

# Retiring Belief in the Resurrection, Claiming the Sayings Tradition

Marvin L. Cooke

## Introduction

The linchpin of orthodox Christianity has been belief in the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event. Yet, from the beginning of modern biblical scholarship, the historical basis of the claim has been problematic. A circumspect reading of the Bible and related writings discloses “doubters,” divergent resurrection accounts, divergent accounts of the meaning of the resurrection, and opponents inside the community who do not seem to hold the resurrection. On close inspection, first-person witness accounts of the resurrection can only be held to be a personal experience of an appearance. It will be argued that the evidence supports a claim that the resurrection was real as a personal experience for particular individuals but not a claim that the resurrection was an objective, publicly available event as we understand historical events today.

A person of belief might well respond, “So what if the resurrection is historically dubious?” As Bultmann (1968) notes in his analysis of the Greek term for faith, the use of faith as a practice only arose in the New Testament world in the context of a challenge to the lack of the visible and knowable. Belief as traditionally practiced has set itself up as proclaiming the truth in the face of a lack of visible evidence. Taking Pascal’s wager in the face of the lack of visible evidence, we should believe. But belief has a downside not admitted in Pascal’s wager. It has led people to die for tenuous reasons. It dehumanizes and dismisses the nonbeliever. It closes discussion in the face of dubious or conflicting evidence and opinions. Given the dubious historical nature of the resurrection and the pernicious nature of belief, it will be argued that belief, as the principal practice of Christianity, should be retired.

If the standard story of orthodox Christianity lacks the historical basis for its transcendent claim, what does the Christian tradition have to offer? It will be argued that it has the sayings tradition to offer. Although they have been incorporated in Scripture, the sayings utilize a rhetorical strategy that does not rely on the external authority of God or a tradition and does not rely on the internal authority of extraordinary experience. Rather, the sayings force a discussion of social practices and their appropriateness for a particular situation. In other words, they are a form of ethical pragmatism. After a brief discussion of how the sayings tradition represents a strategy that is an antidote to the absoluteness of personal opinion found in postmodernism and the absoluteness of tradition found in orthodoxy, I offer some preliminary considerations regarding the primacy of relationships in pragmatic discourse, problems of cross-boundary discourse, practices of organization with power effects on discourse, the importance of critical and descriptive accounts in discourse, and the importance of tolerance for discourse.

An Account of the Biblical and Related Traditions Making the Resurrection Questionable

*The Evidence*

There are at least three versions of soteriology or doctrine of salvation in Paul that indicate diverse points of view regarding the death of Jesus as well as the possible development of a tradition with the resurrection being later in the development. One version locates salvation in the efficacy of Jesus' sacrificial death (Rom. 3:25-26, 1 Cor. 1:17, 1 Cor. 1:22, 1 Cor. 2:2ff, 1 Cor. 5:7b, Gal. 2:19bff, Gal. 6:14). This theme of Paul's seems to begin as a test of allegiance found in the earliest sayings of Jesus rather than as a soteriology (Kloppenborg Verbin 2000): "Whoever does not accept his cross and so become my follower, cannot be one of my students" (translated in Mack 1993). There is some evidence that sayings such as this were historically prior to Paul. For example, Kloppenborg et al. (1990) found a saying in one of Paul's epistles identified by Paul as a "written" saying that is also found in the Gospel of Thomas. Or, the Apocryphon of James (Robinson 1988) specifies a collection of parables used by the community of faith. One could contend that what began as a test of allegiance to a teacher was transformed via Hebrew scriptural themes from Passover and temple sacrifice or via Greek Mystery religions (Mack 1995) into a soteriology based on the death of Jesus. Minimally, the cross appears both as a test of allegiance in early sayings attributed to Jesus and as the basis for salvation in Paul.

A second version of soteriology is found in the Christ hymn in Philippians (2:6-11). Here, Christ's humility—not claiming equality with God and taking on the role of a servant—and his obedience unto death are the key events establishing salvation. In response, God elevates him and his name. Here, the text treats God's response to Christ's obedience as honoring rather than as resurrection as such. Since Paul is apparently citing a preexisting saying or text, it is apparent that another understanding of soteriology existed before Paul that did not use the resurrection but rather humility and obedience as the key factor.

