

#798 The Quest

Today we bring you a long read: a thought-provoking essay by the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Dobson. Ken is a retired Presbyterian minister, now working in the office of the President of Payap University, in Thailand. He is a friend and theological collaborator of Ed Schroeder, and his writings have appeared several times in the pages of Thursday Theology, notably on Christian-Buddhist themes.

In this essay, Ken grapples with the question of how Christianity deals with the current crises of the human condition—an apparent conundrum, given the finality and completeness of what Christ accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

A list of Ken's textual sources follows the essay.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

The Quest **Kenneth Dobson**

T.S. Eliot mentions a fisherman sitting or mired on a forsaken muddy riverbank while rats of death scramble ominously among the weeds. The key to the mysterious fisherman's identity is the title of the poem, "The Waste Land." The fisherman, scholars agree, is a reference to "the Fisher King," keeper of the Holy Grail. The Grail was a vessel, presumably the chalice of the Last Supper used a day later by Joseph of Arimathea to collect blood which was spilling from the wounds of the crucified Christ. The legends say that Joseph brought the cup to England

where it was guarded by the Fisher kings in the Castle of Corbenic. In the Arthurian legends this castle and the Grail became the objects of a great quest.

It [the Grail] was believed to be kept in a mysterious castle surrounded by wasteland and guarded by a custodian called the Fisher King, who suffered from a wound that would not heal. His recovery and the renewal of the blighted lands depended upon the successful completion of the quest. Equally, the self-realization of the questing knight was assured by finding the Grail. [British Library]

In the legends of King Arthur, Sir Galahad completes the quest, heals the wounded Fisher King, and restores the wasteland. Throughout the high Middle Ages the quest for the Grail was imbued with mystic significance.

For the medieval mind, since the grail was supposed to have contained the Blood of Christ, it had also held His “soul” and possibly His divinity. It possessed unlimited powers of healing and was a means of transmitting direct knowledge of God, “a special essence.” The search for the grail becomes the awareness of Christ abiding within. [Grace]

Eliot's reference to the Fisher King in the midst of a wasted landscape outside London is a metaphor for civilization and all the people in it. Theologically it is about soteriology. The quest is salvation. The Holy Grail is symbolic, not of a device for a mystical union with God, nor even less Dan Brown's womb of Mary Magdalene interred in the tip of an inverted pyramid in the Louvre, but for restoration of creation through the intervention of Christ. Reference to the crucifixion of Christ is obvious in all grail legends. What is not so obvious is just how the instrumentality of the cup is efficacious. Sister Madeleine

Grace says the Grail “possessed unlimited powers of healing and was a means of transmitting direct knowledge of God.” She is clear later in her article that the Eucharist also confers just such blessings, although perhaps in somewhat lesser measure than the medieval questors hoped for from the Grail.

Whereas the distinction Luther passionately labored to describe between his own understanding of the theology of salvation and that of Thomas Aquinas is hard to see if Thomas's writing is removed from context and considered solely as a set of independent texts, the difference becomes clearer when a medieval lens is used to look at what had become of “salvation” by the fifteenth century. It was, in the popular mind, not about what Christ had accomplished once and for all, but something still ongoing, symbolized in the tradition of the Holy Grail as a quest. Pilgrimages, crusades, and quests were adventures into the unknown, the realm of incredible holiness. They were designed and understood to be transformational in that such an undertaking could not be anticipated without the questor undergoing profound change. It is arguable that Christopher Columbus was the last great questor and the first great explorer in Renaissance Europe. From Columbus' writings it is clear that he was doing more than looking for a route to India. His whole effort, in fact, only makes sense, as he explained it, if the quest for Eden is factored in. He expected to be a pivotal figure in transforming Christendom. That was the mood of the times.

