The Faith to Doubt: A Theological Autobiography

C. Norman Kraus

Sometime during my forties I remember asking Brother S. C. Yoder, the kindly bishop and former president of Goshen College, whether temptations to doubt and discouragement grew less intense when one reached seventy. He always seemed so calm and self-controlled, and his book on the Psalms exuded devotional confidence. His quiet and unelaborated answer was "no." Now I'm well above seventy, and I can only agree with him. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that a religious profession, such as that of the scholar, teacher, or pastor, is one of the most vulnerable to temptation. The prayer of the professional scholar of religion must always be "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

We all have our own doubts and temptations. Each of us must find our own way through what Michael King has called "trackless wastes" in his book *Trackless Wastes and Stars to Steer By* (Herald Press, 1990) at one time or other in life. I remember walking under the brilliant stars of a rural Ohio sky many years ago asking why a senseless accident should have taken the life of my best friend. I remember the career-changing disappointment in the late 1950s that made me wonder about God's wisdom and my Christian brothers' trustworthiness. (I must confess immediately, however, that I have decided that God was right after all.) But these are not the kind of personal doubts and struggles I want to write about. Rather, I want to reflect on my theological journey – my search for doctrinal and ethical beliefs which I could live by.

It was Martin Luther who observed that God is not only most clearly revealed in Christ, but also most profoundly hidden in the scandal of his

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humiliation, suffering, and death. From the earliest centuries Christians have been ridiculed for the weakness, irrelevance, and irrationality of their claim that the crucified Jesus is the power of God! Understanding the nature and implications of this paradox involved in God's personal disclosure has been the persistent challenge of my theological journey. I think that I would have simply succumbed to unbelief if it had not been for the wise insight of the Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, who pointed out that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Rather, he observed, it is a profound and necessary part of believing.

The Theological Significance of Doubt

There are many things one must doubt in order to hold on to faith in the God who is the profound and Transcendent Mystery of the universe. Indeed, most of the gods, and many of the religious values in vogue today in the name of evangelical Christianity must be doubted in order to follow the nonviolent Jesus whom we confess to be the Christ. They are rightly designated, as Freud correctly observed, the product of our wish projections, and, in the most precise meaning of the word, they are idols. This, of course, is not to say that the Transcendent Mystery whom Jesus called Abba is a wish projection! The central theological task is to distinguish between and rightly name these two different entities. It is theologically significant to realize that the first century Christians were called atheists by their highly religious neighbors because they rejected the gods of the Pantheon!

I have "doubted" just about every belief in the confessional statement of the church. I did not set out deliberately to do that, but in working my way through the teachings of the Christian church, and more particularly the Mennonite church of which I am a part, I found it impossible not to question the partial and often conflicting doctrinal statements. The one thing I found that I could not doubt, however, was the personal impact on me of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. I have never doubted Jesus in the sense of forsaking him as "the Way" although I have explored other ways. With the first disciples ("Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." John 6:68), I simply could not find a satisfactory alternative.

By "doubt" I do not mean a merely systematic academic "bracketing of beliefs" for the sake of organizing class notes. One of the first serious doubts I had was about prayer. I heard other Christian believers talk about prayer as

though it was a kind of pressure put on God by the fervent faith of those praying – "if we pray hard enough, ..." When I suggested to a Wednesday evening college men's prayer group that prayer is more like opening the door to the God who is already there knocking than trying to get God to open the door we want opened, some of the students were disturbed enough to ask for a second meeting. Simple as it sounds, this change, which I first encountered in O. Hallesby's classic entitled *Prayer*, signals a profound shift in the stance and expectations which we have for prayer. To put it in the words of Paul Lehman, ethics teacher at Princeton Seminary at the time I was there (1953-54), prayer is trying to get on God's bandwagon rather than trying to get God on ours!

