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## RITSCHL'S USE OF VALUE-JUDGMENTS

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In this article the effort is made to explain the method proposed by Albrecht Ritschl as the only right one for the attainment of religious knowledge, namely, the use of "value-judgments," as described in his book entitled (in English translation) *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*.

1. We must first answer the question: What does Ritschl mean by "religious knowledge," and how does that differ from other kinds of knowledge?

"In every religion," says Ritschl (p. 199), "what is sought, with the help of the superhuman, spiritual power revered by man, is a solution of the contradiction in which man finds himself, as both a part of the world of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature." Again, referring to Christianity, particularly, as the highest type of religion, he says (p. 212): "Knowledge of God can be demonstrated as religious knowledge only when He is conceived as securing to the believer such a position in the world as more than counterbalances its restrictions." Superiority to, and mastery over, the world, then, is Ritschl's idea of the essence of that which is offered to man in religion, or at least in Christianity. If by "the world" we understand, not only physical nature, but also all within our *human* nature which injures, limits, or restricts us in our highest capabilities and aspirations, or if by the world he means, to use the old phrase, "the world, the flesh, and the devil," I think that we may regard this definition as satisfactory for our purposes.

Religious knowledge is therefore, so far as Christianity is concerned, such knowledge of God as enables man to overcome the world. It will be unnecessary to linger on the argument that the power which is superior to the world, so that through knowledge of

it *we* may also be superior to the world, is a *unity* and is *personal*. This sort of knowledge (or *faith*, as we should ordinarily call it, and as Ritschl elsewhere calls it) differs from scientific or philosophic or theoretic knowledge, first, in the *end* for which it is sought or held, namely, the overcoming of the restrictions and evils of the world. No matter *how* we seek it or come to it, this sort of knowledge, whether as sought or as attained, is *religious* knowledge.

2. The second question is: How is this religious knowledge attained (as *knowledge*), or what *confirmation* have we of its *truth* after the ideas involved in it have been presented, and how does the method of confirmation or proof of *religious* knowledge differ from the method in scientific or theoretic knowledge?

The answer to the first part of this question seems to be: The truth of our belief in God (as revealed in Christ) is confirmed by the fact of our experience that when we hold and act upon that belief we do in reality attain the end which we sought, namely, victory over the world. The nature of this victory is the triumphant feeling which we have that our personalities are severally worth more than the whole world (of nature considered as that which is not personality) and that through fellowship with God, the master of nature, we also share and shall more fully share in his mastery of nature. Now this feeling or these two feelings are judgments of value. In the first place, I judge of the value of my own personality or spiritual existence that its value is greater than that of the whole world of nature which restricts it. It therefore *ought* to dominate or overcome the world. My second value-judgment concerns the Christian idea of God. When I accept it as true and act upon it, I find it to satisfy just my greatest spiritual need—the need for independence of the world and for confidence that I am superior to it and shall eventually triumph over it. I judge, then, that it is of the greatest possible value to me since it satisfies my greatest need.

My confidence in the reality of the Christian God rests, according to this argument, on my judgment of my own value as compared with that of the world and on my judgment of what this valuation of myself implies—that is, the existence of one through whom this superiority to the world may be realized. The relation

of this argument to the similar one in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* must be considered later.

How does this method differ from the method used in attaining other forms of knowledge? In seeking for theoretic knowledge we endeavor by observation and impartial thought to ascertain the relations, especially the causal relations, of the facts and phenomena of our experience to each other. This theoretic knowledge or scientific knowledge is often called "disinterested," but it is such only in the sense that we do not anticipate the results and desire them as having independent value or relate them immediately to our moral or religious life. The method of reaching conclusions, then, is that of impartial observation and of noting uniform and supposedly necessary relations as they actually exist apart from any desire on our part as to how they *should exist*.