Quests and pilgrimages, then, can be described from various points of view. They are in some sense historical and can be assessed as human events. Columbus sailed the ocean blue. It's a historical fact. What his quest accomplished was pivotal, transforming Spain and Europe as well as Columbus himself. Quests and pilgrimages also had an impact on the ones who undertook them. That was undoubtedly the major effect. The

journeys did something holy and helpful to the questors and pilgrims.

The question for us is, and remains, whether these accomplishments were salutary.

Luther hotly contended they were not. Nor, he and the later Enlightenment philosophers and scientists agreed, were cups, cloths (see Shroud of Turin), icons, amulets, relics, or feathers from the wings of angels of any salutary effect—nor were indulgences, sold to raise funds for the Pope's coffers. The point being that the mechanics of salvation are distorted when a necessary element is supposed to be supplied by us. These fall under the headings of magic and righteous work. The trouble with work's righteousness (including the idea that we can make any contribution to our salvation) is that it turns out to be impossible. That was the burden of Luther's argument based on the writings of Paul. At some point Roman Catholic theology and piety make room for good works being productive of eternal benefits. That is the point at which they fail to reckon Christ was totally effective. Our salvation, Luther argued, is not a cooperative endeavor between Jesus and us.

John Calvin, a younger contemporary of Luther, came at this from another angle. Our works, including anything theologically significant, including crusades (ancient and modern), are effects, not causes. They are responses we make to the goodness we perceive in God. Good works and zealous spirituality are indications of salvation, perhaps, but they have nothing to do with bringing salvation about. Calvin, like Luther was adamant that nothing we do has any effect on salvation, which was fully accomplished before we came along. To make his point emphatic, Calvin seized the concept of predestination, to the effect that “so little have we to do with bringing about our salvation that we should understand the issue is over and done with before we

were born. Some are predestined for salvation, and that's that." Calvin was at odds with Luther and almost all other theologians over this explanation of how salvation works.

The "bottom line" for the Reformation is that nothing we do or fail to do has any impact on our eternal salvation. Any concept of salvation that includes even an iota of human contribution or involvement is not orthodox Christian, that is, not theologically defensible. Furthermore, any theological structure or system of thought which does not have a soteriology completely accomplished by Christ is not authentically Christian.

Let me be clear: what we believe or do not believe has zero impact on our salvation; what we do or do not do has no effect on our salvation either to secure it or to undo it. Salvation is about what Christ did. There are no meditation practices that can save us, no campaigns for humanitarian issues that can touch our salvation, and no atrocity we can commit that will negate what Christ has done.

This campaign of Luther and the Reformation theologians challenged the sacramental systems of the Church (Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman Catholic) and undermined the authority of the Pope. A century of bitter warfare eventually settled the issue of Papal power in favor of secular power and religious freedom. But the more basic issue of how sacred enactments are effective is an ongoing argument often carried out these days by opposing groups simply ignoring one another—an arrangement not without merit.

What then of current religiosity, which is about being fair and nice, being happy and feeling good? Does the fact that this fails to mention Christ undermine its validity? The same question can be asked of any number of other constructions about

the human condition. For example, what of Buddhism's analysis that the cause of human suffering is striving, while the cure is enlightened understanding? What about the current "Jesus and Me" theology? Does the fact that it mentions Jesus validate it? Its analysis of the human condition is that we are unfulfilled and not optimized without a passionate personal relationship to Jesus. When we have that we are blessed, that is, we are nice and fair, happy and feel good, as well as have a bright future here and hereafter. What do the big historic and geophysical threats say about the comprehensiveness of "Jesus and Me" theology?

The issue can be considered this way: is salvation disconnected from people's social, physical, and cosmic condition? Christianity's harshest critics have faulted Christian theology precisely on this point. If the central point of Christian theology is soteriology, and our salvation does not have any connection to what we think, what we do, or how we live, then theology seems to be irrelevant to life. On the other hand, if there is a connection, what is it?