Doubting Rational Systems

My early questioning was framed by the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. This debate was already in progress as the twentieth century dawned, and it set the terms of theological debate for the next fifty years. While it was often described as a battle between believers in the Bible and miracles on the one hand, and infidels and rationalistic critics of the Bible on the other, it actually was a head-on collision between two rational systems of thought. Orthodoxy began with the assumption that God is the ultimate embodiment of Reason, and God's Word (the Bible) defines the parameters of rational thought. Modern liberalism argued that the final arbiter of rational thought is empirical experience upon which logical reflection is based. What characterized twentieth-century orthodoxy as "fundamentalism" was its insistence that the biblical truth must be empirically verifiable. Thus miracles were defined as the empirical verification of supernaturally revealed information about God. In this sense fundamentalism was a modern "ism"! For example, one of the fundamentalist critics of my Christology expressed critical dismay at my statement that Jesus' deity was not empirical in the sense that his humanity was! And a book reviewer criticized me because I did not believe there was empirical evidence for Jesus' pre-existence.

At Princeton Theological Seminary I did an original study, later published as *Dispensationalism in America*, of the rise of the Bible and Prophetic Conference movement which emerged in the 1870s. The speakers at these conferences understood and defended the Bible as the inerrant words of God.

They argued that the Bible is the miraculous, absolute, rational authority on every issue it discusses. The miracle is that the absolute (rational) truth of the transcendent God has been transmitted to us in the words of the Bible. Some of the Bible Conference teachers actually said that the words of the Bible had been dictated by God. Others denied this claim but held that the effect was the same as if they had been. It became clear to me that although these teachers were extolling the Bible, it was for the wrong reasons. They believed in the authority of the Bible because of its rational perfection. This was, as Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), the great orthodox Presbyterian Bible scholar of the day admitted, a form of rationalism.

On the other hand, the modernists of the early twentieth century also appealed to human reason as the final ground for belief. Reason for them was empirical reason – human rationality based on inductive and deductive reason. There were no miracles to establish biblical truth. The authority of the Bible's truth claims was dependent upon its historical accuracy and its ability to inspire the reader. This was a more consistent rationalism, but it seemed to me unable to account for the unique significance of Jesus as recorded in Scripture. But more of this later when I speak of christology from "below." So the questions for me became these: What is the nature and power of the life of Jesus in history? How does he "save" humankind? And how is the biblical record related to the historical reality? All these were questions that were supposedly already firmly answered, and to even ask them seemed to my critics a sign of "liberalism."

I became convinced that the Bible's authority and power in our lives is not based on human reason and could not be demonstrated by means of rational arguments such as inerrancy. In the Mennonite Church of the early 1950s this conclusion was a highly problematic one. I wrote an article on the inadequate nature of inerrancy, which I shared with my colleagues at Goshen College, but I was afraid to let the editor of the *Concern* pamphlet series publish it for fear of repercussions. (The *Concern* pamphlets, published in the fifties, reflected the issues and convictions of a group of young scholars who had become known as the "Concern" group. John H. Yoder edited the series.) I remember at another time being kindly reprimanded by Dean Harold Bender for preaching that the Holy Spirit, who inspired Scripture, is the final authority, not the inerrant words of Scripture! However, the 1963 *Mennonite Confession of Faith* dropped the word inerrancy.

All this undercut the rational certainty of Christian evidences, which had made faith so comfortable and comforting. Apologetics, i.e., the rational defense of the Christian faith, and Christian Evidences, which built the rational foundation for Christian belief, had been standard core courses in my seminary years both at Eastern Mennonite School and Goshen Biblical Seminary. Now it seemed that all one could do was to recognize the "paradoxical" character of reality, and affirm with Kierkegaard and Pascal the truth of the seeming contradiction. That was the way suggested by the existentialists. This solution, however, became less and less appealing. After all, paradox is part of the complexity for which we are seeking an ontological solution. It is itself hardly the solution.

Doubting Biblical Literalism

At another level, questions about the nature of the Bible's truth claims also raised the question of the nature of language and of the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Is there a uniquely religious use of language to talk about subjective spiritual experience? Does language relate to both empirical (sensory) data and non-empirical (transcendent, spiritual) data in the same way? How do our words relate to the "objects" which they claim to describe? And when the grammatical object is not an empirical object, i.e., one that can be observed by the senses, what can be the relation? After all, God is not an object!

