The Vision of God
The Christian Doctrine of the SUMMUM BONUM

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greatest theologians have seen to rival it in worth, whilst all have admitted its adequacy and value. Renunciation, detachment, self denial must have their permanent place in every Christian life, however much at the same time we set ourselves to live in the joyous fellowship of human society, and as the beneficiaries of God in things both great and small. Other worldliness is no...last desperate expedient to subdue rebellious passions; still less is it a temporary course of self-training for greater efficiency in humanitarian service. Only at our peril could we confuse it with self-discipline. It must stand, alongside humanism, as a permanent witness to an aspect of the doctrine of God which separates Christianity for all time from naturalism and pantheism.

But if any person presses the question, *What should I renounce? or, How am I to deny myself?* he must expect no other reply than to be directed to that life of prayer which consists in seeing God—in meditating upon the person of Jesus. Sympathetic understanding—always partial, but always progressive—of Christ's renunciations and self-denials will help the Christian to know what he too must renounce, and wherein he too must exercise self-denial. The exigencies of life—ill-health, misfortune, claims beyond the ordinary upon his time, patience, initiative or endurance,—will appear to him no longer as burdens to be borne with resignation, but as providential calls for the heroic renunciation of joys and liberties which would otherwise be legitimate enough. He will not often have to look further afield. The light of divine knowledge vouchsafed to him in the life of meditation will throw into high relief these opportunities for other-worldliness which God sets in his daily path. The excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord will be for him a gaining Christ, a seeing God; and thereby he will attain a righteousness not of his own, not of an arbitrary law, but of God through faith. Through the power of the Risen Christ he will come to that fellowship in His sufferings and conformity to His death, in which the highest Christian self-renunciation must always consist. The spirit of worship will carry him forward along the *via crucis* so revealed to him, until through a spiritual death gladly accepted he attains, with the saints of God, to the resurrection from the dead.

[and, we might add, to the Vision of God.]
Rigorism (Kirk elsewhere says of rigorism, “If life is to be disciplined at all, of what fashion shall the discipline be?”)

So we come to the other and more difficult question. Are rigorism, self-abnegation and world-flight no more than obsolete ideals of other days, or have they too an underlying principle of which the Church and the Christian are still in need? Is the vast and complex history of the monastic movement no more than a matter of purely antiquarian interest, or has it a message for the present time? And if it has, how shall the Christian embody that message in his life from day to day? It has proved impossible [in the rest of Dr. Kirk’s lectures], to attribute the other-worldly element in the gospel and the asceticism of the apostolic Church to any other source than the personal intuition of Jesus and the influence which He had upon his followers. The emergence of monasticism in the fourth century as a feature in world history finds no explanation except in the genius of Christianity itself; even Protestantism—despite its revolt from all that savoured of ‘monkery’—retained, at least in its earlier days, the rigorist element in ethics.

Throughout Christian history, again, this rigorism in ethics has been bound up with a theological formula which—though far from the whole of the Christian doctrine of God—is an integral part thereof; the formula, not of the unnatural, but of the supernatural, God…The thought of a transcendence of God over His creation so infinite that in comparison all creation is as nothing represents one factor in the Christian revelation as to which there can be no question. It is to this factor that asceticism or world-flight, in all its varied forms, has borne consistent witness.

No true scheme of Christian ethics, therefore, can be without its permanent element of rigorism. How to incorporate that element in an individual life is another and more difficult question. Monasticism, clearly, is by no means the only possible way; though it may claim, at its best, to have presented the ideal in a simpler and more cogent manifestation than has been realized anywhere else. But alongside monasticism there has always run some form of lay asceticism, which the

If it be necessary that the gospel should embody some such promise of an infinitely desirable consummation, it seems true to say that no metaphor employed for the purpose in the New Testament expresses the thought more worthily than [the vision of God]. It was a sound instinct which led Christian theology to select the blessing promised to the pure in heart as the highest blessing offered by God to man [Matt 5:8]. There are many other phrases in which the consummation can be expressed—salvation, membership of the kingdom, eternal life; and each of them is capable of animating devotion and inflaming zeal. But all that is of value in them, and something more besides, is expressed by the thought of the vision of God. The transition from darkness to light, from the incomplete to the complete, from the illusory to the true, envisaged by the word 'salvation'; the thought of fullness of personal activity conveyed by the phrase 'eternal life'; the joy, companionship, orderliness and conformity to the divine will implied by membership of 'the kingdom'—not one of these is lacking when we speak of 'seeing God.'