3. The third question that we must answer from Ritschl's standpoint consists of three parts: Can we by the methods of *theoretic* knowledge come to any legitimate conclusions on the questions of *religious* knowledge? If so, may we not in this way substantiate the conclusions which we reach by the value-judgment method? If not, why not?

The first part of this question restated more specifically would be: Can philosophy, by the methods of science or by theoretic knowledge, attain to a single supreme principle or power by which to explain the world? To this question Ritschl gives a definite "No!" He characterizes all attempts of philosophy to do so as cases in which (p. 208) "the law of a *particular realm* of being is set up as the supreme law of *all* being, though the other forms of existence neither would nor could be explained by its means." The materialist attempts to explain the world by the laws of mechanical causality, which, however, quite fail to account for spiritual life, or indeed for life of any sort. "In all the combinations exhibited by the materialistic theory," he says (p. 209), "there is manifest an expenditure of the power of imagination which finds its closest parallel in the cosmogonies of heathenism—which is of itself a proof that what rules is not *scientific method* but an aberrant and confused *religious impulse*." Another vain effort of philosophy is illustrated by philosophical idealism, which, he says, assumes

“that the laws of *theoretical knowledge* are the laws of the human spirit in *all* its functions” (p. 210). “But, as certainly as feeling and will cannot be reduced to ideational knowledge, the last-named is not justified in imposing its laws upon the former.” These two illustrations indicate the general position. Philosophy has always sought a unified world-view, Ritschl admits, but he finds that it has sought it, not from the scientific, but from the *religious*, impulse, and the supreme principles which it has proposed have either been borrowed directly from religion or been developed by the imagination after the manner of polytheistic myths and in no case have been reached by the use of the proper scientific method.

Here we have, then, the explanation of Ritschl’s famous repudiation of any and all metaphysical systems as bases for religious knowledge—they are all fictions or phantasms of the imagination, untrue to their proper methods of theoretic cognition, or else they simply borrow (or steal) religious ideas directly and give them a pretense of scientific support by argument which is without value. Religious knowledge, then, if it exist at all, must depend on its own method of value-judgments, simply because there is nothing else for it to depend on.

4. But has religious knowledge no relation whatever to theoretic knowledge? Does Ritschl, as Orr, for example, charges, “stretch faith and reason apart until no contact remains”? By no means. There is a sense in which religious knowledge is a branch of theoretic knowledge. We noted above the similarity between Kant’s argument and Ritschl’s argument for the reality of God. Kant, Ritschl remarks, limits his proof of the Christian conception of God “to the merely practical use of the reason” (p. 221). “But this limitation hangs together with his *separation* of the spheres of the theoretical and practical Reason, in which Kant failed to estimate the practical Reason at its proper value. If the exertion of moral will is a reality, then the practical Reason is a branch of theoretical cognition. These two positions Kant never reached. The reason for this failure lies in the fact that with him sensibility is the characteristic mark of reality.” Thus Ritschl, and a little later he continues: “Besides the reality of *nature*, theoretical knowledge must recognize as given the reality of the *spiritual life* and the

equal binding force of the special laws which obtain in each realm" (p. 222). "Spiritual life is the end," he maintains (p. 222), "while nature is the means. This is the general law of spiritual life, the validity of which science must maintain if the special character of the spiritual realm of existence is not to be ignored . . . ." (p. 223). "We must either resign the attempt to comprehend the ground and law of the coexistence of nature and spiritual life or we must, to attain our end, acknowledge the Christian conception of God as the truth by which our knowledge of the universe is consummated" (p. 225). "While, therefore, the Christian religion is thereby proved to be in harmony with reason, it is always with the reservation that knowledge of God embodies itself in judgments which differ in kind from those of theoretical science." The value-judgment still remains the bridge, and the only bridge, to the assurance of the reality of God, but reason in its theoretical activity is bound to acknowledge the existence and adequacy of this bridge.

