent to all earthly reality, though actively interested and present within it. As against their absolute valuation of present existence, Christians have no option but to accept the charge of otherworldliness. This world, and human existence, is not for the Bible a final and eternal good, even though the latter may be experienced here and now in some significant sense. "This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Dr. Manson has rightly pointed out that whenever a living faith in a righteous, holy, and loving God is brought up hard against the facts of human experience, some sort of eschatology must emerge if men are to retain their faith.<sup>12</sup> The resolution of the conflict between what is and what ought to be can only be met in three ways: by sheer naturalism which denies that human moral and spiritual aspirations can ever be fulfilled, by the argument that the conflict between the ideal and the real is illusory and that, properly viewed, all is already reconciled, or by an eschatology which affirms that what ought to be will be. The last is the biblical view. When the Old Testament Jew finally realized that ultimate fulfilment of God's purpose cannot be achieved completely in this present order and demanded an eternal dimension, he was not indulging in escapism. He was recognizing the facts of the situation and following the true logic of his faith. He was able to do this with confidence, however, because he already believed that God, though active in, was also "above" the process of becoming and the tragedies of human history. Without this faith he would have despaired, and this consequence still holds true, whatever the radical theologians say.

11. T. J. J. Altizer and W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 169.

12. Cf. T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), pp. 245ff.



There is, however, more to be said if justice is to be done. If we recognize, as late Judaism and Jesus himself did, that our true home is in the eternal dimension with God, does this mean a complete disvaluation of present existence? The radical theologians fear this conclusion, and can point with some degree of justification to certain expressions of Christianity in the past, which are so preoccupied with heaven after death that the present life is reduced to a pale shadow and emptied of any positive significance. It is worth observing that Teilhard de Chardin is also deeply concerned with this same problem. How is it possible to reconcile the transcendence of God and the Kingdom with a positive attitude to human life on this planet and all its finest cultural achievements? Is the proper stance of the Christian to wait with resignation for his translation to a transcendent realm, or can he work wholeheartedly for a future on this planet? De Chardin believes, in my judgment, rightly, that these two can be combined. However, he differs from the radical theologians in preserving the transcendent reference. The fulfilment of God's purpose in and through physical evolution and human history is taken up at the parousia or omega-point into the eternal realm where God will be all in all. Whatever may be thought of the details of de Chardin's vision, there can be no question that it is closer to the biblical view than the position of the radical theologians. The latter will find it increasingly difficult, without the transcendent God, to avoid falling into the naturalism which confines man within purely this-worldly horizons. It could be argued with Bertrand Russell that this is the only option for modern man. It can hardly be claimed that it deserves the name of Christianity. If, then, the radical theologians have not successfully made their point on this question of transcendence, the question can be posed again in real seriousness: may not the Old Testament offer us the truth after all about God and his relation to the world?

However, other objections, of a more strictly metaphysical character, could still be raised. Has not our scientific knowledge of the world made it both impossible and undesirable to seek "explanations" which compel us to assume a reality of some kind "beyond" the natural process or sum total of events as science investigates them in the here and now? Dr. Altizer does not appear to be concerned directly with this aspect of the problem, though he may very well have it in the back of his mind as a support for the position which he has already reached on other grounds. Such contemporary thinkers as van Buren are quite obviously influenced by empiricism and philosophical analysis in so far as these appear to lead to a denial of transcendence in the biblical and theistic sense.<sup>13</sup> The essence of his position is to be found in the assertion that we have no option in the contemporary secular world but to take a non-cognitive view of faith.<sup>14</sup> Simple literal

13. Cf. P. M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

14. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 97.

theism is wrong and qualified literal theism is meaningless.<sup>15</sup> The Christian faith only has meaning when referring to the Christian way of life interpreted as action controlled by agape-love. It is not a set of cosmological assertions.<sup>16</sup>

If these assumptions are accepted, then it follows that the Old Testament understanding of God must be repudiated, as well as Jesus' dependence upon the Old Testament at this point. The astonishing thing about van Buren's book is the implication that a particular contemporary philosophical approach is normative for modern man and will remain so for future generations. This is obviously not true even for the present situation, since one can find many notable philosophers who still defend the idea of a transcendent God—e.g. H. D. Lewis and the late Paul Tillich (in his own special way). The latter does not repudiate transcendence, even if his "God" beyond theism leaves many Christians dissatisfied.