Finally, one finds the standard version or soteriology from orthodoxy based on the resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13, 1 Cor. 6:14, 1 Cor. 15:12ff). Again, there is some evidence in Q—the collection of sayings and parables common to Luke and Matthew—that would suggest that the development of the resurrection occurred later than the development of a soteriology based on the cross. In developing the historical sequence or stratification of sayings in Q, Mack (1993) places Jesus' reply to John's disciples in which he tells them to report to John that "the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are given good news" in the second strata of development. While this is obviously a statement of the meaning of Jesus' ministry, the use of the concept of the resurrection occurs as the latter development of an existing tradition of sayings.

In addition to a diversity of soteriologies in Paul that develop a tradition with the resurrection being later in the development, there is a paucity of publicly available evidence for the resurrection in Paul. Paul reports that God directly revealed "his son" to him (Gal. 1:11ff). He reports that Jesus appeared to Peter, the twelve, five hundred followers, James, the apostles, and finally Paul in that order (1 Cor. 15:1ff). Apparently "reveal" and "appear" imply "resurrection" and are substitutable for Paul. Though Paul indicates that many of the "five hundred" are still around, we know very little from any of them in the written record. For the remainder, the experience of what comes to be called resurrection is far more personal and private than public. In fact, the risen body is

“spiritual,” not “physical” (1 Cor. 15:42ff). From this account, it is likely that there was no publicly available event that one could know.

In his account of religious experience, Proudfoot (1995, 229) notes that the “labels a person adopts in order to understand what is happening to him determine what he experiences.” Proudfoot illustrates this with the example of a person coming upon something in a forest. He sees a bear and runs. Later, he goes back and realizes that that which he labeled and thereby interpreted as a bear was in fact a log. With the case of the bear, there is something publicly available against which to check one’s attribution. With the case of “appear” and “reveal” with a personal, private experience, there is no such publicly available source.

To explain what has happened to someone with a religious experience, Proudfoot (1995) claims that one must identify the available concepts and beliefs, commitments, and contextual conditions supporting the experience. We see Paul making such a process manifest in 1 Cor. 15:1-8 when he ties the two aspects of his proclamation—the death of Christ for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection—to some unstated scriptural passages. Thus, he admits though does not state that there are available concepts, beliefs, and commitments by which one can identify something as “appearing” or being “revealed” as “resurrection.”

Finally, in 1 Cor. 15:12ff, Paul directly addresses a group within the community that apparently claims that there is no resurrection of the dead. Quite obviously, there is a group contemporary with Paul that is committed to the movement but does not share his understanding of Jesus based on the resurrection. Thus, there is evidence in Paul’s opponents of those who provide indirect counter testimony to Paul.

While there is convergence in the picture of Jesus in the gospels up to his death, Crossan (1998) claims that there is no convergence but continuing development—rather than mere redaction—in resurrection scenes. In Mark, women at the empty tomb are told by a young man that Jesus has been raised and to give his disciples, including Peter, the message that he is going to Galilee where they will see him. An abbreviated version of the account in Luke is later attached to Mark. In Matthew, there is a different set of women and order of events at and after the tomb. The account ends as the eleven disciples go to Galilee where they see Jesus, though some of them doubt this. In Luke, unnamed women are at the tomb that are later named but are different from the list in Mark or Matthew. Different and more elaborate events are reported. Again, significant doubts regarding appearances of Jesus after his death are reported. Finally, Crossan (1998) gives the Gospel of Peter a key role in the development of the resurrection story. In addition to a different set of elements to the resurrection story, the cross actually emerges from the tomb and has a speaking part. One can see that there is little convergence that one would expect if a series of texts were either dependent on a commonly available text or a publicly available event. Instead, one finds invention with resurrection appearances.

An argument that one will hear defending the Biblical accounts of the resurrection is that modern people and ancient people do not have the same worldview regarding resurrection. Therefore, it is not warranted to make judgments about the questionable nature of the resurrection from the point of view of the modern worldview. For that very reason, doubts about appearances of the risen Jesus found in Matthew and Luke are even more troubling.