5. We should hardly be satisfied, even in this brief study of Ritschl's method, without one more illustration—perhaps the most famous—of his use of the value-judgment. We must try to answer the question: What is the content and meaning of the Ritschlian doctrine of the deity of Christ, and how does this differ from the traditional doctrine?

As, for Ritschl, God is just the personal being who is superior to the world, and through fellowship with whom we may attain to mastery over, and independence of, the world, so we are to recognize any agent or instrument of the transmission of that power to us as divine, and, to the extent that we, following Christ, actually attain such mastery over the world as he had we are also divine. The Godhead or deity of Christ, then, is just his mastery over the world, or superiority to it, and the influence of his historical life upon us, so that we share in his mastery of the world. Ritschl accepts the dogma of the Eastern church that the purpose of the incarnation was the deification of humanity. That deification, then, is just the attainment of a position of victory over, and independence of, the world.

It will readily be seen that this doctrine corresponds more closely to what we now speak of as the *divinity* rather than the

*deity* of Christ, where those terms are contrasted. When Ritschl says that Christ has for us the religious value of God, he does not mean, on the one hand, that Christ is the eternal God or takes the place of the eternal God for us, or, on the other hand, that there is any *question* about his deity, or, as we should say, divinity. He means that we recognize the divine nature of Christ in just that overcoming of the world which he accomplished for himself, in his patient endurance of all the hindrances and trials of life in the world, and in his retaining, through and in spite of them all, his love for men, his spiritual independence, and his confidence in the infinite worth of his life as compared with the world with all its limitations. In that overcoming of the world for *himself* and in the power to overcome the world which *we* receive through faith in the *principles* of his life and in that *life* as the manifestation of the eternal God who guarantees to us final superiority over the world, we recognize Christ's divinity.

Christ therefore does not pre-exist as a *personal being*, but only in the eternal purpose of God. And his power as exalted, since his death, is *known* to us only in the continued influence of his *historical, earthly* life upon men.

Replying to his opponents, who desire that he shall confess the deity of Christ in his supernatural birth and in the Chalcedonian formula of the union of the two natures, etc., he answers, first, that his physical origin "has never yet been reconciled with his historical appearance and never can be" (p. 468) and that the Chalcedonian formula "rests only on tradition, detached from the circumstances of its origin" (p. 399), whereas the Godhead which led to that formula, and which we now can perceive, was and is recognized in the experience of the *saving work* of Christ and not through the methods of theoretic or a priori knowledge.

We must omit much that would be very interesting in the development of Ritschl's Christology, but we should at least mention the two elements in the life of Christ which make him unique. One of these elements is the fact that Christ stands historically *first* in revealing the world-conquering power—love—and thus becomes the head of all who follow him. The other is that "the members of Christ's community come to take this

attitude" (that of overcoming the world through love and faith in God) "as those who have within them [originally] *another* bent of will; whereas the figure of *Christ* cannot be understood at all unless it is His *original* and distinguishing characteristic that He finds His own personal end in the self-end of God." This seems to be another way of stating the doctrine of the sinlessness of Jesus as contrasted with the sinfulness of all others.

To recapitulate: We recognize the deity (or divinity) of Christ through that value-judgment which asserts that the power to overcome the world which we have through faith in God as manifested in him is just the greatest conceivable power, the power which our spirits require for their satisfaction and which we hold to as being God himself.

#### CRITICISM

The great question of theology or at least of Christian theology is: How can we know *what God* is and *that* he is? I think that we may agree with Ritschl that we can never get a satisfactory answer to this question apart from the consideration of the spiritual nature of man and its needs. At any rate, we know of no answer, and can imagine none, *which will satisfy the spiritual needs of man*, which has been or could be deduced from the consideration of any other facts or principles than those which belong to that spiritual nature. We may go a step farther and say that no world-view or theory about the supreme principle or God of the universe can be regarded as true and sufficient which does not explain man's spiritual nature and needs—for they certainly form a part of reality which is significant, and any theory which neglects them is therefore inadequate and incomplete. We may agree, then, that the Christian faith with regard to God explains the spiritual nature of man and the rest of reality known to man better than any other theory which has been proposed, and that we cannot conceive at present of a better explanation.

