

CHAPTER IV

ABSOLUTE VALUES AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

ABSOLUTE VALUES AND NEW TESTAMENT

Any study of absolute values in the context of the New Testament would first of all warrant a clarification of the notion of absolute value as such. However, the phrase 'absolute value' is not absolute, in so far as it is a correlate of the 'relative value'. Hence, what I have in my mind in this chapter is to bring out the relation that holds good between the absolute and the relative values in the New Testament. In order to do this I shall, first, briefly discuss the sense in which a value may be considered as absolute. In this connection, I will briefly refer to some of the narrowly conceived absolutistic values and also the attack made on them by some of the relativistic philosophical schools. Secondly, I shall examine the relationship that may be said to exist between the absolute and the relative values in the New Testament.

THE NOTION OF ABSOLUTE VALUE

By 'absolute value' is meant one that maintains its validity under any and every circumstance. Thus, the ancient maxim of the Stoics, "Let justice be done though the heavens fall", is a dramatic way of expressing the absolute validity of justice as a principle. For the moral theologians of the

Middle Ages, the general principle, "Follow the good and avoid the evil", was regarded as a major or ultimate premise carrying with it absolute validity. In modern philosophy, the ethics of Immanuel Kant furnishes the best example of an ethical absolute. The 'good will', which Kant defined as the will that acts out of respect for the moral law, has absolute validity; it is good in any context and has a worth that cannot be calculated because it surpasses all values in exchange.

But, the traditional belief in absolute values was based upon the extreme objective theory of values which may be untenable. Though the ethical objective absolutism in this traditional form lingers on, it has largely been abandoned by many scholars. The error of this traditional absolutism consisted in the manner it conceived values, as if they were some sort of objective entities, on the one hand, and its exalted view of reason, on the other.

The absolute values were regarded as eternal and immutable. The claims of values like truth, goodness and beauty are said to be experienced as unconditional. As Kant says, the claim of duty upon the will comes in the form of categorical, not hypothetical, imperative. Similarly, the pursuit of truth by the scientist or philosopher would be meaningless, unless he were to presuppose the existence of

fixed and final truth as the goal of his pursuit. Thus, the quest for the higher values requires us to postulate absolutes. However, to postulate them is not to possess them; they are not entities that can be possessed by us. The error of traditional absolutism lay not in entertaining the conception of the absolutes, but in its proud assumption that man could clearly grasp and even obtain them.

Therefore, what we mean, when we postulate absolute values, is not that there exist absolute ideas of each value in a Platonic realm of being, but that there are absolute principles which should govern the creation, appreciation and judgement of of all values. For example, there is no ideal of beauty which all beautiful things must 'imitate' or in which they 'participate', but there are principles which should be followed by all artists in creating beautiful things. Similarly, there is no ideal of justice to which every just state must conform, but there are principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity which must govern any state which expects to be called just.

Yet another error of traditional absolutism at this point has been to equate these universal principles with specific rules or standards which have been formulated by men of specific cultures. The result has been the treatment of these rules or standards, which are relative to time and

place, as if they were absolutes. Therefore, it must be strongly insisted upon that the 'absolute' of which we have been speaking are general principles rather than specific rules; even as they are not entities; nonetheless they are not merely abstract, rather they have to be embodied as facts of life.

Absolute values are limited because of their unique features. Firstly, absolute values are intrinsic or ends in themselves, and can never become means; but they still need means to become real. Like all values, they become real by being embodied; and the embodiment is achieved with the help of means and ends. Thus they do not exclude but, on the contrary, demand the application of other scales of values. Secondly, absolute values are not concerned with the details of how they come into being, but with the singular essence of objects which come to embody them. Their task is to determine the purpose by which the relative values serving them are defined. Practically, any relative value can be transformed by absolute values; likewise, any 'object' may come to embody values, relative or absolute. Thirdly, traditionally it has been acknowledged that truth, goodness and beauty are absolute values par excellence. They are, in the ethico-religious context, objective forces that form the very essence of the absolute spiritual reality. They are not dependent

on subjective desires and impulses; nor upon the exertion for survival on the part of human beings. But they manifest themselves with man's rational realisation of his unity and attunement to the ultimate spiritual reality. These absolute values, though unique and ends-in-themselves, cannot however be fully understood without the elements of relativity in them. Therefore, relative values are equally important to understand the absolute values, and vice-versa.

Some values are relative in the sense that they relate to age, sex, intelligence, culture, technology and other conditions. In this sense, values vary, depending on circumstances, for example, health, knowledge, pleasure, courage, kindness, honesty, love, friendship, beauty etc. These values have a basis in man's nature and the nature of the world in which he lives. They are necessary for the continuation of life and the development of man. Relative values belong to an existing reality. Thus, 'good' is not something that can stand alone; nor can it be assigned as a predicate to some other quality, unless that quality be conceived as existing. When I say, 'Love is good' or 'Justice is good', I mean that love as realised in a personal life is good, that justice as manifested in a man's character or in a social order is good. It belongs only to the concrete. In this way, ethics is different from other sciences. For example, a mathematical

proposition holds true without any postulate about existence. As distinct from a mathematical proposition, when we say, 'Mr. X is good', we mean to say that a particular person is good in virtue of some qualities or characteristics which he possesses or which constitute his nature. And these qualities or characteristics are manifested in the way in which he reacts to his environment. It is the concrete person who can be said to be good. He is the centre of life and consciousness and his conscious life requires an objective environment which he must know and modify in his action. Man lives in the midst of changes in the society. Therefore, his values also become relative to the environment that he is in and the social order that he lives in.

Against the backdrop of a close relationship between absolute and relative values, it may be noted that absolutism has come under attack by different relativistic ethical theories in the modern and contemporary world.

a) Moral Experimentalism

The appeal of John Dewey's Moral experimentalism is largely due to his emphasis upon the relativity of values and ideals to changing situations. According to Dewey, all ideals and values, however old and respected, should be held tentatively. They should be tested by the consequences of acting upon them. If they increase values and further the

growth of individuals and society, they are to that extent confirmed. But they are not to be accepted as finally and absolutely valid. They are always to be acted upon in an experimental way, the mind keeping itself open to new possibilities of values. The danger however of this view is obvious: It would put all ideals and values in flux and make it impossible to establish any of them as a firm basis for personal and social life. As a result, it would make unity and continuity in the life of the individual or society impossible. Thus, unmitigated experimentalism in morality would be as disastrous as complete relativism.