The doubters are insiders rather than outsiders. For example, Matthew clearly notes that the chief priests and Pharisees had an interest in discounting accounts of the resurrection. But, at the mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20), some disciples see the risen Jesus and some doubt. Given that the account in Matthew is probably addressing groups contemporary with its author, the doubters, by being identified as disciples, are clearly within the Christian community.

In Luke, the presence of doubters appears to have a more rhetorical purpose. On the road to Emmaus, the disciples do not see Jesus as Jesus until he breaks bread and offers it to them (Luke 24:30-32). Here is an obvious example of contextual condition and beliefs supporting an experience. When they return to Jerusalem, the two who had been on the road to Emmaus met the others who claim that it is true that Jesus has risen because he has appeared to Simon (Peter) (Luke 24:33ff). While they are talking, Jesus suddenly appears to them (Luke 24:36ff). Again, the account of the appearance is laced with the rituals of eating a meal together and teaching that evoke the experience of appearance. The very fact that doubt is to be overcome by rhetorical devices indicates that experience of “appearance” and “reveal” do not exist without the preexisting interpretive framework of belief and ritual.

A different paradigm implying a doubting element within the Christian community is found in Mark. In Mark (6:1ff), Jesus’ family and hometown are problematic. Mark uses the old saw of a prophet not being recognized among his or her own to dismiss the problem. But the fact that Mark has to do it indicates that some of Jesus’ family and neighbors did not buy the stories of Jesus as a miracle worker. Mark notes that Jesus was astonished at their lack of faith. Again, faith—the correct interpretation of a situation—seems to be necessary for the experience of the miraculous to appear.

Not only are Jesus’ family and hometown problematic, the disciples themselves—or members within the Christian community who are contemporaneous with the author of Mark and who claim association with the disciples—are problematic. At many points, they do not seem to understand what Jesus is teaching. They are interpreting things out of sync with the author. At a critical juncture (Mark 8:27ff), Jesus asks his disciples his identity, gets the response of the messiah, and proceeds to enumerate the Christological formula of suffering unto death and resurrection. At that time, Peter rebukes Jesus; Jesus tells Peter that he is thinking like men and not God. While the aspect of the formula to which Peter—or more likely members of the community claiming association or allegiance with Peter—is objecting is not clear, it is obvious that some part of the formula is problematic.

A saying that implies at least two different models of understanding Jesus within the early Christian community is found in Matthew 7:21ff:

Not every one who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”

Those who are identified by confessing Lord appear to be engaging in the kinds of “mighty works” that Jesus and the disciples engage in as found in Mark. This would indicate that there are at least two different insider groups struggling to define the meaning of Jesus and discipleship. One would be consistent with Paul and Mark and the emphasis on the resurrection and miracles. The other would be consistent with a community following Q and other sayings emphasizing love of neighbor.

If one considers the sayings common to Matthew and Luke that are commonly referred to as Q, one finds a gospel tradition that Kloppenborg Verbin (2000) claims is as early as Paul but does not explicitly refer to Jesus’ resurrection and only implies Jesus’ death. Instead of the resurrection, one finds sayings that vindicate the wisdom of Jesus and those who follow it. Moreover, the Q tradition does not claim any relevance of Jesus’ death for salvation. Rather, Jesus’ death is a challenge to the Q community to follow the sapient sayings attributed to Jesus included in the Q tradition.

### *Assessing the Evidence: The Downside of Pascal’s Wager*

In a murder case, a jury member must find evidence beyond a reasonable doubt to convict. Does historical evidence exist for a reasonable doubt about the resurrection?

When looking at Paul, the efficacy of Jesus for salvation was found on his death alone, his obedience alone, and his alleged resurrection. Rather than convergence of understanding, there is divergence. There is evidence in Paul’s epistles of contemporaries who use a source that does not use the resurrection or who do not believe in the resurrection. The evidence that Paul provides for the resurrection is his own personal experience of “revealing” or “appearance” and that reported to him of Peter. He claims evidence from the experience of three groups from whom we have little or no independent evidence: disciples, the “five hundred,” and apostles. The problem with the personal experience of Paul is (1) that it is codetermined by beliefs and (2) there is no publicly available reference against which to test his experience. The apparent publicly available references—the testimony of Peter, the disciples, the “five hundred,” and the apostles—suffer from the same problems as Paul’s testimony: there is no publicly available reference outside of private experience. There is no testimony that does not come from a believer.