I understand Ritschl's position to be that I accept the Christian conception of God as true, because I judge that it has the greatest conceivable value for me or that the Christlike God, if he existed, would have such greatest conceivable value; and, further, because of the *experience* that, when I hold that idea to be real and act

accordingly, I do in a measure receive just the value which I should expect from such a being and have therefore evidence of his existence. So far this argument seems to me to be good.

But Ritschl seems to say that the *only* evidence which I have of the existence of God is the value which faith in him has for me in helping me to overcome the world. It seems quite true that this is the only evidence that could be called *decisive*. We must remember also the argument (which seemed a little inconsistent with his main contention) that this value-judgment method becomes after all a theoretical method, approved on logical grounds, if only you recognize the reality of the moral life and its laws; hence, it is not metaphysical systems *as such* that he excludes, but rather all metaphysical systems which attempt to explain the universe without taking into account *all* of the universe, and especially that which, at least for man, is most significant in it, namely, his own spiritual nature. Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason* gave us a metaphysical system which attained the same end as Ritschl's, namely, the Christian God, but expressly limited its validity to the ethical life. Ritschl's system, while not identical, is very similar, except that he denies the *limitation of validity*. He agrees with Kant that the "*pure reason*" or "*theoretical reason*" can never by its proper methods reach up to God. But, when the Christian conception of God is once presented, Ritschl maintains that the theoretical reason must admit or affirm its validity, since the realm of the practical reason is—Kant to the contrary notwithstanding—a part of the realm of the theoretical reason.

Admitting that the conception of the Christian God is reached *directly* only as the explanation and satisfaction of the spiritual need of man for mastery over the world, and that the strongest evidence of the reality of this God is the religious experience of his power in the attainment of this mastery by man, we may nevertheless question Ritschl's right to exclude all other evidence on the subject. While it is true that the evidence of science and history is ambiguous, or that there is, if you please, evidence in them, both for and against the existence of the Christian God, yet one or the other of the contradictories must be chosen—"everything must either be or not be"—and under the guidance of the religious

argument we are justified in choosing the religious interpretation of the scientific and historical evidence with regard to the supreme power in the universe—and I think that evidence will not be inconsiderable.

The value-judgment in which we assert or recognize the deity of Christ is of the same nature as the primary one by which we come to the Christian conception of God, namely, this: that in Christ we see manifested the power which overcomes the world, and through his historical influence we receive such power for ourselves. In brief, this means that, wherever we find this power manifested, we call it divine power. This we understand to be the main contention in Ritschl's Christology, and we shall probably all agree to it, even though some other elements in his doctrine of Christ might be open to question.

In conclusion, we may approve Ritschl's position that the faith that the Christlike God and *only* he will satisfy the needs of the human spirit is a judgment of value, or perhaps two judgments of value—the first, that of the infinite worth of the human soul; the second, that the Christlike God and he alone guarantees that this worth of the soul shall be realized as over against the world. Ritschl is right in rejecting all metaphysical systems which do not take account of and explain the fundamental spiritual nature and needs of man as irrational in themselves and useless for religion. The *Christian* conception of God is the only one which is justified in view of this nature and these needs of the human spirit.

But Ritschl's own system is a metaphysical system, confirmable by the reason, in which the most significant *facts* are just this value-judgment or these value-judgments of the human spirit and the experience of satisfaction following upon the acceptance of the Christian idea of God as real. There seems, however, to be no sufficient reason why science and history should not be interpreted in harmony with the Christian conception of God, and the evidence coming from them, as so interpreted, be used in support of the Christian doctrine. If this position be correct, we cannot maintain that absolute distinction between religious knowledge and theoretic knowledge which Ritschl generally advocates.