But something more is present. In this chance phrase of Christian spirituality there is expressed, first of all the sense that personal contact or intercourse with God is of the essence of that towards which the good life is directed. Next, we find expressed there, more fully than in the other phrases, the sense of the Christian's dependence upon God—the conviction that all attainment is of God's merciful giving. We can speak, as S. Paul does, of working out our own salvation—but the words, out of their context have a dangerously egotistic ring. We can speak of bringing in the kingdom or building the new Jerusalem—though the New Testament certainly does not sanction either of these modes of speech, and they come near to suggesting that it is man who disposes where God can only propose. Eternal life—the enjoyment of timeless values—can be spoken of as though it could be acquired by the simple reorganization of our temporal life and modes of living. None of these inferences would be authenticated by Christian thought at its best; the unanimous testimony of the saints is that perfection comes not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God Who showeth mercy. But this cardinal Christian truth is nowhere more clearly implied than in the
doctrine of the vision of God. We may cast out the beam from the eye of the soul; we may (in Augustine's phrase) 'cleans[e] it by all the actions of a virtuous life; we may direct it towards God by the process of prayer and meditation; but all that is as nothing, unless God of His own free beneficence presents Himself to the clarified vision and supplies the light wherewith He may be seen.

One further point may be noticed. 'Salvation,' 'the kingdom,' 'eternal life'—these phrases cannot be rightly understood apart from the fact of Christ. But they do not carry the mind inevitably back to Him. With the vision of God it is otherwise. No Christian can reflect upon it for a moment without remembering that the Church has already seen God in the face of Jesus Christ. At once the whole scheme of the Christian life springs into view. Like can only be seen by like—it is therefore only as worship creates in him likeness to the character of Jesus that the Christian can achieve his goal. Whatever schematization of virtues or duties may be forced upon us, in the course of our life of worship, as our standard of self-examination or of effort, its content must be filled out and enriched by constant reference to the person of Jesus; otherwise the scheme may produce nothing but the perversions of formalism. Again, true vision—comprehending, apprehending, understanding vision—demands intelligence as well as will. It is therefore only by studying the nature of God as revealed in Jesus,—by plunging into the depths of that nature till our alien souls find themselves at home there in the end, and thought moves naturally upon lines akin to those discernible in the thought and speech of Jesus,—that we can effectively prepare ourselves for the glory that is to be.

Hence comes the importance of 'meditation' in the Christian scheme of prayer. 'Meditation' is not the same as contemplative worship; but it is a stage on the path. There is nothing monastic, pietistic or abnormal about it; nothing from which one should shrink as though from an effeminate habit or narcotic day-dream. It is essentially virile and stimulating. It has no formal rules; it is simplicity itself. It means no more and no less than to go back to the gospels, and daily with them in hand to spend some moments of retirement in reverent but definite thought about the person, character and actions of the Lord as there revealed. If the history of Christian thought on ethics has any meaning at all, this must be the first, and indeed the greatest practical lesson to be drawn from it; a lesson which comes with the glowing commendation of the Christian saints..., and on the invitation of Him who said 'Learn of Me.'

With such a background to his life, the Christian may feel not altogether at a loss in face of the questions...of formalism and rigorism.

**Formalism** (Kirk elsewhere describes formalism as “the tendency of moralists of all ages to express their demands by means of codes of duties, or lists of virtues and excellences; and to require the Christian to conform to these standards by the exercise of deliberate self-discipline”)

The Church's aim is to help people to see God, and God has already been seen on earth in the face of Jesus Christ. On that truth, as has just been said, depends the whole scheme of Christian ethics; we must answer our questions in the light of what the Church knows of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. As far as the problem of formalism is concerned (becoming like the scribes and Pharisees following the letter and not the spirit of a rule of life), S. Benedict and S. Thomas stand out as guides to a solution. Their principles dictate the conclusion that a reasoned orderliness, rather than an arbitrary and rigid rule, will be the Christian's best safeguard against the cyclones of temptation, the gusts of passion which beset the soul. He must indeed have rules of life. But he does not go out into the void to seek them, they are forced upon him by the exigencies of his worship. From the first moment that his thoughts are turned to God, a spontaneous orderliness begins to grapple with the chaos of his passions; and as the demand for orderliness presses outward into consciousness, it brings with it precepts for the mind to grasp and the will to put into effect. Thus law helps forward worship, and worship law; but worship is both the beginning and the end. The promulgation, the revision, the purification of principles of conduct—these can have no sure foundation except in a soul whose primary interest is to keep its eyes directed towards God.

The progress of worship, therefore, evolves along with itself the rules of a Christian life. They are rules such as those on which Jesus lived His earthly life; their value will be attested by increased purity of heart, renewed fervour for God's purposes, and more open love for men. Many of the rules we accept unthinkingly, to set before ourselves or commend to others, ring false when this test is applied to them. Yet there are few who, in a very short space of sober and honest reflection animated by the spirit of worship, could not set out for themselves other rules which they do not observe, which could scarcely fail to win approval if judged by this test. Communion with God will reveal what rules we need, and