When one turns to an examination of gospels, one encounters the same problems. Instead of convergence or evidence of the redaction from a common source, one finds divergence and invention. One finds doubting among insiders in resurrection accounts. One finds stories of Jesus’ family and hometown doubting. One finds resistance to the standard formula of death and resurrection among insiders. (Given the proclivities of some Gnostics (Pagels 2003), the objection could be to Jesus’ death.) One finds early traditions (Q) in which the death of Jesus has no explicit role in salvation and in which there is no explicitly acknowledged or theologically used resurrection.

I would judge that the above evidence constitutes grounds for a reasonable doubt.

Belief, however, is loaded in the other direction. Consider Bultmann’s (1968) analysis of the Greek term for faith. In classical Greek, the term referred to confidence in relation to people, oaths, or contracts. Confidence in this case is contrasted with knowledge. One might not really know a person but decide to trust the person

nevertheless. The term was reused in the Hellenistic setting of debate with skepticism and atheism. Believing in the gods is not self-evident. It requires overcoming objections. In the face of the absence of the visible, one has faith. In Christian scripture, it is precisely the resurrection of Jesus that cannot be perceived but only proclaimed. Faith, in Bultmann's analysis, is the decision to accept—put confidence in—the resurrection that is not evident but only proclaimed. The use of faith as an argument for accepting a claim is, on its face, an admission that there is no publicly available evidence.

In responding to the growing historical criticism of scripture in his own time, Kierkegaard defines belief as an “objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness” (1992, 182). In other words, in the face of reasonable doubt and evidence, hold fast. Pascal (1960) responded to doubt with his famous wager. If one believes and the claims of faith are true, one gets an eternal reward. If one believes and the claims of faith are not true, it does not matter. If one does not believe and the claims of faith are true, one receives eternal damnation. Again, if it is not true, it does not matter. Therefore, it is better to believe than not. The criteria of belief would lead one to set aside reasonable doubt.

*Which criterion does one choose?*

Kaminer's (1999) analysis and critique of the modern personal growth and therapeutic movement, the New Age movement, modern pietism, and postmodernism provides one starting point to respond to this question. She observes that subjective perceptions—when identified as feelings or experience—are the source for modern claims of individuals about the supramundane. If this were the extent of the claim, private faith in the face of “objective uncertainty” would present little problem. However, Kaminer (1999, 5) observes that “religion posits universal truths, not disparate individual realities.” In the face of universal truths, reasonable doubt becomes a problem. How can one make statements of universal truths in the face of “objective uncertainty,” much less in the face of outright counterevidence? If the claim of the resurrection were merely a matter of “individual realities”—which it appears to be—faith would be an adequate criterion. But in the face of universal truths, reasonable doubt might be more appropriate. Yet, the hidden personal reality of a few is tendered as public event by proclamation.

Moreover, there is a downside to Pascal's wager. Consider a situation in which a young man who had diabetes from an early age came to believe that, if he had enough faith and acted out that faith by stopping his insulin, he would be healed. After stopping the insulin, he died. Or, consider the case of a believer in the Heaven's Gate community who believed that, if she committed suicide to rid herself of her current vehicle (her body), she would be transported to the spacecraft that had come for her community. She killed herself. Obviously, a willingness to die for one's beliefs is no guarantee of the truth of the beliefs.

