

Jesus: Grounds for the Christian Estimate

C.F.D. Moule

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This was the third of a series of six lectures delivered by various speakers at the University of Cambridge in Lent Term 1968. This, the third lecture in the series, which was delivered by Professor Charlie Moule, Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, entitled 'Jesus: Grounds for the Christian Estimate', is a copy of the original manuscript which was given to me by Professor Moule. As far as I know, it has never been published. Perhaps, I should explain how it came into my hands.

The lecture was delivered on 7 February 1968 in a large hall just off Trinity Street. It was scheduled to begin at 5pm. By the time I arrived all the seats were taken and, with many others, I had to stand at the back. It was just as well that I did: I was so impressed by the character and quality of the speaker, the subject matter of the lecture and the form in which it was cast, that I was reluctant to leave before he ended to attend a tutorial at Jesus College at 6pm.

As it happened, I happened to see Professor Moule one morning on his way to Clare College as I was returning to Trinity Hall from the Squire Law Library. I went up to him (he was no taller than me) to ask whether the lecture would be published as part of the series of lectures or otherwise. He did not know. However, he went on to say that he would send the original copy of his lecture to me by college mail. He was as good as his word: before the end of the afternoon the typewritten original (with annotations in his own hand) was in my pigeon hole in the Porter's Lodge.

Sometime after that, he wrote to say that he was preparing a talk (I believe, for the BBC Third Programme) and asked whether I would return the lecture so as to assist in him in that task. After that, he returned it to me again. This happened more than once. Eventually (by which time I was in chambers in Swansea) I made a photostat copy of the lecture, which I have carefully kept, and returned the original to him. What follows, is an electronic copy of the photostat copy.

Judge Wyn Richards

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Canon Montefiore started this series of lectures with an account of man from the angles of zoology, anthropology, and religion. The naked ape is also a creature made in the image of God. There are different levels of apprehension, and it is possible to see them as complementary to one another and as simultaneously true. Mr Harry Williams, in the second lecture, also spoke of different ways of knowing, different levels of apprehension; and he contrasted the way of discursive reason (that is, arguing from premises to conclusions) with the aesthetic way and the personal way of knowing. But he refrained (deliberately, I suspect) from saying what part, if any, might be played by the knowledge that comes by reasoning in getting us into position, as it were, for that other sort of knowing, or putting us within range of it. He said, for instance, that, in St John's Gospel, everyone alike is represented as seeing and hearing Jesus, but only a limited number recognize him for what he is. And this recognition by the few takes place, he said, 'because they are capable of a way of thinking of which the crowds were not capable'.

But must we leave it at that – that you either have or have not the capacity to make a Christian estimate and that there is nothing more that can be done about it? Or is it possible that our feet may be set, *by reasoning*, upon a path that leads – not, indeed, all the way to that sort of knowing to which a Christian estimate belongs, but to the frontier of that territory? And, if so, *what* reasoning is it that leads thus to the borderland of a Christian understanding?

‘Grounds for the Christian estimate’: that is the uncommonly searching question confronting me now, and I have to attempt an answer. And (whether rightly or wrongly is for you to judge) what I am going to say is this: Yes,

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there are grounds for the Christian estimate. There is evidence to be examined, there are reasons, which do, I believe, lead to the frontiers of that other realm of knowing. Actually to cross the frontier and go forward looks like stepping over a precipice. It can be done only in faith: there are no guarantees. On the other hand, to draw back and retrace our steps is to go contrary to reason. If I am right, and if it is to such a dilemma that reason leads when it is applied to Christian origins, then there is a significant relation between reason and faith. Faith is not the same as reason; but it might turn out to be actually unreasonable not to believe.

But what conceivable evidence could lead to the dilemma I have described? I suggest that some light is thrown on the matter if we start by exploring the origins, simply, of the Christian conviction. We know, on first-hand evidence, *what* the Christians believed. Perhaps it will pay to investigate and question *why* they believed it, and whether it was for what to us good reasons or in a completely irrational manner.

About Jesus himself there is very little evidence outside the Christian writings – little evidence except from witnesses who already entertained this faith. There is that scornful sentence in Tacitus¹ and some antagonistic references in much later Jewish literature; and that is just about all. For rest, one has to use the documents now collected as the New Testament, and other Christian documents of a later period. And all these, of course, are biased (almost, it might be as the non-Christian sources are!) at any rate, the writings of the New Testament are confessedly by believers.