Professor Langdon Gilkey raises the question of why the classical Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has not received either the attention or the approval it deserves in the last century and a half. In so far as this doctrine was wrongly interpreted as an attempt to give a scientific answer to questions concerning physical origins (and was coupled with a literal interpretation of Genesis) it naturally fell into disfavour when nineteenth-century science had increasing success in suggesting plausible answers to purely scientific questions. However, Dr. Gilkey rightly points out that scientific hypotheses and statements are by definition about "relations between finite things in space and time."<sup>17</sup> The doctrine of Creation, on the other hand, is concerned with the more fundamental question of why there is a universe at all, whatever scientific account be given of the processes of that universe. If it is accepted that our experience both of ourselves and of the world is one of continued change and process, then men are driven inexorably both by their existential frustrations and by the mind's restless search for intelligibility in the world to seek to find some permanent and enduring reality behind the everlasting flux. This is a human quest, not a peculiarly Christian search, though it might be argued that this profound aspiration after the transcendent in some form or other bears witness to man's affinity with God. Certainly it is a feature of Buddhist experience, as we have already seen in our discussion of Altizer's treatment of Oriental mysticism. The sharp reaction in the present against the transcendent springs in part from past philosophical efforts to reach the ultimate One in a spirit of cool intellectual analysis. The transcendent thus reached seems to be a bloodless abstraction, far removed from the actual day-to-day needs of men. Furthermore, it seems to lack those "personal" characteristics which alone make worship of God with heart as well as head possible. This judgment is true, but only partly true. Certainly there is an apparent coldness about Aristotle's handling

15. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 99.

16. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 101.

17. L. Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 25.

of these problems, but in Plato and Plotinus, in Hindu and Buddhist metaphysics, there are obviously profoundly personal motives behind their investigations, which give to their thinking an "existential" quality, despite the apparent abstractness of their language and concepts.

It is certainly true, as Dr. Gilkey goes on to insist, that the Hebrew mind did not arrive at the transcendent God by following a metaphysical urge to discover the enduring unity underlying multiplicity. It started from the familiar personal awareness of bodily limitation, weakness, and death, the moral and spiritual failures and frustrations of each individual life, and the large-scale tragedies of social groups, written large in the history of the Jewish people. It sought a firm standing ground amid such realities and found it in the transcendent God. It found such a secure base, not "from a careful scientific or metaphysical analysis of the general experience of nature and of finite experience, but rather from the illumination that comes from special encounters with God in revelatory experiences."<sup>18</sup> We must not, however, immediately jump to the conclusion that the philosopher's quest for intelligibility in the world is a hopeless and futile quest, or that he has nothing in common with the religious man's quest. Indeed, in some men both quests may be present and both may demand their proper satisfaction.

The conclusion to be drawn from this somewhat lengthy digression is that the Old Testament teaching about the transcendent God cannot yet be safely written off as impossible for a modern man. The fact that Jesus himself did not write it off must also make us hesitate to dismiss it. The same fact makes it extremely unlikely that Jesus can be properly understood apart from this fundamental assumption about God, which governed all his thinking and action.