Another downside of belief not recognized in Pascal's wager was raised as a group studied James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword* (2001) Some of the Christians in the group argued that the persecution of Jews by Christians was a result of a failure of faith. What if it was the result of faith? Does not faith as traditionally understood set itself up as having the truth in the face of reason, evidence, and the need for revision? Does it

not divide the world into the faithful and the infidels? Are not the infidels discounted as less than human? Are they not dangerous to our eternal fate? Though our faith commands us to love our neighbors, does it not at the same time dehumanize our neighbor if he or she is not one of us? Perhaps Pascal did not correctly state the wager. Perhaps faith as holding onto an objective uncertainty or as claiming a transcendent truth or as any drawing an absolute against our neighbor and against our means of coming to terms with him or her—such as reason and evidence—leads to damnable actions as much as to a “safe” faith.

A final, if not fatal, third problem with the practice of belief not recognized in Pascal’s wager is pointed out by Rorty (1999, 171): “The main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.” That is, if belief is held in spite of evidence and argument, no discussion is possible other than conversion. The ethic of love runs directly into the practice of belief. In living together, our decisions and acts involve others and have consequences for them. Thus, the criterion must be more public, open to dialog, and take “objective uncertainty” into account more than does the personal account of faith. Our faculties are limited—whether by the limits of our cognitive apparatus, scope of relationships and context, or any one of many that have been identified throughout history. That means that our decisions are always open to new assessments and information and are revisable. Since we are dealing with historical questions in dealing with the question of the resurrection, criteria used in historical investigations are appropriate.

It is probably too stringent to require that evidence for the resurrection meet the criteria of “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Given that Scripture is the end result of editing out counter texts, a preponderance of evidence is probably not available. From the indirect evidence outlined to this point I would conclude that the resurrection was real as a personal experience—Peter, Paul, and perhaps some others had something happen to them that they interpreted as an appearance or revelation—but not real as an objective publicly available event as we understand historical events today. Obviously, these personal experiences had very public consequences through proclamation that was acceptance by faith.

Obviously, such a conclusion will be disturbing to Christians of a literal orthodoxy. For example, Patterson (1998) reports situations in which congregants became angry when they realized that he was not speaking about the resurrection as a literal, historical reality. But, it is also problematic to Christians who embrace historical-critical research and its findings. For example, Kloppenborg Verbin (2000) reviews several scholars whose principal problem with a gospel of Q is that it lacks the expected props of authority normally provided by the miracles, resurrection, death, a unique message, or, in general, the nature of Jesus. Though his historical-critical evidence questions the resurrection as a historical reality, Patterson (1998) is ready to claim it in faith as a transcendent reality.

Yet, it is this need for an unimpeachable claim that creates the greatest potential for the abuse of the cause of Jesus reflected in the sayings tradition. Claims about the transcendence of Jesus’ nature, works, or message are often the very basis for claiming truth, requiring obedience to a religious community, discounting the beliefs and values of others, and demonizing others. These practices turn religion into a weapon to use

against others (Kaminer 1999; Kimball 2002; Stern 2003). It is for this very reason that it is not enough to recognize that there is in all likelihood no real historical basis for the transcendent claims made by Christianity. The very nature of the Christian tradition must be recast in a way that rejects transcendent claims and the deployment of belief as the principal practice of that tradition.

Toward the Sayings Tradition as a Practice for Being Christian

### *The Sayings Tradition*

Some scholars (Arnal 1995; Kloppenborg et al. 1990; Kloppenborg Verbin 2000; Mack 1993; Robinson et al. 2000) find that the hypothetical source Q contains some of the earliest strata of the Christian tradition. Using the earliest strata of Q (Kloppenborg Verbin 2000; Mack 1993), the following concerns are expressed: the status of the poor, hungry, and grieving; relationship with enemies; the demands of love; the importance of forgiveness; the importance of self-criticism and limitations; the importance of conduct; the nature of loyalty toward one's teacher; advice on carrying out the teacher's mission; how to pray; assurance of God's concern; the transparency of all conduct to God; the relative value of material assurance compared to God's assurance; and the nature of God's rule. As Q developed as it is reported in Matthew and Luke, it adds sayings of judgment in an apocalyptic framework (Kloppenborg Verbin 2000; Mack 1993). As it develops in the Gospel of Thomas, it adds Gnostic themes (Arnal 1995).

