

FROM DIVINITY TO INFINITY

Thomas Sheehan
Department of Religious Studies
Stanford University

At the turn of the millenium we ask what Jesus might mean in the future that opens before us. By "Jesus" I mean his message: the "reign of God" that this itinerant prophet-sage preached in his parables and aphorisms, enacted in his wonders and signs, and celebrated in his manner of life.

Some, of course, would go further and claim that Jesus was the very content of what he preached, the ontological embodiment of his message, or as Origin put it centuries ago, the kingdom-of-God-in-person, *ho autobasileia*.¹ This affirmation in fact lies at the heart of the Christian tradition, and if the guardians of that orthodoxy were to answer the question we are posing today, they would say: What the Christ of faith *will* be is the same as what the Jesus of history *was*: the incarnate presence of the self-communicating God.

But this is the Jesus Seminar. Over the years the members of the Seminar have bracketed, methodologically, the legitimate claims of the Christian faith that many of its members hold, in order to establish *first* the most accurate historical information possible about Jesus' words and deeds, and *second* (though more recently) to investigate the possibilities of a religious (or for that matter non-religious) appropriation of those historical words and deeds in our own days. Using Heidegger's terms we might describe the second task as a "retrieval" of the still living possibilities latent in the prophet's message of the kingdom of God.

This hermeneutical task with focus on both past history and present meaning parallels the program that David Friedrich Strauss, that pioneering giant in Jesus-research, laid out in his classic work, *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-36).² Strauss was quite young -- barely twenty-seven years old, having just begun lecturing at Tübingen University -- when this ground-breaking work vaulted him overnight into fame and no doubt into more notoriety than he wanted (he was fired forthwith from his university position and never allowed to teach again). Strauss' book was an attempt to confront the dramatic crisis that Jesus-research was going through in the early nineteenth century, and it would be helpful to review his program to see if it sheds light on the even deeper crisis that we are living through at the beginning of the twenty-first century: the pathos of a world of religious certitude that is fast slipping away and being replaced by a world that knows no such certitude at all.

Strauss laid out a twofold program that is still viable today, but if we follow it as radically as I argue we should, much of what Christianity is about will be lost. Today we are in a worse case than Strauss was in 1835. He kept assuring his readers that they need not fear his critique of the New Testament, that they would get their Christianity back unharmed at the other end.

The author realizes that the inner core of Christian faith is completely independent of his critical investigations. Christ's supernatural birth, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths no matter how much their reality as historical facts may be called into doubt.... A treatise at the end of the book will show that the dogmatic

significance of the life of Jesus remains intact.³

Today, however, we can make no such promises. If we perform the radical surgery that is required, not only will certain traditional formulations of faith fall by the wayside but also much of the presumed content of Christianity, and rightly so. Our only consolation is that, if we do not intervene radically and soon, the patient will die. The question right from the beginning, therefore, is how seriously, thoroughly, and decisively one wants to act. Strauss hardly went far enough. He claimed that the problem with traditional Christology lay in insisting the Incarnation pertained to one person only, Jesus of Nazareth. The thesis of the present essay is that Christianity's original sin is to think it is about God.

I

DAVID STRAUSS: A PROTRETIC

Strauss' program unfolds in two steps, the critique of *history* followed by the critique of *dogma*. Why the two? Strauss saw himself not just as a critical historian but above all as a theologian who reflects on the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith insofar as these two issues can be distinguished in the Gospels. The subject matter of his critique was never the Gospels merely as texts presenting the (true or false) history of Jesus of Nazareth but always as texts embodying early Christian faith-affirmations, from "Jesus is Lord and Christ" in the Synoptics to "Jesus is God incarnate" in the Gospel of John. That latter and normatively orthodox sentence is made up of the subject, "the historical Jesus," and the predicate, "God incarnate." Strauss, as a theologian, had to make sense of both the subject *and* the predicate, which means that he had to train his critical guns on both elements of that affirmation.

In analyzing the subject of the sentence (a task that takes up most of his book) Strauss asks whether the New Testament stories about Jesus' supernatural deeds are historical or not. Here he attempts to separate out the bed-rock historical events of the life of Jesus from subsequent mythical and legendary faith-extrapolations -- the same task that the Jesus Seminar has long and famously carried out.