But for that very reason they are at least first-hand, incontrovertible evidence for that belief; and that belief,

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in itself (and this is the point from which I start), constitutes a very remarkable phenomenon. Where did it spring from? Where is the bridge between the man Jesus and this interpretation of him? There is no reason (despite the occasional effort of an extreme sceptic) to doubt the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, or the fact that he was put to death by the Roman authority in Palestine round about the year 30 of our era. But at some stage between the date of his death and a date about 20 years later, something remarkable occurred. The documents now

¹ “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, was given the death penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment...”

comprising the New Testament are incontrovertible evidence for that occurrence, namely for the coming into existence of a conviction, among a considerable number of people, that Jesus of Nazareth was alive and was, in a special sense, God's Son, and, indeed, represented to them God himself. And the most careful critical analysis of these writings shows beyond all peradventure that this conviction goes back a long way behind the date of the writings themselves and is embedded in the very early tradition which preceded them.

So our first *datum* is the existence, at a very early stage, of this extraordinary belief that this dead man lived. Now, it seems, on the face of it, so highly improbably that such a belief could be well-founded or justified, that one's immediate instinct is simply to write it off as superstitious, imaginative, the result of credulous, uneducated people taking legends literally. After all, any number of mad faiths have sprung up on the lunatic fringe at all periods (not least our day). Nothing would seem easier than to discredit this one among the rest as just one more of these ignorant fantasies.

And I think that is precisely why a large number of us get no further. The documents, we tell ourselves, are

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not worth wasting our time over: they are bound to be a tissue of credulity. So we do not read them. Perhaps (we say) these first Galilean disciples of Jesus had heard him utter prophetic words about his triumph over death and persuaded themselves, at last, that they had come true. Or they constructed the whole story out of Old Testament Scriptures which they had convinced themselves were descriptive of Jesus. Or possibly the secret is in some slightly deeper psychological condition: some compensatory mechanism, restoring their self-confidence after the shock of his crucifixion. Or, conceivably, they may genuinely have been convinced, through some easily understandable confusion or mistake, that his tomb was empty, and they drew from this the false conclusion that he must be alive. Or did he not die on the cross? Did he only swoon, later to be revived and restored to his disciples. Or was Jesus, possibly, a brilliant schemer, obsessed by a messianic destiny, and was there a Passover plot? This is the theory proposed by H.J. Schonfield (the book is published, I notice, in the 'non-fiction' category of Corgi books). Anyway, we say, there must be some rational explanation, but it is quite impossible, at this distance, to retrieve it; and all we feel sure about is that the Christian estimate must be a figment of pious imagination.

The trouble is that it is far easier to be satisfied with that kind of account before you have acquainted yourself with the documents. As long as you scrupulously refrain from reading them, such theories seem eminently reasonable. It is only when you look more closely that problems begin to appear.

Let us have a look at the earliest account of these convictions that we can date with any certainty. In about the year 50 – that is, perhaps, some 20 years after Jesus, execution – Paul the Christian missionary, in a letter to Christians at Corinth, recalled what he had told them when

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he first evangelized them. And what he told them, he says, was told to him by others – that is, it was part of the common stock of Christian tradition going back into the earlier years before he had come on the scene:

First and foremost, I handed on to you the facts which had been imparted to me: that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day, according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas, and afterwards to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, and afterwards to all the apostles.

In the end he appeared even to me; though this birth of mine was monstrous, for I had persecuted the church of God and am therefore inferior to all other apostles – indeed not fit to be called an apostle.

I Cor. 15:3-9.

Now, there is one eminently remarkable thing about this tradition. It is not only that it appears well authenticated (though, indeed, the appeal to groups of eye-witnesses is impressive). It is that when a Christian like Paul attributes *aliveness* to Jesus he evidently means aliveness of a transcendental sort. What I mean by that may be defined by reference to such beliefs as were current at the time. Paul had been a Pharisee; and Pharisees, we know, were distinguished from another Jewish religious group, the Sadducees, by their belief in an afterlife. The Sadducees, in company with most of the great Hebrew thinkers before them – most of the writers of the Old Testament –, had little or no expectation of any life beyond death. The Pharisees had. Moreover, unlike some of the non-Jewish, Hellenic thinkers of the time, they did not think of an immortal soul, continuing in life beyond the death of the body, but rather of resurrection – the

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raising to life after death – of the entire person, the total personality.