It is beyond my ability to analyze "the human condition" as we are confronting it. Perhaps it is sufficient to list a few of the subheadings under which particular crises are clustered:

1. **Environmental sustainability.** The margins within which human survival can be sustained are being reached. Perhaps the dynamics are already too far along to be reversed before a catastrophe strikes that sends us to the same destiny as the dinosaurs.
2. **The culture of violence.** Human beings tend irrationally to resort to violence in order to solve problems indirectly. In other words, the violence does not actually address the issue. The culture of violence has led to almost constant war for several human generations, perhaps since the

beginning of recorded history. The abilities to perpetrate and withstand violence have become indicators of human quality.

3. **Human dignity**. Divisions on artificial bases (i.e. racism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, etc.) are nearly universal. Now that technology has connected peoples and amalgamated their welfare, the impact of these artificial distinctions is increasing with no sign of abatement.

These will do to represent the mega-issues of today.

In contrast, our oncoming Millennial Generation is concerned about personal authenticity. They understand that God has a role in origination (creation) and “watching over” the world. This is modern theism. What exactly is involved in “watching over” is apparently left up to God. Theoretically it includes the three sub-headings listed above. But the M-Gen is focused on more immediate issues, ones within their zone of influence and concern. Therefore, their concerns are completely contextualized. It is a basic postmodern principle to reject universalities. Thus, there is no problem with the rejection of the entirely premodern notion that God’s solution to the human condition is universal and applies to all. Case-specific divine intervention is consistent with postmodernism and meets the expressed needs of the “Jesus and Me” members of Generation M.

Significantly, this Millennial Generation and the generations that immediately preceded it do not take evil seriously. In their opinion, evil is a lack of good, an absence of authenticity, a human flaw. It does not apply to acts of nature or consequences beyond human control. Tsunami are not evil, they are natural. Pillaging of tsunami victims by looters, on the other hand, as happened the day after Christmas 2004 in Thailand, is evil. Evil is personal. It is infringement of human ethical principles. Rape is evil; it creates victims whose

quality of life is impacted by their victimization. Apartheid in South Africa was evil. Bullying of homosexual boys is evil. The list is long. It includes most of the items clustered under the subheadings of environmental sustainability, culture of violence, and human dignity, and more.

Still, the list is trivial. The power of evil is scaled down as long as evil is an absence of perfection on specific personal issues.

This will not do.

Evil is more than the absence of good-enough. Surely the last hundred years have educated us to the *power* of evil. Genocides (plural) and unspeakable crimes against humanity, widely supported by entire populations, have so exceeded the definition of “personal” that there can be no doubt that evil has power of its own. Hysterias, phobias, and manias, all combined, do not account for the pervasive power of evil.

The loss of consciousness about the reality of evil has had a damaging effect on theology and modern Christianity. Fifty years ago the “problem” and mystery of evil were linked to the mystery of God. In its simplest form the problem of evil is, “If evil is real then God is not good; if God is good, then evil is not real.” Once again the dichotomy is false, but the solution is to resort to mystery. In short, evil is a mystery and not a subject to be handled philosophically.

...the presence of evil is an occasion for obedience rather than for speculation.... The mind must do what it can with the problem: but the solution of the mystery is not an intellectual solution, since the question is not an intellectual question.
[Miller, 119-120]

Fifty years ago Alexander Miller could still submit that “the figure of the Devil … serves to locate an origin of evil which recognizes its reality outside the will of men, yet avoids identifying it with the direct will of God, and keeps it always and finally subordinate to Him” [Miller, 119]. The thing to be handled is the presence in the same universe of both God and evil. Always in Christology, the last line is about the paradox being a mystery. What, then, is to be done about evil? Mystery aside, evil is real. Miller argues that the response to evil is to resist. The “archetypical response” to evil is to accept suffering for love’s sake, which Christ did. “[T]o be afflicted by evil,” Miller concludes, “is to be appointed to fight the Holy War on a crucial part of the front” [Miller, 120].