However, Strauss argues that doing only this much is not enough. Despite the *historical* critique of the Gospels, the myths live on as received *dogma* and find a refuge in the souls of believers as objects of faith. That is why Strauss feels compelled to take the next step and focus his criticism no longer on the allegedly historical data of the Gospels but now on the presumed *supernatural meaning* of the data. In the concluding fifty-eight pages of the book ("Concluding Treatise: The Dogmatic Meaning of the Life of Jesus"⁴) Strauss no longer asks whether the Gospel stories accurately record miraculous supernatural happenings (he has already argued that they do not). He asks instead what meaning those stories -- radically reinterpreted, of course -- might still hold for Christians in his own day. Hence, from the "critique of history" to the "critique of dogma."

Strauss' critique of dogma does not intend to destroy the content of faith but to question its unquestionedness and retrieve from it the latent truth it harbors. Such a critique, he says, appears to -- and in fact *is* -- negative, but not because it seeks to annihilate Christianity. The negativity is that of a Hegelian dialectic. Precisely in order to retrieve the still viable truth of Christian faith, Strauss must attack its "immediacy" of Christian faith, by which he means holding to beliefs intuitively and naively, without questioning, unfolding, and thus adequately comprehending them; in a word, without "mediating" belief through understanding.

Against the immediacy of dogma, as against any immediacy, criticism has to arise in the form of negativity and the struggle for mediation. Now the critique is longer that of history, as heretofore, but of dogma; and only when faith passes through both critiques has it been

truly mediated, i.e., has it become knowledge.⁵

To carry out merely the critique of history, Strauss says, is to fail to achieve the complete understanding required of a responsible Christian. It is not just that the critique of history leaves us with the subject of the sentence bereft of a usable predicate -- the Jesus of history without contemporary relevance -- but that without the critique of dogma we might end up presuming a set of predicates about the meaning of Jesus, based on unclarified philosophical and theological presuppositions. For an intellectually responsible theologian -- one who emphasizes the *logos* in theo-logy, the *understanding* of faith -- the critique of the Jesus of history inevitably entails the critique of the Christ of faith. The critique of faith is not an optional add-on but, in Strauss' words, "the ultimate object" of the critique of history.⁶

What is it that brings people like David Strauss, and us, to the point where we cannot avoid re-interpreting the contemporary relevance of the Jesus of history? What generates the perceived need for a radical hermeneutics that almost inevitably rattles the cage of traditional orthodoxy? Strauss offers a phenomenological description of how one might come to that point.⁷

The need for radical hermeneutics, he says, arises from an acute sense of crisis, a feeling not just of one's *distance* from the ancient texts but, more importantly, of the *discrepancy* between the spirit and culture of the New Testament and that of one's own world and culture. At first one notices the distance and discrepancy only in incidental matters: we do not understand a certain biblical expression or a specific cultural practice mentioned in the New Testament. In this way we tend to overlook just how radical the crisis is, and we continue to muddle through.

But eventually, he says, we see clearly that the discrepancy pertains to the essential content of the New Testament and that its fundamental ideas are felt to be radically incommensurate with today. The immediate intervention of God in history and human affairs comes to seem improbable, perhaps even repellent. We end up denying that divine events could have happened the way the New Testament alleges and affirming that whatever *did* happen could not have been divine. In short, we reject the historical validity of the Bible and explain away what Strauss calls "the absolute content" of faith that is presented in these texts.

One response would be to blissfully deny the crisis, whether out of ignorance or bad faith, and "close our eyes," as Strauss says, "to one's own awareness of the discrepancy" between the world of the New Testament and our world today.⁸ Such denial remains the default position in many of the Christian churches, certainly in a good deal of preaching and catechesis but even in some high-level scholarship that occasionally seems to encourage a schizoid embrace of cognitive dissonance in order to save the phenomena. One is reminded of what one prominent exegete has written about the possible discrepancy between the findings of history and the affirmations of Christian faith:

[T]he Catholic approach has one advantage -- the clear distinction between what is known through historical research and reason and what is affirmed in faith. The historical Jesus belongs solely to the former realm. Moreover, for a Catholic, what is affirmed in faith does not rest on the Bible alone; church tradition, official teaching and theological development all play a part. Consequently, my faith in Christ does not rise or fall on my fragmentary hypothetical reconstruction of Jesus through historical research.⁹