But the important point, for our purposes, is that it is the end of time with which the Pharisees' expectations, on the whole, seem to have been concerned. What they were looking for was some great collective event at the end of time. When they spoke of resurrection, they did not mean individuals being restored to bodily life here and now. If they believed in miraculous stories of wonderworkers bringing individuals who had died back again into the same sort of life they had been living before, that was not what they meant when they spoke of the resurrection and the life of the age to come. The Pharisees' hope of resurrection concerned something transcendental. It concerned the collective life of devout Israelites at the climax of history, when God would have established his reign and his people would have been raised to be with him. However physical and corporeal the terms they used to describe this hope, they clearly intended by it something transcendent and beyond history; and this could not be conceived of as happening piecemeal, in this world, as each individual Pharisee died. It was to be a great, transhistorical culminating act of God.

Consequently, it is on extreme surprise to find a person like Paul, with his background, asserting, paradoxically, of a single individual, Jesus, who had recently been executed, that he was already alive with this absolute, irreversible, inalienable life, in spite of the fact that

history still continues as before and Paul is still living in *this* world. But that this is what he does mean, becomes particularly clear in Rom. 6:9f.:

We know that Christ, once raised from the dead, is never to die again: he is no longer under the dominion of death. For in dying as he died, he died to sin, once for all, and in living as he lives, he lives to God.

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I simply fail to understand how *that* conviction could spring merely from the Pharisaic imagination. A passionate desire to retrieve the crucified Master, however powerful its psychological effects might be, could hardly precipitate this paradoxical conviction which was so unlike anything that a devout Jew might have conceived of for himself. Still less could the physical survival of a badly hurt person (which is what resuscitation theories require) have conveyed this notion – or the mere discovery of an empty tomb. So I am left with no plausible alternative to what the Christians said – namely, that they were driven to this unique formulation by a unique, but clear and undeniable experience.

But what sort of experience? Experience of what? Some Christian thinkers today interpret that unique experience in terms, essentially, not of resurrection but of death. It was, or that showing, an insight, granted to the disciples, into the meaning of Jesus' death – an insight so profound as to mean their own death. It meant death for them in the sense of completely coming to the end of their own resources, realistically reckoning with the bankruptcy of mortal effort, and so – and only so – attaining a new life, a freedom of existence beyond the secular, self-reliance that masquerades as life. They learnt to call the death of Jesus resurrection because, in it and through it, they had found release from their old, self-regarding existence into a life that was real.

This interpretation of the Christians' experience, I confess, appeals to me very strongly. It relieves one of the necessity to struggle with the problems of the historicity of the resurrection; and it represents God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ consistently, as given actually within the limits of mortal weakness and defeat, not in some *Deus ex machina*, some irruption of power from outside, reversing that

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weakness and defeat. There is something majestic in this paradox that death *is* life and defeat *is* victory, and one can grasp the point that any visible *proof* of this would involve an inner contradiction.

Yet, it leaves me still asking, But what was it that led the friends of Jesus to this tremendous insight? Mr Harry Williams said, in his lecture, that there had been moments when there had burst on his own consciousness 'absolute certainties which no reasoning of any kind could even begin to destroy – such as, for instance, that... death is resurrection'. But perhaps it is legitimate to ask, Would he have had such convictions without the Christian Church? And how, in the first instance, did the early Christians reach them?

Besides, if their decisive experience was an insight into his death that simply burst upon them, I doubt if it would be altogether easier to account for the elaborate and circumstantial stories

of the way they saw Jesus. These men were as capable as twentieth-century man of stating a plain conviction, without resort to anecdote.

Thus, while this idea of a sudden insight that death was life is an attractive and arresting paradox, it leaves me historically at a loss: at a loss to explain the genesis of such a conviction, and its formulation in terms which (in a sense) might seem to spoil the paradox; and at loss to explain that strange, unique, new version of the pharisaic hope.

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However that may be, there is another observation that now needs to be made, it is this. This strange conviction about the aliveness of Jesus is never treated by the Christians as though it concerned an isolated wonder. It is not about a miracle in any cheap sense of that word. The Christians' conviction does not concern merely the extraordinary aliveness of some otherwise undefined dead man. It rests on the aliveness of a very particular person, Jesus, whom many of them had

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known very intimately. What comes through the traditions with great force is the conviction that the person who is alive with this new, indefeasible, absolute life is identical with the man they had gone about with in Galilee and Judaea. It is Jesus who has been raised, not just an anonymous someone or other.

And the character of this Jesus is something that comes through their traditions, as someone who was big and strange, and original. Not that we can reconstruct it in any detail; not that we can say, except in the case of comparatively few sayings and incidents, more (at best) than that they are very *likely* to be authentic. The Gospels, as is well known, represent the end-term of a period of some years of oral transmission, when the units of tradition had had time (as stories told from mouth to mouth are wont to do) to become shaped, adapted, and distorted. Indeed, some scholars think that the Christian communities actually created for themselves a certain number of new sayings and incidents. I, for one, find it difficult to convince myself of that. But change and adaptation and a measure of distortion there undoubtedly were. However, careful, critical scrutiny, making due allowance for such distortion, yields some noteworthy results.