Now, fifty years later, deep into the postmodernist era, ironically “the figure of the Devil” has been expropriated by a section of Christianity in such a way as to excuse human beings from being more than dupes deceived into complicity in acts of evil, imbedded, of course, in mitigating circumstances.

Meanwhile, everyone else dismisses the Devil entirely.

Here we have a perspective on the theological realities. But rather than personalize evil, it is time to insist on its extent and nature. Let us be bold to say that evil is real, pervasive, and influential. Evil is an independent objective force. It is a noun: evil. It is not an adjective with meaning derived from the noun it is attached to. The antithesis of evil is God, not good. Good is not big enough to defeat evil, unless evil is as trivial and circumstantial as this generation wants it to be.

The implication of this was anticipated by Luther in *The Large Catechism*. Luther describes gods in impersonal terms. “A god means *that from which* we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is

nothing else than to trust and believe *Him* from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an *idol*" [Luther, 12, emphasis added].

We notice that (at least in the English translation) Luther leads us to understand that a god is "that from which," not yet "He from whom." Only when we have opted to trust and believe with confidence and faith does God (capital G indicating a specific god named God) become personal enough to identify as "Him."

Then Luther clearly seems to say that we "make" God. God is a product of our heart's desire. Again, Dr. Ed Schroeder is my teacher in this. Lutheran theology is his area of lifelong expertise. Ed repeats, "the deity is a power (not a being)" [Schroeder]. Now we can make sense of Luther's statement—at first glance scandalous, as much God-talk is—that we make God and idols. We give this power over us to them by investing confidence in them to bestow all good (not just some select good(s)) and to provide refuge.

This is serious theism. This is not the consumer's free-for-all of a farmer's market. This is not a hum-and-haw deal where we pick and choose the blessings we prefer and the shelter that suits us until we can afford something snazzier or need a higher level of nursing care. This is a serious amount of power we are bartering. Note carefully, this is not all the power God has, but it is total insofar as it affects us.

Before going on, let's try to get comfortable with this form of discourse in which we do not consider God in intimate, friendly terms. Unless we are prepared to conceptualize evil in intimate, personal imagery, then God cannot be either. If evil is power, God is power. This is precisely why Luther's presentation is

appropriate for our age, loath though we may be to linger over evil and its consequences. To be blunt, Jesus (as in “What a friend we have in Jesus” now become “I wanna hold you, love you” Lord) is inadequate to deal with massive, violent racism that fuels intercontinental hatred and fear. This sort of catastrophe is larger and more lethal and pernicious than the sum of its parts inhabiting individual hearts.

Yet how then is Luther’s “God-we-make” any different in power from the “He’s-Everything-to-me Jesus”? At first glance both are co-extensive with an individual’s aspirations.

The difference to begin with is accountability.

Ask first, “To what are we inescapably accountable?” Several answers tumble forth: consequences, karma, death (and taxes), genetic heritage, luck (fate or destiny), to name a few. Indeed, religious systems the world over have much to say about precisely these topics. One of the salient features of cultural religion is how to soften and divert these laws or forces.

Does the theism of the Millennial Generation also have an accountability scheme? Does the slightly modified “Jesus and Me” theology have one?

According to Smith and Denton there are five items in the younger generation’s belief system. None of them mention accountability or its equivalents. In fact, a rejection of “judgmentalism” is a fundamental aspect of item 2, “being good, nice and fair to each other.” God is benevolent and good.

Critchley and Webster are more precise. In their evaluation, too, there is no outside authority to whom one is accountable, nothing “that might transcend the serene and contented living of one’s authentic life.” Furthermore, “failure...is explained by...merely partial enlightenment for which they, and they alone,

are responsible."

Yet the chickens do come home to roost. This "naïve belief in authenticity eventually gives way to deep cynicism." Success is a must. But it is never enough to be thoroughly satisfying. However, when satisfactory success is not forthcoming, it is not the whole idea of the "authentic self" as the sum total of meaning that is questioned. One still believes in authenticity and the value of success, but becomes cynical about obtaining it. With no other authority to whom to be accountable, one must report to one's self. When one is alone and one has failed, one is at the end of one's rope.