Such convenient distinctions between subject and predicate may well lend believers temporary shelter in the hurricane now ripping through Christianity, but one wonders how much longer this lean-to can last. Strauss' option was quite different -- not to seek refuge in the accumulation of Christian tradition, ecclesiastical pronouncements, and theological speculations, but simply to face

into the storm -- "to unequivocally acknowledge and openly avow that the issues narrated in [the New Testament] have to be viewed in an entirely different light from that in which their authors regarded them." He calls for a radical salvage effort by way of a new hermeneutic that will hold to the essential while surrendering the non-essential.¹⁰

From the beginning, the Jesus Seminar has self-consciously taken its stand, as did Strauss in his times, at the center of the hermeneutical storm that defines contemporary culture, historical science, and thus Jesus-research. However, until recently and for good reasons, the Seminar has focussed almost exclusively on the critique of history rather than engaging the critique of dogma. But even apart from that, there are two important differences between Strauss' program and that of the Jesus Seminar.

First, Strauss was entirely forthcoming about his *religious* position -- something that is much more difficult for the Seminar, since its many members hold such diverse beliefs in this regard. Second and more important, Strauss was completely candid about the *philosophical* presuppositions undergirding his critique of dogma. This was particularly true with regard to his "speculative Christology," which argued that the incarnation of God was not a one-time, one-person event but took place from all eternity and within the entire human species. Strauss' philosophical presuppositions were, of course, Hegelian and no doubt are uncongenial to most researchers today. But it would be erroneous to think that the members of the Jesus Seminar operate without *any* philosophical presuppositions guiding both their historical work and, to the degree they chose to follow Strauss's twofold program, their critique of dogma as well.

II

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: A SERMON

In the service of the critique of dogma that makes up the second step of Strauss' program, I wish to sketch out some of the presuppositions that guide my own position on this matter. This will be only a sketch and no more: I will not lay out the arguments supporting those views (any more than Strauss did for his presuppositions in *Das Leben Jesu*). Rather, I would simply like to *enact* them in the form of a popular sermon (the way Strauss enacted his in the conclusion to his treatise), that is, put them to work while discussing what the future of Jesus' message might be. This sermon, unlike others that one might hear, is meant less to convince anyone -- it is only one possible reading of the the message of Jesus -- than to raise questions about how presuppositions work and what they can do.

In the sermons that follows I shall stay within what some theologians call the "anthropocentric paradigm," which follows out the dynamism of human spirit towards the possibility of its ultimate fulfillment. The first principle of such an approach is that, in second-order reflections on the possible relation of God to human beings (and a sermon is such a reflection), we must begin with ourselves, not with God -- because there is no other place for us *to* begin. By the nature of the case, God is not an on-hand, readily available entity; if we believe in God and think we have been touched by him, it is *we* believe in him and claim to have been touched by him. We relate to God from a human place and in a human way; and this is so even if we claim that we have known God through his self-communicating revelation.

In the name of asking what the message of Jesus might mean today, let us take a journey -- "let us go, then, you and I" -- and let us make it an "anthropocentric" journey, one that insists on remaining in the only place where we find ourselves and the only place where God, should he choose to do so, could reveal himself to us in Jesus: the human world of language and experience.

At the risk of being corny, I will make this journey be a train ride. This train will be making regular stops along the way, where you can get off whenever you have had enough. As we travel between stations, I will sketch out one possible anthropocentric approach to the question of God and his revelation in Jesus. After each such segment of the journey I will announce an up-coming station at which you are free to get off the train -- but please don't forget to take all your baggage with you.

A. Finite infinity

The train slowly pulls out of the station. The first segment of the journey is about finite infinity.

One of the most fundamental and arguably obvious facts about human being and human consciousness is that they -- that is, we -- are radically finite. This might seem unproblematic enough; but there is a slight paradox here. Once one establishes the radical *finitude* of human being, one likewise establishes its radical *infinity*. However, this paradox can be easily resolved by distinguishing two kinds of infinity. On the one hand there is the infinity of God, who has everything together: he knows everything, controls everything, and has endless power. God's infinity entails that he does not have to do anything, to work at anything, to search for anything. As perfectly self-identical or coincident with himself -- as Aristotle put it, an act of thinking that thinks of nothing other than of itself as an act of thinking: *noesis noeseos* -- God already *has* everything. We may call this infinity a "perfect" or "good" infinity.

Human beings, on the other hand, precisely because they are not God, do not have everything together. They have to search and question, they need to learn things and work to control them. And because they never *will* have everything together, they must search and question and learn *endlessly*, that is to say, infinitely. Of themselves, these efforts are never over and done with. Like a mathematical infinity, you can always add one more on to the series, and one more again, endlessly, or at least until death. We can call this endless or imperfect infinity a "bad" infinity.