One simple example may help clarify the problem. While the grammar is the same in the sentences "My mother loves me" and "God loves me," they do not have the same meaning. Parents are *objects* in our experience whose *observable* actions indicate to us their feelings. God is not an object; neither are actions attributed to God empirically verifiable. Indeed, a parent's love serves as the metaphor for God's love. Or, again, the two theological statements "Jesus is a man" and "Jesus is God" do not have the same historical value. Grammatically they function the same way, but do they have the same semantic function, i.e., do they indicate the same kind of historical reality? How are words and meaning related? What does it mean to say, "God told me so," or "Daddy told me so?" In light of this problem Paul Tillich suggested that the word "God" really functions as a "symbol of God," i.e., the Ontological

Mystery, and biblical scholars spoke of the mythical symbolism of the biblical stories.

This language issue may seem very theoretical and abstract to anyone who simply assumes, like Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, that a word means "just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." But, believe me, these differences have profound implications. To remove "God" to the realm of metaphor and symbol is to question God's "existence" in my everyday experience. Not necessarily God the Transcendent Mystery, but God who exists for me in the reality of my everyday life. Authors of the period referred to this phenomenon as "the silence of God," or "the absence of God."

If I may digress, I sometimes wonder whether our more recent emphasis on worship is not a tacit recognition of this "absence" and an attempt to reestablish a short-circuited connection. In charismatic services the worshippers attempt to establish the connection through a free emotional expression. God's presence is experienced in spirited, uninhibited singing and prayers. Emphasis is not on the simple *believing* of a biblical truth, but on *claiming* that word in an ecstatic experience. In such an experience God is perceived as speaking in the present. The spiritual connection is established! While many of our Mennonite congregations do not follow a purely charismatic pattern, the movement has had a profound impact on the way they think about the dynamics and goal of worship.

My own conclusion was that the language of Scripture is a language describing human reality in its depth dimensions, i.e., in its relationship to God, the ultimate Personal Mystery, the creative source of its very being. The primary reference of theological language is to our personal-social, historical experience with its openness to transcendent dimensions. It describes human reality as "in the image of God." Thus human reality becomes the medium through which we understand the transcendent reality we name God. Or in other words, it becomes the metaphor for God-in-relation to us. The error of the Positivists and Logical Empiricists was not their understanding of the language mechanism, but their denial of the reality of the depth dimensions of our historical existence to which our language points.

It seemed to me that traditional orthodoxy was in great danger of simply reifying the God-language, i.e., simply converting abstract symbols into concrete

objects as though verbal statements (dogmas) themselves are the reality. This in effect made our definitions of god "God," rather than "symbols of God." We seemed to forget that words like "Trinity" really say nothing about God's essential being. They only attempt to describe, in the words of John Calvin, how we have experienced God; and we use them, as Augustine said, only in order not to be speechless. Thus, it seemed to me, we turned God, the Transcendent Mystery, into an idol, "*our* god." And it did not help when we fervently glorified this god's transcendence through "worship," or elevated personal, mystical experience, whether individual or corporate, as the way to know God.

Religious symbols are given concrete reality only through personal interaction and relationship, and apart from this concrete social-personal reality religious language has little objective meaning. Thus the crucial question was one of *authenticity* rather than orthodox language. The "concrete" meaning of God can be realized only in a social context of relationship. People "see" God reflected in the life of individuals-in-relationship in the obedient community. This is the profound significance of the church as the salt and light of the world (Matt. 5:13-14), and the anticipatory sign of the kingdom of God.

Doubting the Compromise of the Church

My concept of the church as the community of disciples empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit of Christ was first formed under the tutelage of Dean Harold Bender and Guy F. Hershberger. In the 1950s Bender's idealistic interpretation of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement was normative for us. The Schleitheim Confession, with its clearly enunciated two-kingdom theory and its sharp demands for separation from the world, was embraced as the model for the modern Anabaptist-Mennonite church. But increasingly, as I pondered and tried to explain this radical cultural-political separation of "church" and "world," I began to question the adequacy of its theological rationale as well as its pragmatic feasibility.