In claiming that Jesus took for granted the Jewish faith in a transcendent God, it is assumed that we have enough reliable knowledge of the "mind" of Jesus to be able to make such a statement. Here again, after stripping away all the extraneous issues, the basic issue can be simply stated. Such reliable knowledge of Jesus' thought about the nature of God is either attainable or not attainable. In the former case, the mind of Christ must presumably be taken seriously by anyone claiming to be his follower. If, on the contrary, such knowledge is not attainable, then there would seem to be no point in trying to establish a religious position in which Jesus would have a central place. It is no answer to this problem to insist that we still have the "faith" of the church. Either the faith of the church has some foundation in the mind and intention of Jesus or it has not. If it has, then it is logical to claim that the "faith" of the church is not self-created or simply the mythopoeic activity of the worshipping community, but derives in the last analysis from an understanding of the "mind" of Christ reliably known. On the other hand, if the faith of the church is not rooted in any knowledge of the mind of Christ, and the thought and intention of Jesus must inevitably remain a mere  $x$ , then the church is no longer bound,

18. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

morally, intellectually, or spiritually, to its past or to Jesus, and can develop its contemporary spiritual life in complete freedom. The Church might continue to use the term "Christ" to denote the Christ-idea or some constellation of spiritual ideas and ideals, but these would have no necessary connection with Jesus of Nazareth. Once again it could be argued that biblical criticism has left us with this option alone, but it must be asked whether the result would still be Christianity in any intelligible and recognizable form.

It must be confessed that, in the present state of New Testament study, there is ample reason for confusion on the part of believer and unbeliever alike. It is difficult to establish any point by a simple appeal to the consensus of New Testament scholarship, for it is always possible to list some learned scholars who will dissent. Nevertheless, the absence of unanimity does not mean that in this field there is a free-for-all, where any one position is just as plausible as any other. Furthermore, the fact that New Testament study today has to be carried on in an ecumenical context has made the idea of a real consensus of Christian minds less utopian than it might have appeared not long ago. The constant reiteration in recent years that "the quest of the historical Jesus" has failed is one of those oversimplifications which can seriously mislead the uninitiated. If it is simply the claim that it is no longer possible to penetrate behind the New Testament documents to a purely human Jesus who by definition could not be the "Christ of faith," then the point is well taken. But it is possible that the authentic Jesus of history was never such a figure stripped of all supernatural claims. It might just be the case that the Christ to whom the apostolic witness testifies was in fact the real Jesus of history. At least, this is a thesis not to be cavalierly dismissed without serious consideration.

However, the question which concerns us at the moment is not the defence of the whole faith of the church in respect to the Incarnation. It is whether we have enough reliable information about the mind of the "Jesus of history" to enable us to say that he shared the Jewish belief in the transcendent God. Professor John McIntyre makes the valid point that our inability to give a modern psychological account of how Jesus developed from childhood to manhood, or to write an official two-volume biography in the best Victorian style, does not mean that we are completely ignorant of the mind of Christ, "of how he thought about the Father, about his own death, about men and women."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to assert that, if we are unable to speak in any sense at all of the personality of Jesus, then we are really forbidden by the nature of the case to talk of Jesus in any meaningful sense. One cannot escape the conclusion that many who speak of the failure of the quest of the historical Jesus do not wish to go this far. Usually they go on to speak as if they knew with reasonable certainty a good deal about Jesus' thought, and in particular about the Jewish belief in God which he took for granted and everywhere presupposes in his teaching. Of

19. McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology*, p. 124.

course, it is still possible to argue that Jesus was a Jew of the first century, and therefore shared the Jewish belief in the transcendent God, but that he never made claims for divinity and that the church was wrong in making such claims on his behalf. This argument, however, raises the whole Christological problem and the question of the correct interpretation of the total New Testament witness—and with these issues we are not concerned here. Our concern *vis-à-vis* the radical theologians has been to point out the New Testament presuppositions about God. Without these, the New Testament could never have developed whatever Christology its pages contain. It could not have said that “God” sent his Son, or that “God” was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

All this seems like flogging the proverbial dead horse or underlining the obvious, but when the obvious is no longer admitted, it is necessary to affirm it again clearly and unambiguously. Our conclusion, then, is that Jesus believed in God, in that he accepted the basic Jewish convictions on this point whatever he said or did not say about his own special relationship to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus was not an atheist either in the ancient or the modern sense.