Whereas God's perfect infinity means that he is perfectly self-contained without losing or excluding anything that exists, our imperfect infinity means that we are never complete and closed in upon ourselves but, within the limits of our finitude and mortality, always open, always able to become more. This constitutes the "up-side" of imperfect infinity: we are open to *everything*, able to be question, be interested in, and search for everything, able in principle to know something about everything, if we never fully possess everything. This is what Aristotle was affirming centuries ago when he declared that the human *psyche* or soul "is in some way all things."¹¹

We may envision the unfolding of human knowing as a progression through the world of whatever there is, in the direction of an ever receding horizon. With every step forward in knowing and managing this or that, with every new acquisition within the world of the knowable and doable, the horizon moves backwards, opening up an even broader vista of what we can know and do. Thus, in principle we have access to and contact with everything in the world, even if only by questioning it. We are open to the endless intelligibility and accessibility of everything. And as we go forward, we never hit a final unsurpassable wall except our death. Not even the existence of God puts restraints on human capabilities.

Likewise with every step forward, we transcend our previous selves, and yet always bring those transcended selves along with us as our inheritance (what we have been and still are) even as we transcend ourselves again. In short, we are ever becoming ourselves without ceasing to be ourselves. Another name for our finite infinity is endless self-transcendence bordered only by our finitude and mortality.

This affirmation of the human being's finite infinity and endless self-transcendence constrained

only by its intrinsic limitations is an affirmation of radical *humanism*, even if that is a de-centered humanism, a way of being human that is ever projected beyond itself into a future that never completely arrives. There is nowhere in the universe of being where we are not at home. The Latin motto "Nothing human is foreign to me" (*nihil humani a me alienum*) becomes simply "Nothing at all is foreign to humans" (*nihil humano alienum*). So too there is no tree in the Garden of Eden whose fruit we cannot eat. And if there is some fruit we *should* not eat, that is not because of a heteronomous command from the God beyond, but only because eating it would harm or constrict our finite infinity. The only sin is to refuse to be the mortal, finite, and thus endlessly self-transcending infinity that we are. In principle there is nothing we cannot know and manage endlessly (and in principle completely), unbounded by divine restraints. There is no way in which God's perfect infinity could ever function as a break on our finite infinity -- and this is not some hybriistic defiance of God's creative power but the very gift of that power.

We are pulling in to the second station. All those who object (understandably!) to this admittedly sketchy notions of finite infinity and radical humanism may want to get off here -- but please don't forget your baggage. Among those who choose to disembark might be all who insist on putting an in-principle limit upon the human ability to know something about everything, and to have access to everything about anything in a mortal but infinite odyssey of intellect and will. Also, all off who think God has to be the final restraint on our finite infinity, that he is the wall we eventually will hit. However, those who believe in creation may want to stay on board since, on one account at least, that doctrine is precisely the tracks on which this train is running.

B. The ever-receding horizon

All aboard who are staying on for the next leg of the journey. The train pulls out of the second station. Next topic: the *goal* of infinite infinity.

Within the anthropocentric paradigm as I understand it, one of the jobs of philosophy is to figure out the correlate of our finite infinity, the objective or goal of our human striving. The correlate of human knowing is the humanly knowable, the correlate of human desiring is the humanly desirable. But what is the correlative of human becoming as a whole? What is the ultimate objective of the human odyssey?

In the traditional version of this correlation, the final objective of human becoming is God. Think of St. Augustine's *Confessions*: "You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."¹² In this view, the troubled journey of the soul will some day end in the quieting embrace of God -- in fact, our restlessness has already begun to end, if only by way of anticipation. We are already proleptically at the end of our journey, and in God's embrace, but not yet fully. And the tradition would insist that these are ontological facts that in principle can be established not just by revelation and faith but by philosophical reason alone, without supernatural aid or information.

In the vision that I propose, however, all we can affirm phenomenologically, i.e., experientially is this: Every step we take forward is answered by the horizon moving a step backward. If human being is endlessly open, then its correlate is the endlessly open-ended. It is not that human beings face toward a vaguely glimpsed God who awaits us up ahead, just beyond the end of the world. (To say this is not to deny that God exists but to deny that the "up-ahead" model is an adequate way to speak of God.) Rather, we face endless possibilities of self-realization *within* the world, in a progression bordered finally only by death as the end *of* the world.