At least in the "Jesus and Me" belief system, non-punitive Jesus can be appealed to for rescue, and counted on to provide it. There is no space in that system for divine non-performance, provided the faith of the believers is strong enough. "Ask and ye shall receive," is a favorite mantra.

Meanwhile, our chorus has been chanting, "All this is too petty." Evil is too powerful, too widespread, and too persistent to be handled by individuals acting on their own ideas of self-interest.

The M-Gen wants to avoid evil. Money is initially helpful, so one consumes one's way toward authenticity, donning the mantle of success, woven by the same wonderful weavers who wove Hans Christian Andersen's "Emperor's New Clothes."

Since evil is large and noisy, the M-Generation needs to manipulate the news media if it is to escape. Facebook and Twitter are highly selective. Whole genres of news can be ignored or only played with, perhaps twisted. Anything is possible: global warming can be rendered a questionable conspiracy, creationism can be presented as a science to refute the unprovable theory of evolution, child slavery is a foreign

issue, cats can think up clever aphorisms, the food on the table can be important enough to picture for hundreds and perhaps “go viral.”

It is time to refer to the S-word. Reinhold Niebuhr thought about sin more than most theologians in the twentieth century. His analysis is that it stems from arrogance.

[T]he real issue is the universality of corruption which results from undue self-regard. ...the idea of a universal inclination of the human heart is not only meaningful but is empirically verifiable. It means merely that the capacity and inclination of the self to give its interests undue regard can arise on every level of culture and of moral attainment. The taints of vanity in the lives of saints would attest to the inclination as well as the power lusts of a Napoleon or Hitler. The universality of the taint does not preclude the possibility of mitigating or aggravating egotism by education, social engineering, cultural disciplines or any other method of channeling or transferring man's basic and inordinate self-regard. Nor would it preclude the relation of this self-regard to all forms of creativity. Actually all creative impulses are probably inextricably related to self-regarding ones, but in such a way that the latter are absolute prerequisites of the former. It is significant that political science usually presupposes some version of the doctrine of original sin despite the unpopularity of the concept in modern culture since the Enlightenment. [Niebuhr, 350-351]

Niebuhr posits corrupt inordinate self-regard as a universal human condition. This is potentially a scathing indictment of the “me era.” Since Niebuhr wrote, the trend has actually been for “me” to expand in importance. At first it seemed that postwar (WWII) enthusiasm was fairly innocuous; then came the

new hedonism. That was expected to burn itself out, but it metamorphosed into the individualism of the millennial generation that we have been describing. Niebuhr seems to be saying it is basically a corrupt system. He leads to the question of whether anything in this generation's value system has been, is being, or could be transformed from self-regarding impulses into creative, productive, and maybe even altruistic ones.

I think the answer is that nothing can rescue this system until the number of people willing to submit to criticism of their core values reaches critical mass. What is needed is a new sense of identity, a new validity, and a new purpose.

However, that does not mean that critique is avoided. Just because the M-Generation does not want outside interference does not mean that there will be no inside interference. The inescapable fact is that any benefit comes with a charge of some sort. Freedoms come with responsibilities. Causes have effects. Actions have consequences, and so do inactions. Adjustment is built in. We have already seen how judgment works in the "gospel of authenticity" system, the result being cynicism, which is a toxic poison, I might add. A radically cynical generation is a danger to itself and to the world.

It has been widely argued that there are multiple theisms these days. The "gospel of authenticity" which thrives in the relatively affluent members of the millennial generation in the "first world" is just one emerging theism. There is another theism here in Thailand in which karma creates the balance. There is even a hidden theism in the atheism espoused by 46% of the people of China. What all these theisms have in common is a system whereby A implies not-A. The plusses on one side are weighed and charged for, somehow, in every system. In the end, however, these balances are only an aspect of accountability.