Nevertheless, moral experimentalism, like moral relativism, points to an element of truth that is important. As stated earlier, while principles of values are absolute and unchanging, the forms assumed by values in different times and places are relative and changing. There are several reasons for this: The most obvious is that changes in human knowledge and social conditions are continuous, and values are modified as a result of these changes. Secondly, we can think of infinite possibilities. For example, man's knowledge of nature is still partial; and there are many different forms of beauty which are still to be created. Human mind should always be open to new forms of value which may be discovered and realised. Finally, man is a spiritual being,

characterised by freedom and the capacity to transcend himself. He is essentially creative, always seeking to produce forms through which he can express new possibilities of values. Hence, he cannot be content with a single style of art or literature, merely copying the masters of the past and repeating their achievements, for he sees always things in fresh ways and experiments with new methods of expressing what he sees. Thus, the boundless possibilities of value in nature and history interact with the creative spirit of man to bring new forms of value into being. This is particularly characteristic of the modern world in which scientific methods of knowing and the democratic ways of life have combined to emphasize rapid changes, although life in such a world is difficult because of the constant necessity of mankind to adjustments to changing situations and demands.

Thus, in Dewey's moral experimentalism, we cannot deny the fact that man's life is relatively oriented to values which are in a sense experimental and relative. Yet we cannot conclude from this that these values are totally relative, because we cannot isolate them in relation to absolute values. Therefore, the boundaries between them need not be drawn too rigidly.

b) Emotivism

Like Dewey's moral experimentalism, A.J. Ayer's emoti-

vism too plays down the relationship between the absolute and the relative values; emotivism is also a form of relativism. A.J. Ayer argues that all ethical statements are emotive. "Thou shalt not" really means "I feel it is wrong" or "I dislike it". Ethics is not cognitive, much less prescriptive, it is simply emotive. Ethical pronouncements are merely ejaculations of our subjective feelings, and not divine imperatives about moral duty. This is clearly a radical relativism, since on this ground everything would be relative to the vastly different feelings of different individuals. Therefore, there would be no room for absolute principles in ethics.

c) Subjectivism

Jean Paul Sartre's atheistic existentialism involves a form of radical subjectivism in ethics. He believes that there is no objective meaning or value in life. "Man is a useless passion", says Sartre. He writes, "To give me orders I am doomed to have no other law but mine.... For I am a man, and every man must find his own way".¹ Man is absolutely free and everything is relative to what the individual wills to do. We can create our own meanings and values. There are no objective values to be discovered; all values are made subjectively by those who will them. While we may

1. Jean Paul Sartre, No Exit and Three Other Plays, "The Flies", New York, Collier Macmillan, 1966, pp. 121-123.

acknowledge here the merit of giving prominence to the subject who makes his choice in this theory, we must not forget to acknowledge equally that a notion of pure subjectivity in ethics is a chimera; for our choice is not made in the vacuum but in concrete and objective situations of life.

d) Situationism

Joseph Fletcher's 'Situational Ethics' exemplifies yet another form of relativism. Everything is relative to the situations, says Fletcher.² In certain situations it may be right to lie, steal, commit adultery, kill etc. All values are determined by the specific situations. Thus, he claims that the ends justify the means. But this kind of situationism is fraught with a total rejection of all ethical norms and values; the absurdity of the position is self-evident; ethics would then cease to be a normative discipline.

e) Cultural Relativism

One of the powerful sources of relativism in ethics in modern times is anthropological and cultural analysis that highlights the great variety of customs and practices found in different groups and cultures. From this point of view, ethical absolutes are sought to be ruled out, because there cannot possibly be a universal agreement or consensus

2. Fletcher, J. Situation Ethics, S.C.M. Press Ltd., London, p. 39.

of opinions with regard to any standard or norm. It is argued that each set of values is relative to a geographical place and time, and we have no way of transcending this situation, leaving us confined to an ethical cultural relativism.

Before we point out in general the untenability of the forms of relativism in ethics, it may be granted that ethical absolutism is wrong, if we understand the absolute values as if they are objective entities either in this world or in a mysterious realm. Nonetheless, absolute values become a necessity both in the context of ethics and religion. We need rather to understand them as the principles which get embodied in relative and changing situations. Against this backdrop, we may note that the attacks on the ethical absolutes by the forms of relativism fails to take into consideration the close relation that exists between absolute and relative values. It ignores the fact that the absolute values get embodied in relative values and that relative values derive their significance from the absolute values. Although relative values may fall short in their standards in comparison with the absolute values, yet they are not without any significance to the absolute values. Both are equally important in their own context; and in order to understand values, either absolute or relative, one has to synthesize their differences without creating any dichotomy between them.

Thus, absolute values would be merely abstract, or mere ideas, without their manifestations in the relative values. And the relative values would be merely means without ends if they are sundered from the absolute values. The relative values would simply lose their significance without being fulfilled, if they are separated from their ground of the absolute values.

THE NEW TESTAMENT ABSOLUTE VALUES

The New Testament ethics at the core is firmly absolutistic: It is based on the nature of an unchanging God, "Who cannot lie" (Titus, 1:2). It is manifested in God's law which "cannot be broken" (John, 10:35), and in the person of Jesus Christ who "is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb., 13:8). Total ethical relativism, therefore, is not an option for a Christian. But, to be realistic, we must however acknowledge that we live in a constantly changing world. The absolute values have to take the forms of relative values as well. But this does not mean that we underestimate the values as absolute. In fact, values at the core of the New Testament, for that matter of any religion, have to be absolute, no matter what forms of relativity they may come to acquire. In other words, absolutism in the New Testament is not incompatible with the different relative forms of the absolute values. We encounter in the New Testament neither a mere

relativism nor a total absolutism, though absolute values in their own unique features do predominate therein, as they are the undercurrent of Christian ethics. This New Testament orientation to the absolute values, it may be noted, is different from that of Immanuel Kant in his advocacy of the Categorical Imperative.