As we face an endlessly receding horizon and thus the inexhaustible possibilities of human knowing and doing, there is no guarantee that the horizon, as it backs up, will hit some wall

behind it (God, let us say) and stop receding. No, we never hit the wall. (Our dying is not a matter of hitting a wall but of just dying.) All we perform are endless acts of self-transcendence; and in that way we endlessly "humanize" the world, learning to be at home everywhere within it. In fact, if improbably we were to reach the horizon, the point where there was nothing more in the world to be known because we had come to know every worldly thing in its complete intelligibility, there would be no guarantee that we would be shouldering up against God, at least not the God of Jesus of Nazareth.

If you have had enough of this, you may want to consider switching trains at the up-coming station. There will be another one pulling in on track two, and on that train they believe that the constant receding of the horizon is the action of the hidden God, who, as he recedes, calls us forward into his final mysterious presence. As T. S. Eliots put it in *Four Quartets*:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹³

This beautiful poetic vision of the human odyssey weaves together the notions of Aristotle's God as final cause, Plotinus' return of the soul to its source, and Augustine's God of homecoming. However, it *is* a different journey from the one on *this* train.

We are pulling into the third station now -- and there it is! -- the the T. S. Eliot Express over on Track 2, ready to take off in what seems to be the same direction as ours.

If you transfer to the T. S. Eliot Express you will soon notice that the people on *that* train have a tremendous advantage over us. Over there they believe that the correlate of our finite infinity is the hidden God who stands beyond the horizon, drawing us onwards towards himself. The passengers over there are able to have it both ways. They get history now and eternity later; they operate on faith during the journey but attain to the vision of God once they pull into the final station. Most importantly they know that their train, while being governed to *some* extent by the secondary causality of nature, science, and technology (Newton's laws of motion, diesel power, and so forth), is *ultimately* being pulled to its final destination not by the secondary causality of the locomotive up front but by the final causality of God up ahead.

And over here on this train? No, we are *not* going in the same direction to the same final station. And no, the difference between this train and the T. S. Eliot Express is not that they *know* the final correlate of their movement to be God whereas we are *undecided* whether the correlate of our movement is God or the endless humanization of the world.

No, on this train we are not confused about our goal. Rather, we know that the goal we are moving towards is not God but more of our finitely infinite selves. The endless open-endedness that is the correlate of our self-transcendence is really our own territory, not God's; it is the realm of our own possibilities. You may want to call the receding of the horizon a mystery, but it is the mystery of ourselves as finite infinity. What the receding horizon makes available to us is our world; and what constitutes the receding of the horizon is our own finitude -- not God, or God's drawing power, or our alleged progressive itinerary toward God. (Nor will we settle for some facile undecidability between "God" and "justice." We know the difference between the two. To say this is not to deny that God exists but to deny that the God-or-justice/take-your-pick model is a responsible way to think about God's relation to us.)

Our finite infinity means we are always a lack of fullness. We may try to fill the lack up forever,

but we will never succeed: it's an abyss. To cover over that endless lack with the face of the distant God, or to hope it will be finally filled with the presence of the parousial God would only be the last example of Bonhoeffer's God-of-the-gaps. In the final analysis our endlessness bespeaks not God but our present mortality and our future death; and to fill in that emptiness with God would be to deny our mortality. It would be the final blasphemy: "You certainly will not die: you will be like gods" (Genesis 3:4,5).

Rather, we should celebrate that lack as the form of our lives, as what gives us whatever measure of being we have. Why hope and pray for rescue from it? God is not the final filling-in of our lack, the ultimate supplement that completes our finitude, because, by the very laws of our creation, our lack cannot be filled and our finitude can have no supplement. Thus it is out of a deep sense of piety in the divine creator that we should refuse the name of God -- much less the name "Abba" -- for that emptiness.

Last chance to disembark and transfer to the T. S. Eliot Express, especially if you get motion-sick just thinking that the horizon keeps receding as we move ahead and that this train will never reach a final destination. All aboard who are staying aboard.

C. Long day's journey into co-openness

Looking around as we pull out of the station, I can see there are very few of us left on the train. Most of our fellow passengers did transfer to the T.S. Eliot Express (let's hope they took their baggage with them). So as the remaining few of us, the *anawim*, pull out of the station on the final, unconcluding leg of this journey, we may want to collect our thoughts about where we are going and why we are still together.

Despite the beauty, comfort, and assured destination of the Eliot Express -- the train of the God-up-ahead, drawing us onwards as he recedes into mystery -- there are a few reasons for declining to ride it.