Crossan (1991) identifies a wider inventory of sayings that he places at the earliest stages in the development of the gospel traditions. His inventory includes all of the topics noted by Mack and by Kloppenborg Verbin in Q as well as sayings regarding the marginal and reviled and early relations with the Jews. According to Crossan, the program of the earliest tradition challenged purity regulations, the patriarchal use of honor and shame, and the inclination to establish and use boundaries and hierarchies.

When one looks at the structure of these sayings, they do not directly rely on transcendent appeals to the will of God or the authority of received tradition. They do not directly rely on the results of formal logic or universal conditions. Instead, they are contextual instructions, declarative statements, reflexive statements, questions, and parables. They rely on existing traditions by inverting, transvaluing, or challenging them. They assume that God's rule is important. But the specific metaphors for that rule are not justified. They do not rely on the authority of the tradition for their acceptance. In fact, Matthew 5:34ff implies that it is inappropriate to use any authority in swearing oaths. Rather, we answer for ourselves. Finally, they do not assume an appropriate response of submission or obedience. They are designed to engage and provoke thought and discussion.

### *An Argument for the Sayings Tradition*

In *Godless Morality*, Holloway (2002) argues that divergent absolute answers that various religions give to moral problems are not helpful in coming to terms with the common problem of our living together. The use of absolutes backed by claims of the will of God end the moral discussion and lead to conquest or avoidance as the only



moral strategies. The challenge for the person of a religious tradition is to separate the principles that might give us help in facing our common life from the absolute anchors that make it impossible to discuss their merits on the basis of consequences. From the point of view of our common life together, the value of the sayings tradition from early Christianity is that it contributes to an assessment of our problems without the use of absolutes. Thus, the sayings open moral conversation rather than close it.

By recognizing that the sayings tradition is simply one moral resource available to us without anchoring it in absolute authority, do we not run the risk of the downside of postmodernism: every opinion is as good as the next? From a theoretical point of view, postmodernism has been a gift in that it has made us recognize that all perspectives and modes of arguing are historical creations. But this leaves us in a situation as problematic as moral absolutes. Whereas moral absolutes leave us unable to adjudicate competing claims because there is no appeal to an external authority, complete moral relativism leaves us unable to adjudicate competing claims because there is no appeal to internal authority. The pragmatism of the sayings tradition puts the problem between us rather than outside or within us.

In the history of the church, the pragmatic solution implied by the sayings tradition is the least tried. In Paul's epistles, one finds little evidence of the sayings tradition. Instead, the meaning of Jesus is reduced to his person and his work as defined by his death and resurrection and is built on the personal experience of revealing that has been externalized into the historical claim of resurrection. The historical claim is experientially replicated for the believer in the dying/being-born-to ritual of baptism. This enables claims about Jesus to be based on an external, transcendent authority. In the synoptic gospels (Mack 1988), the sayings are merged with and subsumed in the structure of Paul's definition of the faith. In this context, the sayings lose their openness by becoming the words of the Lord. In the Gospel of Thomas, the sayings retain their openness but retreat into personal experience for their authentication (Pagels 2003). The conflict between these perspectives becomes visible in the Gospel of John and concludes with the definition of the external authority as represented by the canon as orthodoxy and of internal authority as heresy (Pagels 2003). Meanwhile, the pragmatic approach of the sayings tradition languishes. It is this tradition that I wish to claim.

### *Some Considerations for Using the Sayings Tradition*

#### The Priority of Relationship

In *Reason in Ethics*, Toulmin (1970) outlines the process of ethical reasoning as moving from a consideration of alternatives within the context of existing institutions, to a consideration of alternative institutions within the context of an agreement about the kind of community that is desirable, to a consideration of alternatives about the kind of community that is desirable. Beyond this, one cannot ethically reason. At times, one hears a question that sounds like moral reasoning but is not in that it is not considering alternatives. Instead, it is asking a different kind of question. Toulmin refers to this question as a "limiting question" because it exists at the limits of normal reasoning within a field. The particular limiting question that Toulmin considers is one in which a

person is asking why one ought to do a particular action. In other words, the questioner is not asking what course of action is to be taken. The questioner is asking why one should be motivated to take the known acceptable or moral course of action.

