

The Crisis of Faith

By Rudolf Bultmann

When we speak of a “crisis of faith,” we mean something different from the crisis in morals, for example in reliability and loyalty, or in political ideology and respect for the laws; indeed we mean something other than a crisis in religion. For in all these instances the crisis is one of human attitude and human character, and is concerned with the problem of a particular age or generation – that is, with a sociological phenomenon. Although faith is connected with morality and religion, and is always at the same time a human attitude, it is nevertheless differentiated from them by its being a particular faith, faith in an up-againstness, in something beyond humankind. Faith is not religiosity, not a disposition of the soul to devotion, gratitude, reverence, and awe of the world and of life as a whole. On the contrary, it understands the world and life in the light of a reality lying beyond them, of a power lying beyond them, which is their origin and their Creator – that is, God. A crisis of faith therefore arises when their supramundane reality has been called into question.

The situation is exactly the same as in the relation of one person to another, to which also we apply the term “faith” – for the friend or the lover has faith in the other person. Faith here does not mean an attitude of love – for that can persist even when faith wavers or collapses. Nor does it mean an attribute of character, for that can also exist before and after love. But it is faith in the particular of the other person, who is recognized as such in just this faith – giving love. Such faith undergoes a crisis when it is established that the other person is not what faith in them made them appear to be.

To speak, therefore, of a crisis of faith in the sphere of religion does not mean that we are referring at all to a crisis in religion or religiosity, as, for example, in regard to their being shaken by events in the history of the world or of the mind – or to their awakening under the influence of these factors. Nor does it mean that we are referring to indifference in regard to religion, but rather to the crisis of a particular faith. For us there is point only in speaking about the crisis of our own Christian faith.

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- 1 What then is this Christian faith, the crisis of which is our concern? What is that supramundane reality which is the object of Christian faith? **What is God in the Christian sense?**
- 2 God in the Christian sense **is nothing other than what God is to every faith** in which the idea of God is treated at all seriously. What, then, is conveyed by the idea of God?

- 3 Every human being knows or can know about its finiteness, for, consciously or unconsciously it is driven this way and that by this finiteness, as long as it exists. It is no more its own master than it is its own creator. It is never perfect, but is driven this way and that by **care**, which reminds it of its finitude and of its imperfection:

If no ear would hearken to me,
In the heart 'twould echo surely;
Changed in form before your eyes,
Gruesome power I exercise.
Vexing ever as you follow
On the pathway, on the billow;
Ever found and never sought,
Cursed when not with flattery bought...
He whom once I make my own
Might as well the world disown...
Fortune, failure stands revealed
As whims – he famishes though filled,
Joy or torment equally
Postponing to another day
And as everything he leaves
For the future – nought achieves.

- 4 In the first place, it is **everyday care for the morrow**. Human beings are taken up with the provision, procuring and preparation of the means of living. Yet fundamentally they know that they cannot make life sure with the means of living. Everyone understands the story of the rich husbandman who thought to fill his barns with the rich harvest and then to say to his soul, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” But God said to him, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” Everyone see that the husbandman was a fool.
- 5 This mysterious power – the power which limits human beings and is master of them even when they think they are their own master – is God, the controller of humanity’s future.
- 6 Or again, no matter how little life can free itself from this care for the things of every day or for the morrow, it refuses to see in this care what gives life its significance, but goes beyond it. Life is driven this way and that by the **longing for the true and the beautiful**, or even just by that **indefinite longing** which awakes in the “deep of night” and in which it becomes clear that:

Every pleasure seeks to be
Embedded in eternity.

7 And yet even in all of its lofty moments human life is not granted this eternity of pleasure or this pleasure of eternity. Does it indeed know any hours in which it could say to the moment – “But tarry, for thou art so fair?” And even if it does – then the moment just does not tarry! Humanity has no power over the temporal and the eternal. The power which controls them is God.

8 Or again, life is driven this way and that by the **desire for love**, and by the feeling that there is truth in what in Karl Spitteler’s “Olympian Springtime” Apollo says to Hera, who is haunted by the fear of death and would like to escape from death:

In Ananke’s cruel domain
In vale or mountain flourishes no solace to remain,
Save the solace of the eyes – twin stars in friendship blest,
And the syllables of love, by grateful lips expressed.

9 Some lives are poor in friendship and in love, and some rich, but even the rich life is aware of a final solitude into which it is forced:

Can e’er man as he’d wish belong
On earth, to his fellow?
In the long night I thought of it and could but answer
No!

The power which drives humanity into this final solitude is God.

10 Or again, life is motivated by the **thirst for knowledge** and one is led to admit, “I see that we can nothing know.” Or perhaps it is the **impulse to action and work**. That in fact is the way in which Faust finally sought to reach that moment to which he could say, “But tarry, for thou art so fair!” Yet behind Want and Guilt and Care, for whom access to him or mastery over him is forbidden, comes ‘our brother, Death’. And when the blind Faust takes delight in the clanking of spades they are not the spades which are getting busy on his work and bringing it to completion, but those which are digging his grave; and it is the foretaste of sublime happiness which is the highest and final moment. The power which sets a terminus to knowing and doing is God.

11 Or, finally, human existence is dominated by **the idea of duty**, by knowledge of the principle that “You can, for you ought.” But it is well aware that life in accordance with the “You ought” is a struggle, in which it is a question of mastering oneself. It knows the **voice of conscience** which summons to duty and recalls from thoughtlessness and aberration to everyday things, and pronounces the verdict “Guilty” on wasted time and lost opportunity, impure thoughts and mean actions. The summons of the “you ought” divesting humanity of its self-determination, and the dictates of conscience showing human beings how small, incomplete, and wretched they are – these are God.

- 12 It is God who makes humanity finite, and who makes a comedy of one's care, who allows one's longing to miscarry, who casts one into solitude, who sets a terminus to one's knowing and doing, who calls one to duty, and who gives the guilty over to torment. And yet at the same time it is God who forces humanity into life and drives one into care; who puts longing and the desire to love in one's heart; who gives one thoughts and strength for one's work, and who places one in the eternal struggle between self-assertion and duty. God is the enigmatic power beyond time, yet master of the temporal, beyond being, yet working in it.

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