First, Jesus was (if one may put it so) very big. He had a genius for cutting away trivialities and getting down to reality. With an unsophisticated but powerful mind, he went to the heart of a matter, much to the disconcertion of the more complacent and hypocritical of the religious leaders of his day. This impression of 'bigness' comes through again and again. Here is a clean, incisive mind that cuts through sham and asks disturbing questions:

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On another occasion when he went to synagogue, there was a man in the congregation who had a withered arm; and they were watching to see whether Jesus would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they could bring a charge against him. He said to the man with the withered arm, 'Come and stand out here.' Then he turned to them: 'Is it permitted to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' They had nothing to say; and,

looking round at them with anger and sorrow at their obstinate stupidity, he said to the man, 'Stretch out your arm.'

Mark 3:1-5.

Accordingly, these Pharisees and the lawyers asked him, 'Why do your disciples not conform to the ancient tradition, but eat their food with defiled hands?' He answered, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites in these words: "This people pays me lip-service, but their heart is far from me: their worship of me is in vain, for they teach as doctrines the commandments of men." You neglect the commandment of God, in order to the tradition of men.'

He also said to them, 'How well you set aside the commandment of God in order to maintain your tradition? Moses said, "Honour your father, and your mother", and, "The man who curses his father or mother must suffer death." But you hold that if a man says to his father or mother, "Anything of mine which might have been used for your benefit is Corban"' (meaning, set apart for God), 'he is no longer permitted to do anything for his father or mother. Thus by your own tradition, handed down among you, you make God's word null and void. And many other things that you do are just like that.'

Mark. 7:5-13.

They came once more to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple court the chief priests; lawyers, and elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you acting like this? Who gave you authority to act in this way?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; and if you give me an answer, I will tell, you by what authority I act. The baptism of John; was it from God, or from men? Answer me.' This set them arguing among themselves: 'What shall we say? If we say, "from God", he will say, "Then why did you not believe him?" Shall we say, "from men"?' – but they were afraid of the people, for all held that John was in fact a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus, said to them 'Then neither will I tell you by what authority I act.'

Mark 11:27-33

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And he was big not only in intellect. He was big in integrity. It is remarkable that, through a rather prudish tradition, there survived this portrait of an attractive young man moving freely among men and women of loose morals with a tenderness and grace and an enjoyment of their companionship matched only by his un-selfconscious integrity.

But Jesus was also strange. Despite his companion-ability he both had and conveyed to others an enormously vivid sense of living (if one may put it so) 'abnormally' close to God. He addressed God as 'Abba', which, in the Aramaic spoken by Jesus, seems to have been a child's word, rather like 'Daddy' – a most unliturgical formula; while, at the same time, this intimacy, free as it was from all trace of sentimentality, went with instant and uncompromising obedience to what he believed to be God's will. Consequently, Jesus was, there God was being devotedly and whole-heartedly obeyed: with startling, abnormal, alarming results. The presence of Jesus dumbfounded his opponents and brought surprising release and new life to the handicapped, the social outcast, the and depraved. This sense that, where Jesus was, there God's reign was being acknowledged was evidently a startling feature of his person and presence. It was strange (paradoxically) because of his intense at-home-ness in the world; and it was this which lent him his irresistible authority. Everything about him was authentic – his worship of God, his words, his conduct. He had no rabbinic degrees or external credentials: only this unique and transparent closeness to God, and the

active, tireless service of men that was its expression. He revealed (there is no other word) the intense concern and devoted service of

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God himself.

Thirdly, he was original. Critical examination of the parables shows pretty conclusively that they have, been modified and adapted to the needs of the early Church. But when the layers are stripped off and the original is reconstructed with reasonable plausibility, it transpires that Jesus was courageously attacking the religious complacency of his day and presenting a very new and fresh picture of God in his outgoing mercy. It is impossible anywhere else to find parables with anything like the freshness and originality of these. Nothing could be less like the frigid allegories which many of the rabbinic stories, equally with the later Christian stories, are. The parables of Jesus are convincing analogies drawn from acute observation of the world and presented like the insights of a brilliant cartoonist, which carry their own authentication because they constitute a kind of revelation of the inwardness of a situation:

He said, 'The kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed on the land; he goes to bed at night and gets up in the morning, and the seed sprouts and grows – how, he does not know. The ground produces a crop by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then full-grown corn in the ear, but as soon as the crop is ripe, he sets to work with the sickle, because harvest-time come.'