Toulmin claims that this particular limiting question is really a faith question. It seeks a motivation for action. However, I believe that it can equally be taken as a relationship question. When I ask why should I do or not do a particular thing, I usually have in mind particular others, how the action in question will affect me, them, and us, and how they will judge me. Before the ethical question exists, the relationship and the problem of living together exist. As Niebuhr (1963) has observed, we respond in anticipation to a response to us. I might care about that response because I love the other and want to please them, enhance their welfare, or not hurt them. I might care about that response because I fear what they might do. While the answer to Toulmin's limiting question might be some transcendent God (Ogden 1977), it is in the first instance those with whom I live.

Niebuhr (1960, 1963) built his understanding of relationship essentially on George Herbert Mead's (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*. For Mead, people learn how to interact by trying to look at social situations from the viewpoint of another person from whom we seek a response. As we participate in many different experiences of a social situation, we learn how to imagine the viewpoint an average person would take in the situation. Niebuhr (1963) uses this general model by identifying four elements in the situation of human interaction: our actions are (1) a response to (2) interpreted actions toward us (3) in expectation of a response to our response (4) in the context of a continuing community of agents. In our interpretive self-talk in this situation, we are in internal dialog with our selves, our specific companions, and what we believe would be the perspective of an impartial observer or—in words borrowed from Mead—the “generalized other.” For Niebuhr, the community of agents includes those dead, living, and yet to be born. So, one can take the tradition into account as well as imagined future consequences. The basis for ethical judgment for Niebuhr (1963, 61) is “the *fitting* action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.”

How do we get to fitting action? For Niebuhr, using Mead, we get to fitting action through our interpretive process. No doubt, our actions are rooted in our interpretive processes. But, our actions themselves are externalized. The anticipated response of the other gets actualized. Through a round of action, what we thought was fitting might be responded to in a manner other than what we anticipated. Here, the focus of consciousness is not my imagination but the immediately present, directly observed social situation (Heap and Roth 1973). Moreover, the situation is available to all parties. The process of interpretation is created as one of us calls out something and the other responds with acknowledgment and possibly additional responses that might correct, confirm, modify, assess, or propose alternatives (Percy 1958; Schegloff 1992; Wittgenstein 1972). If we stay with Niebuhr's model based on Mead, I can identify action that I think might be fitting if I take what I think you think into consideration. But, I cannot really know what you think unless I ask you and you respond. I cannot move from deciding a fitting action to actually fitting our lines of action together without interaction. In the language of the sayings tradition, I cannot love my neighbor as myself by simply asking how I want to be treated or by taking him or her into consideration in my

imagination. I must explore how he or she wants to be treated and how I want to be treated by him or her in some sort of interaction. Since interaction becomes the place where loving our neighbor takes place and since interaction takes place in relationships of some sort, the real questions turn on the nature of the relationship and what considerations must be made in fitting divergent lines of action together.

### Human Relations and Interactions

In Tuomela's (2002) account of social practices, human beings are dependent and interacting. While people operate by considering others only from their personal point of view, they also interact by considering the situation from the group's perspective. Specifically, they act from the perspective of "we" rather than "I." When one adopts the "we" perspective, one has a perspective, believes that others in the groups that is the referent for "we" share the perspective, and believes that others in the group believe that all members of the group share the perspective. What is held as "our" perspective is based on testing it through interaction. It can even be made more explicit through agreement making.

The real problem arises with the question of having a relationship in the first place. Who is included in a group has boundaries. For every "we" there is a "they." "They" can be relatively unknown and neutral. We do not care or know if they exist. "They" can be known by use and related to through some mechanism such as the market or the state. However, they do not necessarily share the same beliefs, attitudes, norms, or actions as us. They may not share the same language. "They" may be viewed with enmity and suspicion.

Many of the sayings in the sayings tradition have to do with the boundary between "we" and "they," usually in the direction of incorporating "them" or opening "us" to "them." Thus, one finds stories about being a neighbor to the tax collector, the Roman occupier, the deviant, or the unclean. The failure to reach across the boundary between "we" and "them" can be found in studies on genocide and terrorism (Stern 2003). A key element in facilitating genocide or terrorism is making the distinction between "us" and the target group absolute and by dehumanizing "them." Deciding to have a relationship—to create a "we"—is the first decision to humanize the other.