Our above contention, that, in understanding the New Testament ethics, the absolute values therein must not be understood in terms of either mere relativism or total absolutism at the peripheral level, deserves a closer scrutiny. In general it may be stated that, while a mere relativism is rejected in virtue of the unchanging nature of God and of his will being embodied in the moral law, a total absolutism too is equally rejected for the following reasons.

Firstly, a total absolutism would fail to speak to man in his ethical concerns. Finite man does not have the perfect understanding of God's absolutes. Paul says,

"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

(I Cor. 13:12)

Paul suggests that our understanding of God's perfect law is imperfect; that God's word may be infallible (John, 10:35), but our understanding of it is not. God is infinite by nature,

but we have only a finite grasp of him. However, our understanding may still be adequate for a reasonable moral life, but it is not yet omniscience. This inadequacy in our understanding of the absolutes makes for a certain relativism.

Secondly, not all prescriptions of the New Testament are intended for all men at all times in all places. They are not universal either in intent or in content; they too are context-bound. Some commands are not universal in extension, they need not be obeyed in all circumstances. For example, it is clearly acknowledged that the commands to obey parents or governments may sometimes be superseded by the higher laws. This is the import of Peter's statement, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts, 5:29).

Finally, not all ethical commands have equal importance. Jesus himself spoke of the "weightier matters of the law" (Matthew, 23:23) in contrast to mere formalistic laws. He spoke of the "greatest" and the "least" commands (Matthew, 23:23). If this is so, a Christian is not committed to the commands ~~causistically~~ causistically. There are occasions when one has to go by the spirit of the commands rather than the letter of the demands. It is also possible to attach greater significance to some laws than to others' this at once suggests a gradation in importance of the laws (Matthew, 23:23,24).

The New Testament absolute values cannot be fully defined. Therefore, there is a sense in which we can consider them to be subjectively absolute, especially when we reject an objective absolutism. Nonetheless, it is not a mere subjectivism just because they cannot be defined; they can be described and to some extent elucidated. It is equally difficult to identify values as absolute in the New Testament. However, it is generally admitted that love, goodness and truth have a claim to be considered absolute. Other values, in so far as they are seen as some forms of the manifestations of the absolute values, are considered to be relative. In what follows is a brief elucidation of love, goodness and truth with their inseparable relation to the relative values.

1) Love

If we are not to dwell here on the distinction of the kinds of love spoken about in the New Testament, (which is already discussed by me in Chapter II), love as the absolute value may first of all be identified with the holy nature of God (agapé); and secondly, with the reflection of God's holiness in the life of men, in particular, in the relation that they bear to one another. With this conviction, Paul writes that there "abide faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love" (I Cor., 13:13). Indeed, the criterion to judge if one is a follower of the New Testament is love

(Romans, 13:8; John, 15:12). St. John brings out explicitly the twofold aspects of love as what abides in God and what is reflected in man in the sphere of intersubjectivity: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (I John, 4:16). In order to know God, a Christian must abide in love. It is a value that is absolute because all other values are tested by love, and love cannot be tested by other higher values. Other relative values are sought to be attested by love. Even truth and goodness must be permeated by love. To pursue them without love could lead them to mere intellectualism and voluntarism respectively, turning at once our concern with ethics and religion alike into blind formalism and emotivism.

Love is an absolute value in the New Testament. It is often extended beyond the confines of the temporal existence. In the temporal sphere, it entails forgiveness and compassion, revealed in the person of Christ himself. Men, who accept this foundational truth, are to find a clear endorsement of it in their own personal life. I shall now discuss its absoluteness along with the concern of the Christian ethicists to incarnate the abstract principle of love into concretely dynamic but relative values. These ethicists inject into their Christian ethics elements of relativism, situationism and personalism, although not in the sense of rela-

tivising the absolute value. This may bring out clearly the relation between the absolute and relative values.

Ethical relativism, not at all in its derogatory sense, has come to liberate ethics progressively ever since the simultaneous appearance in 1932 of Emil Brunner's The Divine Imperative and Reinhold Niebuhr's Moral Man and Immoral Society.³ Both moral theologians built their conceptions of the Christian ethics on the principle that Divine command is always the same in its 'Why', but may be different in its 'How'. It is absolute and changeless as to the 'Why', but contingent as to the 'How'. For example, we are always commanded to act lovingly. The 'Why' of this command is the agapēic nature of God, whereas the 'How' of it depends on the concrete situation of our nature. How we are to love depends on our own responsible estimate of the situation. Only love is constant; everything else is a variable. The shift to relativism liberates the contemporary Christians from code-ethics, from stern iron-bound do's and don'ts, from casuistic conducts and legalistic morality, and bestows upon him the freedom according to the spirit.

The Christian relativism spoken above can therefore well go along with the Christian situationism in the cause

3. Brunner, E. The Divine Imperatives, Charles Scribner's Son, 1932.

of incarnating the absolute value of love in concrete situations. In Christian situationism, the ultimate criterion still remains agapeic love. This love however concretizes the abstract absolute principle; it does not either absolutize the relative or relativize the absolute. Concretization is not relativization at any rate. Joseph Fletcher says, "The Christian does not understand God in terms of love; he understands love in terms of God as seen in Christ". His statement beautifully captures the truth, "We love because He first loved us".⁴

Yet, love is meaningful as a value only in the community of integral human persons. Brunner declares that the notion of value apart from persons is an illusion.⁵ There are no intrinsic values, values exist only with reference to persons. Value is what it is for a person, rather than something with an absolute, objective existence; the absolute value is not a thing but only a principle. Like Brunner, Edgar Brightman combines with Christian relativism and situationism yet another important item, namely personalism. Personality is the only true intrinsic value we know. All values are but forms of personal experience of the absolute principle.⁶

4. Fletcher, Joseph. Situation Ethics, S.C.M. Press, p. 49.

5. Brunner, E. The Divine Imperatives, Charles Scribner's Son, 1932, p. 194.

6. Brightman, Egar. Nature and Values, Henry Holt & Co., 1945, p. 62.

If so, the value of love is the absolute principle that finds expression in the personal experience of human beings as centres of consciousness, will and free actions.