The first reason is that the Eliot Express has gotten it all wrong about the directionality of human vision. (That is why Thomas Aquinas is still riding with us on *this* train and not on the other one.) Over there they promise us an illusory metaphysical glimpse into the Beyond as a supplement to our ordinary vision of this world -- something that Aquinas has showed to be impossible. He argues conclusively that we human beings have only one legitimate line of vision, the view that our senses have of this world of physical data, which we make sense of by means of our spiritual faculties. According to Aquinas we cannot look over and beyond sense data -- cannot, as it were, stick our heads out the train window and peer up ahead into the metaphysical future, catch a glimpse of God waiting for us at the final station -- and then return, assured and comforted, to our seats and to our normal vision of the world.

On this train, no hanging out the window to get a view up ahead, no metaphysical vision added on as a supplement to our worldly knowledge of things, no deep-back-up certitude that our train is heaven-bent. Likewise, no double vision whereby we (1) love the God who awaits us at the end of the line and then, for his sake, (2) love the neighbor sitting next to us on the train. Not two visions, two loves, two movements, the one directed beyond towards God, the other directed back into the world. That may work on Plato's train or T. S. Eliot's but not on this one. Here you face only the physical things of this world, and you make intellectual and spiritual sense of them only within the ever-expanding horizon of human possibilities. Everything else lies outside your range of vision and is not covered by your ticket.

There is a second reason for not switching trains. Not only is it true that the horizon keeps receding, but we can never peer beyond it. And least of all should we ever attempt a leap of faith *over* it -- because we would only land in nothing. The horizon is something like the expanding universe that keeps offering us more world to explore; but we cannot reach ahead and touch some

"membrane" that defines the edge of the universe of experience, much less cut through it and penetrate to the other side -- because there is no such "membrane" and there is no "other side," only more and more of this side. In fact, in the normal course of events we do not even look directly *at* the horizon. Instead we mostly tend to forget it, and rightly so. Apart from rare moments of what Plato and Aristotle called "wonder," we usually see the finitude of things on this side of the horizon rather than any finitizing darkness on the other side of things.

If you tried to pierce through the horizon, you would get caught up in a cyclone that hurls you back into this world and lands you right here among the rest of us finite self-transcenders. You can no more peer beyond the horizon than you can climb inside your own consciousness, for the nature of both of them, the horizon and your consciousness, is to rebound you back into the world. The mystery of the ever-receding horizon is about more of yourself beyond yourself; and the job of that ever-receding horizon is to give you more of this world, this realm of meaning, these things, this life.

The third and most important reason for refusing to change trains -- that is, for declining to say that the correlate of our finite infinity is the God who draws us on as he recedes -- is that it is very dangerous.

Consider this: The fact that our ultimate correlate is an ever-receding horizon (and the correspondingly ever-expanding world of human knowing and doing) means that we are not God (God has no horizon and needs no world), we are not perfect, complete, and already in possession of everything. Unlike God, none of us is a self-contained unit; each of us is extended and plural, not the whole of humanity but always a part of the human whole. By our very nature as finite infinity we are social, not atomistic (much less Adam Smith-istic) but always one *of* the species without losing our singularity, inevitably part of a multitude that lives in common, each one of us bound to all the others and to the common good, no one of us ever finally free or fulfilled until the whole community is free and fulfilled.

The ever-receding horizon bespeaks not only the generic "radical humanism" that we mentioned above but also and more specifically a radically *social* humanism. Our endless *co*-openness -- our sociality or "species-being," as some have put it -- is never an add-on to an otherwise atomistic self sufficient unto itself. Instead, our sociality and how we relate to it *defines* our individuality.

But notice some consequences. If the ever-receding horizon bespeaks endless possibilities for realizing our human powers in the world, limited only by mortality; and if our openness is always social *co*-openness; then what we are moving towards in self-transcendence is *social* self-realization, perhaps asymptotic but nonetheless an immanent rather than a transcendent realization.

This is why it is dangerous for those who are riding the T.S. Eliot Express to call the correlate of human becoming "God." For if one *does* choose to use the word "God" to name the open-ended correlate of human openness, then "God" would be a name for the perhaps asymptotic but nonetheless *immanent* fulfillment of the whole human species across history. The word "God" would be a marker for the full unfolding of all the natural and social powers of humankind. Then we really *would* be in bed with David Strauss, along with Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx, and wouldn't that be fun. . . .