Tuomela's account recognizes that "we" can include organizational units larger than can be sustained through fact-to-fact interaction. Here, methods of governing create means of adopting perspectives, taking decisions, and acting for us. Of course, the issue of the appropriateness of methods of governing is always in question. Thus, a critical account—rather than a descriptive account such as Tuomela's—is required to explore the problems and issues. In the sayings tradition, a question is asked over a coin as to what belongs to Caesar and what to God. In a question about leadership, is the king a good model or is a servant? Today, C. Wright Mills (1956) describes the differential ability of individual citizens to influence opinions and initiate action in the New England town meeting versus the national congress or mass media. SteinhoffSmith (1999) describes how the professional-client relationship destroys the mutuality that exists in relationships.

In describing how one argues for truth, Tuomela (2002) observes that the theory of correspondence works reasonably well when phenomena are externally controlled.

But, in all other circumstances, notions are conditioned by our shared practices. This would mean that the very nature of what constitutes appropriate relationships is constituted by our shared practices. Again, a critical rather than a descriptive approach is needed. Critical practices always explicitly or implicitly include an alternative social practice or perspective. So, in the sayings tradition, if my neighbor is simply a person in my group, how is that any different from how the worst of our enemies act? In a discussion with a Maoist, Foucault (1984) points out that the issue of justice is not one of who is the judge. The court itself is a bourgeois institution. As an alternative, Foucault offers the justice of the street mob. Admittedly, I am not sure that I would want to define justice by mob action versus a Western democratic society court. But, the issue is joined. Foucault's example raises a second point. A critical discussion about a social practice—such as justice—cannot be carried out outside of those involved in the situation. In other words, it is the “we,” those who have to actually depend on each other and interact, who must make the decision about what constitutes justice for them in their situation. The relationship precedes the discussion of the social practice. The social practice serves the relationship.

If parties in a relationship can work out a line of action or perspective among them, they can move on. What if they cannot? Tuomela (2002) notes that some perspectives and actions are allowed in groups even though they are not necessarily supported by norms. They are permitted. Some members of a group may disagree with the normative judgment of the group but still remain in the group and tolerate the difference. In both of these cases, the members of the group in disagreement with the remainder of the group are willing to permit or tolerate the situation. Only when not accepting a position entails the negation of a position and the exclusion of those holding it does disagreement lead to the destruction of relationship. While the application of orthodoxy seems to be of this variety, the application of the sayings tradition seems to leave open space for disagreement, toleration, and future discussion in cases of disagreement. So, from the sayings tradition, should we eliminate the “weeds” of those who disagree, or should we tolerate those who are questionable?

Where do we go from here?

The suggestion that belief as a Christian practice be retired in favor of the ethical pragmatism of the sayings tradition will be dismissed by many as another in the long line of ranting freethinkers. Those who hold positions in the Church will wonder how the multibillion-dollar global enterprise will survive without transcendent authority to back it. But, after the shock, one may see that there is an important cause to be undertaken with the sayings tradition as a Christian model.

In his theses on humanism, Rorty (1999) identifies the task of the humanist as expanding the moral imagination and questioning acculturation. Surely these are also the tasks of the sayings tradition as a Christian model. But the sayings tradition as a Christian model must also work at evaluating the options brought forth by the expansion of moral imagination without privileging the Christian tradition or community and work to implement the results. The sayings tradition assumes the requisite relationships and encourages the practices by which public discourse can take place.

Those in the Church may ask, "What is the 'unique' role of the Church with the sayings tradition?" There is no unique role. In fact, "unique" is a back door for a new claim of transcendence, belief, and authority. But, in our society and the world today, not very many communities work at creating the necessary relationships and practices to carry out a public discourse. Most communities work at maintaining closed boundaries and reinforcing existing beliefs and authority. "The harvest is large but the workers are few, so beg the lord to send out workers to the harvest" (Thomas 73 in Kloppenborg et al. 1990).

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