While incorporating the elements from Christian relativism, situationism and personalism into Christian ethics, it is important to note that the absolute principle of love is not relativized, for the simple reason that it stands for the agapeic love; the elements only bring out the ways in which the absolute value of love becomes meaningful in the concrete living of a Christian. In other words, they indicate the relation between the absolute and relative values in the New Testament. In conclusion, it may be stated that in the New Testament, the absolute character of love as a value, lies only in the agapeic love. 'God is love' amounts to saying that 'God's nature is love', and that all other forms of applications of love are derived from the agape as its source; the latter are the relative concretization of agape itself.

We may now fruitfully look for the close relation between the absolute and the relative values of love in some of the texts in the New Testament. Divine love as demanded by Christ becomes absolute in his reply to the teacher of the law that the first and the most important commandment is:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength."

(Mark, 12:30)

The absolute principle has an absolute demand on one's heart, soul, mind and strength. This calls for a total surrender on the part of a believer to God, he lives no longer for himself but only for God. It is only in a Christ-like manner that a Christian can understand the absolute law of love that demands the dedication of his total life to God. It is absolutely unique, in the sense that it transcends all other demands in his life.

The practice of the absolute love, according to the New Testament, liberates man from the law understood in a narrow sense of strict conformity with rules. If we have this absolute divine love, law ceases to operate in man's life for the simple reason that love fulfills all laws. In this sense, love being a unique absolute is said to supersede the law. Again, in the same sense, it is said that Moses gave form to the law, but Christ could give a substance to it by way of love.

Moreover, divine love as an absolute value not only fulfills all laws, but it at once becomes antithetical to a natural law of hating one's enemies. Christ is explicit on this love of enemies, too:

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you".

(Luke, 6:27-28)

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them".

(Luke, 6:32)

"But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them; without expecting to get anything back".

(Luke, 6:35)

It is not only the love of one's friends but even of one's enemies that ought to be characterised by an unconditionality. It is a love that does not expect anything in return. This absolute love is said to be antithetical to natural law, in the sense that it clearly transcends the instincts imbedded in human nature, not necessarily evil. One can manifest this heroic love to one's enemies only in the spirit of Christ himself. Thus, the absolute agapeic love personalised in Christ becomes the model for a Christian life. The absolute and the relative values of love meet in the person of Christ.

We may fruitfully cite a few concrete instances in the teachings of the New Testament to drive home the truth of Christ being the meeting point of absolute and the relative value of love:

"If anyone says, 'I love God', yet hate his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen".

(I John, 4:20)

Love of God is an absolute value, but, in a sense, it is an abstract principle. But it can be concretised by way of filling the abstract schema with flesh and blood by relating it to our fellowmen. It is the communitarian context that transforms the abstract principle of love into concrete love. Since all value is related to our day-to-day activity. The apostle seems to suggest that, if our love is not concretely expressed to our fellowmen, our claim that we love God is nothing short of a fraud. Again,

"A new commandment I give you, love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

(John, 13:34-35)

The new commandment given by Jesus explicitly makes the love of one's fellowmen the criterion for one's love for God. Moreover, it is not only the criterion, but also the content of divine love. For in addition to being the test for the principle of love, it is also the mark that is supposed to distinguish a Christian. It is this idea which is implicit in the call for discipleship in the text.

St. Paul also reiterates the New Testament teaching that seeks to materialise abstract love into concrete forms:

"You my brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love".

(Galatians, 5:13)

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient bearing one another in love".

(Ephesians, 4:2)

Paul takes into consideration the relative values of service, humility, gentleness, patience as the concrete forms of love itself. For they fulfill the demands of the absolute love. To understand love in Pauline philosophy, we have to realise it as related concretely to our day to day living.

John in his epistle further explicates the teaching on the value of love, adding to it an element of concern for sharing:

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him. How can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words to tongue but with actions and in truth".

(I John, 3:17-18)

Relativising love in the Christian context is not minimising it, but rather relating it to one's concrete actions. It is not a mere profession in mere words and speech that we

love God. Loving God entails one's sensitivity to the needs of one's fellow men and their fulfilment in action. John, who is known as the great apostle of love, is fully aware that these actions of love are firmly rooted in the agapeic love, as is clearly evidenced in the following:

"Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love".

"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us".

"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him".

"And he has given us this commandment: Whoever loves God must also love his brother".

(I John, 4:7-8; 12; 16; 21)

One has a feeling that a commentary on the above texts would only defile the exquisite beauty of the texts that could not be simpler for one's understanding. Its lucidity can be gauged directly as flowing from the apostle's heart to the heart of man open to the spirit. In conclusion, it may be admitted with many that the New Testament ethics is absolutistic. But, if absolutism were to be understood that the ethics concerned excludes all relativity, it cannot however be subscribed to. It is rather absolutistic in the sense that it admits the principle of absolute love, identical

with the divine nature, that seeks concrete manifestations in the life of man. Such ethics is not a static ethics, for it is the ethics of love and liberty: Hence, it admits many a form that is relative. Thus, speaking of the co-relation between the absolute and the relative values, the value of love not only permits, but also demands, that we concretize absolute love and determine the relative values of love in each situation in the light of its unique demands. Therefore, a large element of relativity is required in applying the absolute value of love; in the New Testament an ethical absolutism is not incompatible with a Christian ethical relativism, situationism and personalism.