Basic, in-depth, transformational critique is not fully represented in them. What sets Christianity apart is the way in which it explains that the arrogant human condition not only abuses others but destroys the relationship by which we are enabled to battle evil. This would be a hopeless disaster except for the fact that the critic is simultaneously our rescuer. Rescue is intervention, coming between the immense forces of God and evil, entering our milieu, extracting us.

Christian apologetics have said that inasmuch as judgment is inevitable it is better to have access to a system in which the final outcome has a potential to be favorable rather than one in which we are bound to fail. There are two perspectives on life. One point of view sees something like "three-score years and ten." Christianity, Buddhism and all the world religions propose that there is more to life than meets the eye. Some belief systems aim for targets totally in the range of "now and soon," while others aim for the beyond. Christianity has been labeled and libeled as one of the "pie in the sky" type. We will look at that now.

The question we have been considering is how Christianity, as it has evolved and adapted to various contexts in the West, deals with the human condition. To be honest, it seems to me that Christianity's main *theological concern* is long-range and relatively disinterested in current affairs. Soteriology is about salvation unto life eternal. The other issue is whether what Christ accomplished has any immediacy. In short, does what Christ did have any impact on saving us in the short term from the ravages and effects of this tough life and our own shortcomings? Professor Schroeder says, "The question still hammers us: Was it really all for nothing?" In fact, it seems to me that the many theisms are mostly about filling in a gap between the Old Jerusalem on the outskirts of which Christ's crucifixion took place and the New Jerusalem in the center of

which Christ is enthroned and everything will be perfect. This age and this world in which we live is still a zone where evil has power.

Very recently I was told about a couple in Gen-X (the ones in their 40s, old enough to know better). One day Hal came home to find Gennifer in bed with Thad, the pastor of their church. This is very much a local crisis, hardly on a par with massive starvation in China or the flooding of New Orleans, but it is a crisis with a ripple effect. Three weeks later Thad is out of a job, out of a home, ruined. Hal is devastated but not given to hysterical reactions, so is proceeding cautiously. Gennifer was initially suicidal, overwhelmed with shame, and unsure of herself. What does our rigorous theology have to say about this? I wrote to Gennifer from half a world away (I would rather have just hugged her and Hal and said less, shown more unconditional regard for them and their mess). What I said was this:

The last three weeks must have been a living hell. It is wonderful that you have survived. You and Hal have so much going for you, and so much living already behind you, that there is every chance of you going beyond this. You told us how you blame yourself and how you cannot forgive yourself. What can anyone say to make it better? Words are not the medicine to make this sick go away. But you asked about God, and you asked me to use words so here they are:What you and Thad did has no effect on your salvation or your place in God's heart. God is not saying, "You did that! Now get out!" God is saying, "As far as you and I are concerned, Jesus took care of that. We can go on together, you and me. But, you have now made things more complicated for yourself and the people around you. That will need to be dealt with. But let's take things one item and one day at a time."

You need friends. Your closest ones are in your church and you

are ashamed to go there now. Open a window, Gennifer. I bet some of those friends are standing outside trying to get your attention to let them in. Hal is staying in for now. Make it easy for him any way you can. Let him get back close to you; try not to hold him away. Remember, too, there are other people who need you just as soon as you can get over shedding your buckets of tears and be available to them. Your grandmother needs advanced nursing care and she is afraid of a nursing home. Your mother is not doing all that well after her mastectomy. They need you. And your kids do too, but you know that. One step at a time, as soon as you can. Then take it just as slowly as the ones walking with you need to go.

Now, here is what I expect you will find: there are tracks in the mess that show a way out, there are comforting hands of angels you might not be aware of at the time, there is familiar music coming from somewhere, food will be tasting better. These, too, are gifts from God for these tough circumstances.