A number of movements within the church were critiquing the two-kingdom theory and exploring its meaning for the Mennonite churches of the twentieth century. The Mennonite Community Association explored the practical possibility of establishing a "para-church" Mennonite-Christian socio-economic community to maintain the ethical separation. Mennonite Mutual Aid was

begun to extend and professionalize local property aid plans. The post-war mandate of Mennonite Central Committee was expanded, and some individuals became active in the civil rights movement especially as it was led by Martin Luther King. All of the emerging models modified the traditional Mennonite two-kingdom concept with its strict cultural and political separation from the dominant English culture. John C. Wenger tacitly approved this extended version when he interpreted "nonconformity" as "separation *unto* God," rather than *from* the world, in his book of that title, and Guy F. Hershberger added his sanction with the publication in 1958 of *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations.*

I myself was introduced to the tension through my participation in the nonviolent Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and the '60s. I became caught up in the hopeful excitement of the Black church as we stood in a circle praying and singing freedom songs full of faith that God would work a modern exodus. Through the late '60s and '70s I was increasingly dissatisfied with, and disappointed in, the church's response to the social and ethical issues that confronted us. It seemed to me that although we had argued with Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics of compromise, we were in fact compromising on a regular basis. I found myself increasingly disillusioned with a church that claimed to take the biblical message literally but refused or was unable to take a radical gospel stance on issues like human rights.

This intransigence of the church was, and continues to be, my greatest disappointment and temptation to abandon the institutional church. My acquaintance with Clarence Jordan, who was at the time translating the *Cotton Patch Version* of the New Testament, and my visits to Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia firmly cemented the concept of the church as a socio-spiritual movement into my thought patterns. Frustrated with the inertia and rationalization of the institutional church, I remember asking Clarence, the founder of Koinonia Farm, after he had been excommunicated from a local Baptist congregation for bringing a dark-skinned man into the service, how long one should stay in such a compromised church. His answer was "As long as they will let you!" which, of course, put the burden back upon me where it belonged.

Of one thing I was certain, the language of *metanoia*, personal and social repentance and transformation, was at the heart of the gospel, and this

language was not merely symbolic or metaphorical. Reinhold Niebuhr had said that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount should be taken "seriously but not literally." But it seemed to me that the language of *metanoia* demanded a literal conversion, not just individual but social as well, from violence and injustice to the *shalom* of God's rule. If the church were to be taken seriously, it would need to demonstrate and call for fundamental changes in the social order of which it was a part.

My study of the New Testament and Anabaptism convinced me that Jesus had intended to begin a movement for spiritual and social change, not another religious institution to foster worshipful religious experience. Movements are defined by their actions. Had Jesus himself not chided his disciples, "Why do you call me 'Lord' and do not do what I say?" He said that he had come to cast fire on the earth, and it seemed to me that the best the church could do was keep a sputtering candle from going out! As Ralph Abernathy put it when I was interviewing him in the midst of the Black movement for civil rights (summer 1964), the church that was supposed to be a headlight had turned out to be a taillight. It was not leading, but following.

Doubting the Universality of Orthodox Formulas

After many years of teaching at Goshen College, my experience teaching theology in a variety of Asian and African cultures persuaded me of the significance of "contextualization" at a time when it was still highly suspect in evangelical circles. A missionary message that created duplicate churches and parroted western theology impressed me as an inauthentic witness to the gospel of freedom in Christ. As the apostle Paul already argues in his letter to the Galatians, the message and application of the gospel must be freed from cultural literalism, either theological or ethical. I remember standing on a Sappora train platform one night with a Japanese colleague soon after I arrived in Hokkaido. He asked me what I had come to teach the churches, and I returned the question by asking him what he thought was needed. After a moment's reflection, he said, "I think it would be very helpful if you could help us understand why Jesus had to die." I was surprised, but he continued, "We know what the missionaries have taught us, but to be truthful, it does not make very good sense to us." His candid, trusting admission became the guiding challenge for my ministry in Japan.

Every cultural perspective has its own assumptions and values, and raises its own questions. For example, to call Jesus "God" and to speak of the Trinity in pantheistic, polytheistic, or naturalistic settings does not have the same meaning as in our western theistic tradition. To speak of Jesus' death as "satisfying God's justice" makes little or no sense in cultures where shame, not guilt, is the social sanction. Words have meaning within a cultural context. Therefore, we need as much as possible to use indigenous languages, thought forms, and social patterns when making cross-cultural theological translations. For me, this was the genius of the incarnation, which set the precedent for spreading the gospel.