2) Goodness

In the Old Testament, "good" is generally referred to what is 'pleasant', 'right' (Deuteronomy, 6:18) and 'beneficial' (Job, 2:10). In the New Testament, the Greek words 'agathos' and 'kalos' are rendered by 'good'. In none of these usages, however, 'good' has its full ethical content. In contrast to Greek ethics, the Bible centres goodness on God, the source of all goodness. It is true that both Plato and Aristotle also make "the good" central in their systems of thought: "If it is true that in the sphere of action, there is an end which we wish for its own sake, and for the sake of which we wish everything else — It is clear that

this will be the good or the supreme good" (Aristotle, Ethics Bk. I). Noble as these ideas are of the nature of the summum bonum, for the New Testament they do not lead to a living personal God as the ground and source of 'the good'. Throughout the Bible, however, God is declared to be good, because of his acts of redeeming love.

The triad of values of beauty, truth and goodness, acknowledged by many philosophers, are often reduced by Christian philosophers and theologians in the context of the New Testament to a fundamental value of goodness. The underlying reason for this coalescence is that God who is the fullness of being (truth) and auspiciousness/holiness (beauty) is experienced by man in his redeeming acts (goodness). In addition, what constitutes any of these values is precisely the goodness they share in common. Moral goodness in particular exists for person. The ideal of absolute goodness can exist only in a person from whom all reality and holiness is derived. Therefore, goodness cannot be explained on merely naturalistic or evolutionistic grounds. Even though we do not always follow the good, we are compelled to acknowledge its absolute claim upon us.

The New Testament declares that goodness must shine in its own light. Since it refers to action, the right context for it is the world of free persons; it has to be embodied

and lived. Since the concrete living of persons is the context of goodness, a feeling for goodness plays an essential part. Like all other feelings, this feeling too cannot be acquired once and for all, but must be experienced afresh each time. Goodness in the New Testament admits a hierarchy of values all of which may be considered as good. Nonetheless, God who is the end in itself for the specifically human soul, may be considered as the absolute value. In virtue of its specific bearing on the soul, it is more a spiritual than a purely ethical value, unlike it is the case with Plato and many other contemporary moral philosophers.

The New Testament terms the highest goodness variously as 'the kingdom of God', 'the state of blessedness', 'the life eternal', 'salvation' etc. Christ himself called it the kingdom of God. In most religious and philosophical systems, the highest good is conceived either negatively as cessation from life's miseries and sufferings or positively as happiness and bliss conceived often in terms of the joys and pleasures of empirical existence.

At the higher philosophical level, bordering on a non-dualism and even mysticism, goodness is often equated with contemplation of, and absorption in, the divine or the ultimate reality. But to Immanuel Kant kingdom of God is the intelligible world of pure reason:

"The Kingdom of God has come to us so soon as even the principle of the gradual transition from church faith to the pure religion of reason, the principles of a divine ethical state on earth, has been anywhere recognised as a fundamental principle, however, far off may be the actual realisation of such a state".⁷

The kingdom of God thus seems, for Kant, to have been inspired by the spirit of enlightenment, to have already begun in the shape of pure reason, or what he calls 'the intelligible world'. But in this empirical and historical world, it is only in a process of manifestation, and the full development lies ahead in the historical future. Nonetheless, for Kant the kingdom of God began now with the spirit of enlightenment, and will be consummated in the historical future, but this kingdom is unequivocally an ethical kingdom. Indeed, we would not expect anything more than this from the author of Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. Thus, Kant seems to equate the reign of reason with the reign of God. He seems to believe that the reign of reason establishes a supersensuous order of things through which the highest good is made possible, and can come into the possession of men. Thus, it is ultimately a kingdom of man on earth.

But the kingdom of God in the New Testament is not a mere ethical kingdom of pure reason, as Kant would have.

7. Martin, H.V. The Kingdom of God, Christian Literature Society for India, Bangalore, 1952, pp. 20-21.

But it is the kingdom of God, in which God himself reigns in the life of a believer. The New Testament clearly acknowledges that the kingdom of God is the kingdom of 'Grace', 'Love' and 'Power'; it does not acknowledge the kingdom to be the reign of pure reason alone, as it is acutely conscious of the mystery of evil in human life. Hence, it considers the foundation of such a kingdom to rest on divine power, grace and love. It heralds the kingdom to have begun in the life of Jesus, but it does not envisage its fulfilment in the flowering of human reason alone; its fulfilment is not in the historical future, rather in eternity. This transcendental dimension does not minimise the importance of the refinement of reason in man but rather it takes into consideration the ultimate victory of man over the problem of evil, both physical and moral, which it conceived as the religious concept of sin. Therefore, the New Testament subscribes to the belief that the kingdom of God is already begun, in so far as God rules as the spirit in the heart of man, but it is to be consummated only in eternity. Therefore, it clearly transcends the ethical kingdom identified by Kant with the rational ordering of the world and of the human relations therein.

What is stated above is not meant to establish that Christianity is an other worldly religion, having nothing

to do with ethics that govern the human relations in this life. On the contrary, the New Testament clearly acknowledges that the kingdom of God is already inaugurated in the life of Jesus on the earth. This is abundantly clear in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus' moral ideal, as disclosed in his doctrine of the kingdom of God, is meant for the life to be lived here and now. Hence, it harps on the continuity with the prophetic teachings of the Old Testament. His idea of the kingdom, to be sure, took root in the common ground of the Israelitic hope of the restoration of their secular kingdom. Jesus, however, spiritualises their material expectations. His doctrine of the kingdom expands on the broader lines of the prophetic teachings concerning the Messianic age which is yet to come. A peculiarity of Jesus' preaching of the gospel of the kingdom, which immediately arrests attention, is his announcement that it is now and here on this earth. He taught with remarkable insistence that it was an immediate and actual presence and reign of God among men. (Matthew, 4:17; 10:7; 12:28), (Mark, 1:15), (Luke, 17:20-21).