Now a thought-experiment: What if, while still declining to ride the Eliot Express, we nonetheless chose to call the correlate of our social *co*-open-endedness by the name "God"?

A first thought: In this vale of tears, what really needs love and care and reassurance, what really requires respect and attention, is not God (who is doing quite well, thank you) but humankind. Wouldn't it be bizarre to think of God as some neurotic Roman Emperor who is forever getting annoyed when he fails to get enough attention? No, it is human beings who need

nurturing, attention, respect, and fulfillment; and they deserve that for their own sake, not as a second-order reflux from another's love of God, and not as a mere stepping stone towards some higher good.

A second thought: Can we imagine the following? What if God, without reserve and without expectation of return, were to lend his name as a stand-in for, and a protection of, the *intrinsic* and unending fulfillment of the human community? What if God allowed his name to be used for the open-ended correlate of our socially co-open infinity?

If that were so, then on *our* train the word "God" would name the possibility of the asymptotic unfolding of our social powers precisely as immanent natural powers. The word "God" would hold open that space of possibility for social self-realization and would protect it against the ever encroaching forces of dehumanization that seek to reduce us to something less than our full social freedom, to make us into (for example) mere consumers, or bean-counters, or "profit-maximizing animals," or the like. If God did lend his name for this purpose -- without reserve and without expectation of return -- then in saving the name of God we would be saving ourselves.

But we would also have finally lost the God up ahead and up above, the Supreme Being who, even after the Incarnation, continues to rule history from beyond history, who reveals himself to us from his supernatural heaven, and then draws us as he drew his only begotten Son, onwards, upwards, and outwards to our transcendent fulfillment.

It is not be that we declare, out of pride or hubris, that we have outgrown our need of the traditional God, no longer find him useful, but rather that the very meaning of "God" would have revealed itself to be *kenosis*, a self-emptying self-communicating God poured out without remainder, not clinging to the form of a transcendent divinity but emptying himself into the form of finite infinity, happily dying as transcendent in order to be reborn in the endless mortal struggle to live our co-openness in common, to endlessly enhance each other, to humanize nature and naturalize the human -- not for any transcendent divine motive but for no other reason than itself.

If (continuing the thought-experiment) we can at least *imagine* God might do that, then to what would we liken the kingdom of God? It would be not a gift *from* God but the gift *of* God entirely given over without remainder. Not the hypostatic incarnational union of the divine and human natures coming together from opposite poles of the ontological universe, but the end of the need and ability to make such distinctions.

But surely that could not be the kingdom of God! Doesn't the kingdom require a transcendent Abba, all powerful, who gives us our daily bread, forgives our sins, whose will shall someday be done on earth as it is in heaven, when his kingdom comes? Or could the kingdom of God be the end of transcendence, the end of "God" and the beginning of co-open-endedness, which means our resolute living in common for justice and mercy?

But what a labor this would be to reinterpret every category and attribute of "God" as a marker of our infinite co-openness; and above all, to take the highest name for God -- the Holy, the Blessèd One -- and read it instead as "making holy, making blessèd" -- in a word, "anointing" -- such that the title *meshiah* or *christos*, "the anointed and blessed," would become an ontological designation of our finite infinity, and such that the doing of justice and mercy would become (to use the name the early Christians used for their way of living) the holy and blessed Way.

What then would *faith* be? Would it mean believing the unbelievable? holding to propositions that we cannot fully comprehend? Or might it be trust in and commitment to the endless tasks of justice and mercy without need of transcendent motivations or sanctions? What would *hope* be? A yearning for the end of history and the fulfillment of our final fantasy of living forever in God's heaven as pure, post-mortem souls with eternal consciousness? Or might it be hope against hope in

the unending struggle for that justice and mercy on this side of death? And what would *love* be? Would it be that double-visioned love of the transcendent God and worldly human beings, the latter for the sake of the former? Or would that distinction disappear?¹⁴

And the Jesus of history? What would any of this have to do with him? Imagine that only half of what we know of the Jesus of history were true: common table fellowship, overturning the dominant social hierarchy, consorting with outcasts, challenging the empire and the religious establishment. Then postulate that Jesus somehow found out that he had no Abba in heaven gives us our daily bread, forgives our sins, and promises to realize his heavenly kingdom on earth. On that premise, can you imagine Jesus giving it up, throwing it all over, eating only with the rich, joining the conservative establishment, reaffirming the old hierarchies, kissing the wrist of Rome? Did Jesus' message of the kingdom stand or fall with his faith in the transcendent God?