He said also, 'How, shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we describe it? It is like the mustard-seed, which is smaller than any seed in the ground at its sowing. But once sown, it springs up and grows taller than any other plant, and forms branches so large that the birds can settle in its shade.'

Mark 4:26-32

'Here is another picture of the kingdom of Heaven. A merchant looking out for fine pearls found one of very special value; so he went and sold everything he had and bought it.'

Matthew 13:45f.

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But what do you think about this? A man had two sons. He went to the first, and said, "My boy, go and work today in the vineyard." "I will, sir", the boy replied; but he never went. The father came to the second and said the same. "I will not", he replied; but afterwards he changed his mind and went. Which of these two did as his father wished? 'The second', they said. Then Jesus answered, 'I tell you this: tax-gatherers and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For when John came to show you the right way to live, you did not believe him, but the tax-gatherers and prostitutes did; and even when you had seen that, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Matthew 21:28-32

So, again, with the so-called Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. This is almost certainly the Evangelist's own pastiche of separate sayings from his fund of tradition; and, indeed, some of them recur in a different context in St Luke's Gospel. And it may be that there are only a few sayings in the Sermon (if any at all) that are absolutely unique and without parallel, in rabbinic writings in antiquity. But when someone alleges that Rabbinic Judaism

contains the whole of Christ's teaching, a very just reply (even were the allegation true) is one made many decades ago by the great scholar Julius Wellhausen, who said 'Yes – but how much else Rabbinic Judaism contains!' The concentrated distillation, in the Gospels, of profundity and illumination is vastly impressive; and, still, more, the fact that all this adds up not to good advice or moral maxims but to an insight into the nature of God:

'You have learned that they were told, "Love your neighbour, hate your enemy." But what I tell you is this; love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who sends his sun rise or, good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the honest and the dishonest. If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect?

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Surely the tax-gathers do as much as that. And if you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. You must therefore be all goodness, just as your heavenly Father is all good.'

Matthew 5:43-48

'Therefore I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food and drink to keep you alive, and clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are worth more than the birds! Is there a man of you by anxious thought can add a foot to his height? And why be anxious about clothes? Consider how the lilies grow in the fields; they do not work, they do not spin; and yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not attired like one of these. But if that is how God clothes the grass in the fields which is there today, and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you? How little faith you have! No, do not ask anxiously, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?" All these are for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you. So do, not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own.'

Matthew 6:25-34

It is not just anyone, then, but this known person – a man, big, strange, and original, – that the Christians believed to be alive with an absolute and inextinguishable life. There was all this *before*, his death, as well as the disciples, conviction *after* it. And so, we return to our original question: what was it that led to such a conviction? We find, ourselves in a dilemma. It is easy enough to say: It is all moonshine; or, with Bruno Bauer 'everything that the historical Christ is, everything that is said of him, that is known of him, belongs to the world of imagination, that is of the imagination

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of the Christian community and therefore has nothing to do with any man who belongs to the real world'. But is the portrait of Jesus convincingly relegated to such a position? And is imagination, enough to account for the genesis of that, strange, unexpected, unparalleled belief that the ultimate resurrection, associated by Pharisaic teaching with the wind-up of time, had, in the case of this one individual, already taken place? And is the bigness, the strangeness, and the originality of the figure who is discernible behind the traditions

compatible with puerile suggestibility and make-believe? Besides – and this is an element in the situation which I did not introduce at the beginning – we have to account for the fact that the convictions about Jesus were no flash in the pan, but were so steady and persistent that, before long, this group of otherwise perfectly normal Jews got squeezed, against their will, out of the synagogue and, against their own intentions, became differentiated as the sect of the Nazarenes; and that many of them were perfectly ready to die for their conviction. All this is difficult to classify as superstitious fantasy.

So we are left with this dilemma. The rationalist in us all says; Explain away the Christian estimate; there is no room for it in a rational person's beliefs; account for it by hallucination or error or mere superstition or trickery. But the historian in us says: But is that sufficient to explain this mighty before and after? – this big, strange, original Figure before, this extraordinary conviction after the death? The historian in us leads us, pretty relentlessly, as I believe, to the edge of that precipice of faith. To step over the precipice means allowing a transcendental factor into this story –

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allowing that history led to transhistory, that here, in an exceptional but inescapable way, the transcendental impinges on the course of history. To believe that – to step over the edge – is to move to Mr Harry Williams' second type of cognition. To withdraw from the precipice and retrace our steps involves inventing tales about credulity and stupidity which ill accord with the extraordinary depth, and sanity of what is presented. Whatever are we to do?

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