Jesus' announcement of its presence on this earth was different from that of John the Baptist, proclaiming that it was at hand. He had not come like John the Baptist to enforce a stern requirement of repentance as a preparation for the coming of the kingdom. On the other hand, in Jesus'

Gospel, the kingdom of God is already here; and because it is a present reality, God is said to invite man for faith. The real presence of the power of heaven on earth is the joyous reason for Christian life and hope. Whereas John's proclamation was, "Make ye ready the way of the Lord", and it concerned still the preparation for the kingdom of God, Jesus' proclamation was, "The time is fulfilled", and it announced the kingdom being present in the midst of men. The Christian conception of life and its supreme good rest on this fundamental fact which Jesus announced: that the kingdom of God is not something wholly pertaining to future or remote from our present participation in it, but it is a real power and an actual reign of God already begun on the earth, in the life of those who accept God as the ultimate good of their life. The Christian conception of the highest good is, accordingly, both ideal and real; it is an ideal which is transcendent, and at the same time real as immanent.

Besides these general observations of the kingdom of heaven revealed by Jesus, we may note some specific characteristics of his doctrine of the highest good, in the New Testament:

Firstly, the kingdom of God is a personal good. To the Jewish mind, the expectation of the kingdom of God as

the establishment of their secular kingdom had become too predominantly a political hope. Jesus taught that the beginnings of the kingdom of God lie in personal character, and its good is to be realised through the new life and spiritual victory of the individual man. Jesus called his disciples by name, man by man, into his kingdom. He taught the Pharisees that the kingdom of God should not come with outward pomp and observation; that it already was in the midst of them:

"The Kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is' or 'There it is', because the Kingdom of God is within you".

(Luke, 17:21)

His gospel of the rule of God became an intensely personal message. The kingdom of God among men is a temper of mind, a spiritual disposition, a state of heart. To enter into the kingdom is not to make a pilgrimage, or to go up through the gates into the holy city; but to come into a certain willingness of mind, to be of a certain spirit, in short, to have a new heart.

Secondly, the kingdom of God is a social good. The kingdom of God is not only a personal good as shown above, but also likewise a society of men. Therefore, its good is to be secured in the larger life of humanity. This humaneness

of the New Testament corresponds to the personal identification of Jesus with humanity. The Messiah who has come to establish the kingdom of God as an ever present and continuous reality on earth, himself belongs to humanity. The highest good, then, as it is presented to our thoughts and desires in Jesus' teaching is more than its conceptions by any of the prophets before him, in the latter it is still ethnically determined. The highest good in the New Testament is therefore at once social and human. It is no ideal of life to be attained by men merely individually, apart from the perfection of humanity; it entails the participation of the entire humanity in its own redemption. The Christian conception of the highest good then is to be realised in the consummation of the human history. The New Testament asserts that man is to play his personal part and to share individually in this human weal and perfection through a life bound up dutifully with the lives of others, and in the fulfillment of his common human relations, obligations and destiny. It is the true reign of God in human heart, in other words, the kingdom of God on earth.

Thirdly, the kingdom of God is a spiritual good. While this kingdom belongs to humanity and thus, is, in its idea and purpose, for man, it is also superhuman. It is the kingdom of God for man. The coming of the kingdom is there-

fore, also the revelation of God. The New Testament believes that this good comes from above, and is to be gradually naturalized in the life of man and his institutions. Hence, it is said, it does not come 'of flesh and blood, but of the spirit'. This humanitarianism thus envisages the hope of the glorification of man through the spirit of God. Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God is not the same as a gospel of some possible kingdom, however great, to spring up from the earth: 'My kingdom is not of this earth' rings out in the ears of any reader of the gospel. It is the enunciation of a spiritual power in man, working for the good which is here and now to be realized. Nonetheless, it is not to be limited by the conditions of present environment; and it has in itself the potency and the promise of a higher spiritual life and perfection. Therefore, the New Testament thinks that men belong to this kingdom of God as immortals.

Thus, the kingdom of God is personal, social and spiritual, in virtue of the facts that it is for nurturing persons, having Christ-like characters; that it is meant for the perfection of humanity; and that it is for the highest good of the human spirit. In this sense, goodness becomes an absolute value different from its abstract philosophical conceptions. But mere absolutism of goodness is not tenable to the New Testament, because we cannot understand it merely

as abstract ideals. It is to be understood and grasped in terms of relative values of goodness embodied in the life of man.

An embodiment of the absolute value of goodness, identified with the kingdom of God, into relative values is instantiated in the following:

"Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of God. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of God".

(Matthew, 18:2-4)

In the above instantiation, Jesus reveals how the kingdom of God is incarnated in the concrete living of man, without its ceasing to be what it essentially and eternally is: The kingdom, negatively, is not an abstract entity. It is not also a restored Hebrew commonwealth with its throne of dominion, not a glorified earthly city which shall exercise lordship over the nations. Also, it is not the supreme political good which the Saducees covet, nor the reign of the law which the Pharisees exalt above the claims of humanity. But the kingdom, positively, is the spirit of a child: Its simplicity and the purity of heart. Jesus' invitation to man to become a child is not a regression to an infantile stage, but a progression to a nature stage of life characterised by child-

likeness and guidelessness. We can thus understand the supreme good only in the nature of a child, who has the simplicity of mind, purity of heart and the trustful spirit, open to God, its ultimate good.

All these attributes are the relative values, concrete expressions of the absolute good. They are the manifestations of God's reign in man. This is further substantiated by the truth that only the pure in heart are favoured with a vision of God: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew, 5:8). The purity of heart is here considered to make for the vision of God, which to the New Testament is identical with the attainment of the kingdom of God.

In conclusion, the New Testament value of the highest good, conceived as the kingdom of God, is an ideal for personal and social humanity, to be reached through ethical and spiritual progress in one's life. It is the reign of God in the hearts of men, who are to reflect God's own nature in their personal and social endeavours. In this way they prove in their life and actions that the kingdom of God is already inaugurated here and now, but will be consummated hereafter. It is an absolute value in so far as it reflects God's own nature of immutable goodness; nonetheless, it is relative in so far as it reflects Christ's spirit that governs the life of an individual and humanity as a whole in myriad ways.