The main point of Christology may be about salvation, but Christian theology does have things to say, comfort and advice to give, and tools to handle the details of the human condition even before “the last river is crossed”. Paired with justification is sanctification: paired with salvation into life eternal is being fruitful in the life temporal.

To get beyond the morass of multitudinous theisms, can we not, for the sake of progress in the discourse, simply agree with Niebuhr’s analysis that “undue self-regard” is the nature of the human predicament? If that is so, what is the solution? To be effective the solution has to be at the same scale as the problem. This leads us to look for the cause of that condition. The cause we have been considering is evil. If evil is the cause, not the result of the problem, then the solution has to

address both the human condition and the underlying cause.

Evil is a God-size problem. It takes God to address it.

I can no longer evade the issue that has made me hesitate: the biblical testimony has been that human sin is the cause of the mess we are in. Christ's deliverance from sin is the solution. Throughout Christian history the formula of the Church has been along the lines of, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." Sin is the cause of the human condition, and the world is broken because of it. Luther's thesis was that Jesus Christ took all the sin upon himself and, in Paul's and Luther's words, He became sin. As Bertram highlighted it, sin is a predicate for the verb expressing a state of being. At the same time, and this is the crucial thing, he became the Savior, both at once. Only God could do it; only a human person could connect to the human realm of existence. This Christ did, past tense; it is done. But in the process the entire empire of evil has been conquered, a conditional effect to be completed (absolutely, for sure) in the future.

Evil, however, is of another scale than sin. Here's my arithmetic on it: all the sin, and the mounting avalanche of effects of that sin added together, do not yet equal the power of evil; remove all the sin and the consequences of sin, and there is still evil. Evil must have an existence independent of human beings. Sin is not independent of human beings. If evil is larger and more extensive than sin, then sin is not the origin or cause of evil. It may be the other way around. If it is the case, however, that evil is the cause of sin, then why is it not also true that human beings have no choice but to sin? This, too, of course, is an old, often discussed question, which leads around in a circle (as this entire topic does). In order to jump off this merry-go-round I will simply assent as a matter of faith in the face of the mysteries of God and evil that (a) at

some point human beings have freedom not to sin, and (b) in some ways we can oppose evil and have an effect on the outcome.

This era in which we live is a transitional one. It is in between the victorious battle and the final capitulation. This is “not-yet” time. The nature of this intermediate zone in which we live is that sin and evil have both been defeated, but the full effects of that have not yet been realized. It is the outcome that is sure. Meanwhile, there are battles to be fought, stratagems to be launched and opposed, and victims to be cared for. Horrible atrocities are still taking place, immense natural disasters still afflict us, chronic conditions have to be confronted, injustice is to be balanced. And it all has to be done over and over, while we try to wrest as much joy and do as much good as possible. We are people with bifocals, keeping the distant mountain in view, but clear about the plains we are crossing.

Our quest is under way.

It is not a quest for salvation, but for allies to confront powerful evil and for passage across the arid plain. These are critical times. The short-term outcome is still unknown. My strategy for living as a Christian in a milieu of diverse theisms is to engage in resisting evil with the confidence of one who knows that evil is ultimately defeated and even my own destiny is securely out of my hands. This may be effective enough to attract the attention of my allies to the mountain on the horizon. We do what we can do, determined only to make it more difficult for evil to prevail in particular instances. What is left after we survive a skirmish is to keep the mountain in view, form alliances to battle as far forward as we can, and trust the rest to God whose character is clearly up to the challenges. Oh, I will fall before I reach the mountain, but I will awaken upon its peak. That, too, is a mystery under the

power of the One who will defeat the power of evil.

In the fifth section of “The Waste Land,” the setting is the day between the crucifixion on Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter, after the thunder rolls, when the sky darkens. It is a time not unlike ours. The rats of death scurry undeterred among the weeds of the waste land. The Fisher King’s wounds are fresh. The questor has not arrived. The Fisher King muses:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me.
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

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