We cannot speak for him, of course, and the question might even seem foolish and trivial, perhaps even offensive. But what is not foolish and trivial (though it may turn out to be offensive) is what we know we must do, based on what we think we are and where we think we are going.

The sermon is over. As I promised, it has been nothing more than a very idiosyncratic enactment one set of presuppositions. The intent is not to convince anyone to share these presuppositions but to suggest that each of us has some such story, a proto-anthropology and a proto-theology, mostly unthematized, which guides his or her interpretation of Jesus' message. The future of that message will depend in good measure on how we clarify our views on human being and its relation to its final end, and use them to reinterpret the kingdom of God.

ENDNOTES

1. In Origen's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, *Patrologia Graeca* XIII (1862), p. 1197.
2. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet*, Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, Erster Band, 1835; Zweiter Band [beginning with chapter nine], 1836. On the title page of volume Strauss is identified as "Dr. der Philos. und Repeteten am evangelisch-theologischen Seminar zu Tübingen" and the volume, ironically bears the "imprimatur" "Mit Königl. Württembergischem Privilegium gegen den Nachdruck"! The fourth edition of the work (1839) was brought into English as *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, translated by George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), three volumes, London: Chapman Brothers, 1846. Eliot's translation, edited and introduced by Peter C. Hodgson, has been republished under the same title, in a one-volume edition, by Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972. In this lecture I follow the first German edition, with its often idiosyncratic spellings.
3. "Den inneren Kern des christlichen Glaubens weiss der Verfasser von seinen kritischen Untersuchungen völlig unabhängig. Christi übernatürliche Geburt, seine Wunder, seine Auferstehung und Himmelfahrt, bleiben ewige Wahrheiten, so sehr ihre Wirklichkeit als historischer Fakta angezweifelt werden mag. ... Den dogmatischen Gehalt des Lebens Jesu wird eine Abhandlung am Schlusse des Werkes als unversehrt aufzeigen...." "...Ueberzeugung...dass alles das den christlichen Glauben nicht verletzt." *Das Leben Jesu*, "Vorrede," I, vii-viii.
4. "Schlussabhandlung. Die dogmatische Bedeutung des Lebens Jesu," *Das Leben Jesu*, II, 686-744.
5. "Erwacht daher allerdings auch gegen das in seiner Unmittelbarkeit auftretende Dogma, wie gegen jede Unmittelbarkeit, die Kritik als Negativität und Streben nach Vermittlung: so ist diese doch nicht mehr, wie bisher, historische, sondern dogmatische Kritik, und erst durch beide hindurchgegangen, ist der Glaube wahrhaft vermittelt, oder zum Wissen geworden." *Das Leben Jesu*, II, 688.
6. "ihr leztes Ziel," *Das Leben Jesu*, II, 689.
7. *Das Leben Jesu*, I, 2.
8. "wenn sie gegen das Bewusstsein der Differenz zwischen der neuen Bildung und der alten Urkunde sich verblendet," *Das Leben Jesu*, I, 2.
9. *New York Times Book Review*, December 21, 1986, p. 16.
10. Cf. "...wenn sie klar erkennt und offen eingesteht, dass sie das, was jene alten Schriftsteller erzählen, anders ansieht, als diese selbst es angesehen haben. Dieser letztere Standpunkt ist jedoch keineswegs schon ein Sichlossagen von den alten Religionsschriften, sondern es kann auch hier noch bei Festhaltung des Wesentlichen das Unwesentliche ungescheut preisgegeben werden." *Das Leben Jesu*, I, 2-3.
11. Respectively, Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III, 8, 431 b 21 (*he psyche ta onta pos esti panta*); and Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, qu. I, art. 1, responsio, in Thomas Aquinas in *Quaestiones de veritate* (in *Quaestiones disputatae et quaestiones duodecim quodlibetales*, III-V [Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1942]), p. 3A (quod natum est convenire cum omni ente).

12. "Tu excitas, ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te." *Confessiones* I, 1.

13. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," V, (*Four Quartets*), *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 197.

14. Is it possible that those who have learned something from the Jesus' message of the kingdom of God might choose to celebrate sacraments and liturgies, eucharists and feasts, to solemnize the mystery of endless co-openness? Could the churches ever be what Nietzsche called them, "the tombs and sepulchers of God," but now in a positive sense: the temples of justice and mercy? The most probable answer is: no.