3) Truth

Yet another absolute value in the New Testament is truth. It is absolute because it stands for the fidelity and reliability of God (Romans, 3:1-7). Nonetheless, in so far as man is related to the absolute truth, it is also relative in man's life. Thus truth is the quality that is in Christ (Ephesians, 4:21); again, the preaching of the gospel is the word of truth (Ephesians, 1:13); again, the righteous man who fulfills the law of Christ is said to walk in the truth (II John, 3:4). Despite the difficulty involved in defining truth, in the above contexts, we may say that a Christian, in his conception of truth, will have to take into consideration the transcendental dimension of God's own nature and its immanentism in the life of Christ, therefore, of himself. Hence, truth is man's conformity to divine nature after the manner of Christ's own conformity. The conformity spoken of is not merely static but dynamic to the extent that man is entrusted with the task of realizing in himself the fidelity and reliability of God. Thus, truth in the New Testament has to be understood as a character of a covenant between God and man.

The kind of truth, for which a scientist strives, is open to change. It is discovered with the help of the objective methods, in which observations and experiments

play a dominant role; the discovery of scientific truths has nothing to do with the ethico-religious methods. The noun 'truth', as we encounter in the New Testament, is not the simple statement of something which is true. It implies both the knowledge of facts and the understanding which makes sense in terms, related to our experience. This kind of truth cannot be reached by the objective methods, because it forces itself upon us as ultimate and which, once we have recognised and accepted it, can no longer be shaken by doubts, nor ever change. Such a truth is necessarily ethico-religious. The New Testament truth, accordingly, must be judged in the light of our experiences. Its absoluteness can only be confirmed by our experience. It is the truth by which we live, and it is confirmed if we are committed to it. This element of commitment, combined with its understanding, is the specific character of all ethico-religious truths; the New Testament truth is no exception here.

Scientific truth is determined by the external facts or the objects that it studies; it has its objective determinations. The ethico-religious truth of the New Testament, on the other hand, while not ignoring the objective nature of God, is also determined by the relation that the subject bears to the absolute truth; it has its subjective determinations as well. It governs our conception of the kind of

persons we ought to be. It cannot be brought about by conscious effort of discursive thinking, nor is it capable of being the conclusion a logical argument. Hence, the New Testament emphatically states that 'truth must shine in its own light'.⁸ The New Testament may not go against the general philosophical thesis that truth is based on our judgement. For it holds that the organ, by which we grasp truth, is, in the last resort, our 'sense of truth'. This sense, however, can mislead, but it can also be tested. A precondition for all such test is that we must see truth in the right context. For instance, a mathematician may consider his findings to be the nearest approach to absolute truth; but this is also not the context in which truth can be discovered, because mathematics is purely formal and has to be applied to acquire significance. Absolute truth in the contrary must give us direct knowledge of a content i.e., both fact and its meaning.

We may here point out that the right context for ethico-religious truths is constituted of two conditions, namely, personal approach and freedom. These two conditions, closely related to each other, are equally essential. We must firstly be concerned and involved as the individual persons, because it is the subjective method which opens approaches truth. And secondly, truth must appeal to us as

8. Roubiczek, Paul. Ethical Values in the Age of Science, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 278.

free persons. For truth must strongly compel our attention and influence our lives, so that our sense of truth is stimulated into free action. Free action because without freedom our search for truth would be meaningless.⁹

It may be granted however, that we cannot hope to know the absolute absolutely, but only its facets. This follows from the very logic of the absolute truth. Nonetheless, each facet must belong to the same kind of truth: To be true, each partial truth must partake in the whole truth. Moreover, truth must be experienced always anew, and the new experience must be a vivid experience. Therefore, knowledge of truth loses its significance once it is no longer understood in terms of living experience. All established forms of truth, if they no longer evoke a new experience, can become a dead ritual or worship. Therefore, no single facet of truth can be regarded as something which we rely upon as possessing forever; it must awaken our feeling, our sense of truth, constantly afresh and be tested by new experiences. If it is a facet of truth, it will re-emerge triumphant; if not, it ceases to be truth, failing to touch our experience.

All that is stated above goes to substantiate the point that truth must be embodied in such a way that it can be lived; and that it has to be lived to become entirely

9. Ibid., p. 279.

real. A mere proclamation of truth is insufficient; our belief in the truth which a mystic professes, for instance, will be severely shaken, if we discover that he evidently desires powers and luxury, even though there may be truth in what he proclaims. Truth as an absolute value must affect the quality of life in such a way that we are compelled to commit our lives to it.

This explains why a new truth so frequently needs a personal sacrifice before it becomes powerful, it needs the witness by whom it is made moving, compelling, even terrifying. Buddha, Socrates, Christ, religious martyrs and the early Reformers in the Christian tradition had their own measure of sacrifice, even to the extent of laying down their life as a witness to the truths that they professed. In the absence of the possibility of proof, a new truth becomes convincing when we can see a personal participation in the truth concerned. Christ could have recourse to measures that would have guaranteed the worldly success, but he had to bear witness that his conception of truth mattered to him profoundly; otherwise his sayings would have seemed no more than interesting speculations. In the absence of conclusive proofs, it is life which has to bear witness to the truth. But while the personal testimony to truth is incontestable, there is also a caveat; we have to guard ourselves against

the notion that sacrifice in itself is the criterion for truth. For even as weakness of character, or lack of courage, may prevent a sacrifice demanded in the service of truth, dynamics of power and self-aggrandizement too may goad one to sacrifices, not necessarily in the service of truth. Men have given up their lives for the most atrocious causes, from the crusades to Nazism, yet it is not done in the service of truth.

How does the New Testament conceive of truth? Firstly, the absolute value of truth lies primarily in the fact that it enables man to transcend himself by participation in being beyond himself. The pursuit of truth, for anyone who is a real lover of truth, cannot stop at any point, but must press on beyond every limit in the effort to know reality as a whole. Moreover, the lover of truth seeks knowledge of the meaning and value of his own being as well as of Being itself. Truth enables man to embrace the fullness of Being. Thus it bestows upon him the power to participate in universal Being and Value, which is identified by the New Testament with God's own nature of absolute fidelity and reliability for man: 'God is my rock and my salvation'.