With these considerations in mind, after many years of teaching in the western culture, I sought out an Asian culture within which to write a christological statement – in this case, Japan. How would one explain the mystery of God in Christ in a Shinto culture, which had been overlaid with Buddhism? Sociologist Robert Bellah had discovered the fruitful concept of "civil religion," which he used to critique American Christianity through his studies of Japanese culture. What might I find that would help us transcend the traditional theistic limits of western theological categories? And how might I be helpful in the cross-cultural missionary task of giving witness to the gospel?

I intentionally attempted to go beyond the traditional statements of western orthodoxy with which I had become dissatisfied. I was trying to picture Christ as "the human face of God," as John Robinson had put it, not in the abstract terms of Greek metaphysics. Orthodoxy in the second and early third century first sought to understand and describe Jesus according to the rational categories of Greek metaphysics; then in the fourth and fifth centuries it reified these categories and used them as prescriptive dogma. Thus, increasingly, the theological question was how Jesus of Nazareth fits the orthodox explanation of incarnation, not how can we most adequately picture "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

The essential question, it seemed to me, was not how Jesus could be both God and human at the same time. That is a metaphysical problem that arises in part because of the inadequacy of the Greek philosophical categories used. In Japan, where I was teaching as I wrote *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, these Greek categories were not definitive. In that cultural context one was free, indeed, encouraged, to reframe the question and find more adequate ways to

present Jesus to the Asian mind. Given this new context, the more crucial question was how Jesus in his humanity became, and becomes for us, the very "image of the invisible God," as Paul puts it. Thus the language of paradox to accommodate inherited metaphysical categories did not seem adequate. In fact, it was precisely in his humanity that Jesus became the new name of God for us ("the name above every name") taking the place of the name Yahweh. His life, death and resurrection became the basis for a new covenant "in my [Jesus'] blood" (Luke 22:20).

Perhaps I was naïve, but I was unprepared for the repercussion of my work in the American Mennonite church. I assumed that my new insights gleaned as a missionary from an Asian setting, which was in some respects nearer the biblical culture than our modern western patterns, would be welcomed. Instead, it was read as an extension of modern western liberalism. Former college and seminary colleagues gave my book a fair hearing, but representatives of the more right-wing Mennonite groups like Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites reacted vigorously with cries of heresy and calls for discipline.

More unsettling than these outcries was the way in which the leadership of the church, in the name of keeping the peace, attempted to quiet the disturbance without facing the issue of contextualization. While some leaders quietly assured me that they personally agreed with me, they carefully avoided taking a public stand. The institutional church dealt with the issue as a pragmatic political matter. The publication board was mildly criticized by implication for not consulting broadly enough "before publishing materials for distribution." And the General Board expressed its concern "that the [Kraus book's] level of readability has made discussion in the church difficult." (*Gospel Herald*, January 10, 1989, page 25) Gradually the hubbub died down and the Mennonite Publishing House published my second volume, *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode*, and a revised edition of *Jesus Christ Our Lord*.

Holding on to Faith

Very early in my career when teaching a course called *Life of Christ*, I came across words of Jesus that became a motto for me. Translated they read, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22). The setting for this admonition was the withering of the fig tree under the curse of Jesus. The disciples were not only

astonished at the miracle but also baffled that the tree, which symbolized God's people Israel, should be destroyed by one whom they believed to be the messiah. Their consternation was a temptation to doubt the authenticity of Jesus, and in that situation Jesus quietly admonished them, "*Hold on to* (a strong present imperative) *your faith in God*."

What I have discovered is that the faith to which we hold is not of our own making but is truly God's gift to begin with. Faith, again, in the words of Paul Tillich, is not our grasping for God but *our being grasped by God*. Or, to put it in the words of a Zen master, enlightenment is simply the realization that all the while we are searching for God, we are actually being held in the palm of God's hand! We must learn to distinguish between the skeptical doubt which is "unbelief," or rejection of God's gift, and what has more recently been called the "hermeneutic of suspicion," which can clarify and deepen our understanding. The former is a kind of blindness, but the latter is, in Anselm's oft-quoted words, "Faith seeking understanding."