Secondly, if the goal of truth is participation in the realm of reality and value, it is obvious that all the human faculties must be enlisted in the quest for it. A fallacy

of Positivism with its narrow conception of scientific reason is that truth is discovered only by reason working on materials provided by sense experience. This may be an adequate account of the process by which scientific knowledge is attained. But it is completely inadequate as a description of the process of attaining truth in morality and religion. In these fields, besides reason, intuition, feeling and action are also involved in the discovery of truth. The New Testament is explicit here: Religious truth can come only to him who is pure in heart (Matthew, 5:8); it comes to him who seeks God with his whole self; it comes to him who surrenders his will to God; God will henceforth be worshipped in spirit and in truth. Thus rational analysis and synthesis must be supplemented by intuition, feeling and commitment of the will, if truth and value is to be discovered.

Thirdly, the New Testament holds that truth must ultimately be understood from the religious perspective. The knowledge of natural laws by the scientist, the appreciation of qualities and values by the artist, and the synoptic vision of reality by the philosopher are, for the New Testament, all partial expressions of the truth that is in God. It is to this conception of the New Testament that St. Augustine gives expression to in stating that all truths must be seen in the light of the universal truth which is in God.

How can man know the final secret of this divine truth? In the Greek view, man knows truth by reason, since truth is an impersonal and universal structure or order. However, in the New Testament, man cannot know the ultimate truth by mere scientific analysis, or artistic contemplation or by mere philosophical speculation alone; he must rather interpret it with the help of God's revelation of His truth in concrete historical events. For the New Testament God has revealed truth in Christ, not merely in his teachings, but also in his person. This is why Christ is called in the Gospel the 'Word', the self-utterance of God:

"The word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we beheld his glory, the glory as of
the only begotten of the father, full of
grace and truth".

(John, 1:14)

The New Testament believes that the fullest and the clearest expression of God's nature and of his purpose for man has come through his incarnation in Christ. The word of Christ in the gospel reflects the faith of the early church about him: "I am the way, the truth, and the life". The meaning and value of this truth can never be demonstrated by scientific or artistic or philosophical arguments. It is grasped with the help of revelation, and is accepted by faith. Therefore, the vision of truth in the New Testament cannot be separated from God's revelation in the person of Christ.

Finally, the New Testament conviction, that the ultimate truth about reality has been made known through revelation, does not imply a depreciation of the value of other truths which can be known by the methods of common sense, science, art and philosophy etc. Indeed, it enhances their value immensely, for it enables us to see truths in relation to their divine source and to the creation as a whole. In this way, our knowledge is endowed with a broader and deeper meaning, every fact pointing beyond itself to its ultimate origin and taking its place in the totality of truth that is in God.

From all that is stated about the conception of the New Testament truth, it should be evident that the absolute value of truth should not be divorced from other relative values in the life of man. There must be an interpretation of values, if there is to be a unity in the personality and the completeness in the spiritual life of man. In modern thought, however, there has often been a tendency to assert the 'autonomy' or independence of truth, and to insist upon the thesis, "truth for truth's sake". The New Testament may be said to admit that truth is "autonomous", but only in the sense that it should not be determined by an appeal to human authority; it may be said to further subscribe to the thesis, "truth for truth's sake", but only in the sense of

an affirmation of the intrinsic value of truth. But, it would also simultaneously uphold that the absolute value of truth is not divorced from other relative values of truth, which give flesh and blood to the abstract absolute value. Since truth enables the self to transcend itself by participating in reality and value beyond itself, it exists not merely for its own sake but for the sake of the enlargement of life. This is the wider vision of the New Testament truth.

Let me explicate the process through which the absolute truth comes to acquire flesh and blood through the relative values. Truth as an absolute value can be understood only in terms of "truthfulness" in the life of man. All the virtues of truthfulness materialises the absolute truth. Thus truth may be defined as expressive of the moral virtues of love, gentleness, goodness, kindness, justice and so on. Further, even these relative truths the New Testament seeks to materialise in such a way that they are personified in a living moral being. We are unable to conceive of love without thinking of it in a person who manifests it in action. All moral virtues therefore, have a concrete value only when they are seen in a human being. The human mind cannot conceive of any of the moral virtues without a being in whom these qualities are personified. For the New Testament, Christ is that person the whole humanity can look upon as the perfect

ideal, the complete and perfect personification of all the moral qualities; and in him all the moral and spiritual truths are eminently realized. He is the meeting ground of the absolute and relative values. It is against this backdrop that we have to interpret Christ's claim to be the 'truth'. In him, we see perfect love, holiness, purity, goodness, kindness, mercy and justice - all blended together in perfection. In so far as he is an ideal for man, in him we find the truth about our duties towards our fellowmen and towards God.

In conclusion, the absolute values of love, goodness and truth in the New Testament are eternal values, because they refer to an aspect of divine nature itself. They are unaffected by the flux of events. Therefore they are absolute. But, in so far as we realise them in our life, in a sense, we partake of the eternal life. This recognition is indeed the immortal message of the New Testament. These absolute values are at the core of the New Testament and they constitute the heritage for the soul as ends in themselves. The New Testament ethics would be empty without these absolute values. God is the only source of their substance; they transcend all other relative values. The reinstatement of the absolute values of the New Testament is relevant today in a special way, when the naturalist psychologists and philosophers have precipitated a cultural crisis in modern world.

They advocate a doctrine that values are simple objects of desires or interests which are to be used by man as far as they bring satisfaction to him, without imposing any absolute demand upon him. And yet, the New Testament ethics is not an objective absolutism, for the absolutes here are not objects but principles. Therefore, we cannot ignore the importance of their being relative too, in so far as there is a constant need for their concrete manifestations in the life of man. The absolute values may be transcendental, but they have an aspect of immanentism in being embodied as relative values.

Values do not exist in vacuum. That is to say, they got imbedded in human action and attitudes. Further, justification of action requires absolute values. If we do not accept absolute values justification of human action will be impossible. In short, there is a logical need to accept absolute values. In a sense, Truth, Good and Beauty can be regarded as absolute values. Historically speaking, these three values have played a very significant role in civilization. They represent three distinct aspects of human life.
