

I have said that to take Jesus of Nazareth as the concluding figure in our group of original thinkers is a strange enterprise. All of the men we have considered up until now [have been] free thinkers. Free, in the sense that they tried to face the real position of man in the world and to discover a genuine creative capability within man's mind. But to include Jesus of Nazareth here, especially where those discoveries are concerned, is indeed strange, because if we consider him not as the the Son of God (as he is taken by believers) but merely as a man (as he has been taken by many thinkers since the end of the eighteenth century) then we find that as far as personality goes he is the most amazing man that one could ever hope to encounter. That he is a kind of phenomenon, even a curious phenomenon and if we abstract from him all of the divine significance that he would have as the Son of God, then it becomes almost inexplicable why this man should have had the great influence on world history that he did. Perhaps the greatest influence that any single man ever has had.

If we abstract from him a bit, relying only upon his teachings and sayings (and we have only a few left that can be considered original, such as the Sermon on the Mount and various dispersed sayings in the Gospels) then we are forced to ask ourselves how he came to have such an effect? If we consider only his sayings and his deeds – namely, that he was a man who apparently was a healer in the psychosomatic sense, then he could not impress us as a performer of miracles because historians, have discovered that [Palestine](#) was just overflowing with people like that, with Rabbis who went around healing people and so forth. Many Jewish Rabbis at that time healed people, and many doctors and psychologists now believe that all of the miracles Jesus of Nazareth performed are things that many other people can perform in a psychosomatic sense, and this was of course a very hysterical country at that time. We didn't even need the historians to tell us that, because

the Jews in Poland right up until the time of Hitler still had their Rabbis who performed miracles, and they were continually praising their miracle Rabbis to one another.

So taken as a performer of miracles Jesus of Nazareth is, so to speak, pretty run-of-the mill stuff, and taken as a preacher, as a maker of sayings, then if we don't impart any higher divine purpose to them we are forced to conclude that they are all banalities. They are ethical banalities, the same as were being preached by every Rabbi in Palestine for Palestine was, and had been for many centuries, a deeply religious country, and there is not a single saying of any of them that the ancient prophets had not said better and that was not contained in the whole of the Bible already. Thus considering Jesus merely as a man (and we shall consider him here only as a man, because philosophically we must exclude belief and therefore are not entitled to consider him in any other way) he appears as a very remarkable performer of miracles of which we have hundreds, and as a very convincing speaker who walks the streets preaching the ethical banalities of his time and place.

But there is another view. For if we look at him as a Jewish Rabbi of a very definite time, of whom we now know, historically speaking, that he was indeed a living person (and of whom we could have known long ago if we had really looked into his teachings) then he must be included among the most illustrious of philosophical thinkers who each, in their own turn, discovered absolute human creative possibilities existing in man. And that means to consider him as a philosopher, as someone who had something absolutely new and amazing to say, who brought ideas into the world without which we would not be able to live, eternal ideas to be eternally considered.

I say that this is so. I say that Jesus of Nazareth, considered as a man, belongs not only to the ranks of those few original philosophers but is the culmination of the whole process of discovery that they began. That he was a thinker, and taken merely as a thinker one of the greatest men that has ever lived. To consider him in this way runs against our whole non-religious tradition, and so we must first have a look at the great objections that have been put forth against this man by two of the greatest thinkers of the nineteenth century, [Dostoevsky](#) and [Nietzsche](#).

Nietzsche once said ›Jesus has been introduced to us as a hero. Lately, he has even been presented to us as a genius. To make a hero of Jesus, and even more, what a misunderstanding is the word genius.¹ Jesus of Nazareth a genius? Wasn't he rather an ———? (But the word that he wrote was eliminated by his sister from his archives). The word has been discovered. What he said was:

›Wasn't Jesus of Nazareth rather an idiot?‹

He said that, because he was pursuing the same line of thinking Dostoevsky had pursued when he wrote his novel [The Idiot](#). Dostoevsky, being thrown into the nihilistic predicament was wavering between an absolute and foolish belief, that is, a belief in the sense of [Kierkegaard](#), an hysterical belief, and also an hysterical negation of belief. That is why he created the character of »The Grand Inquisitor« in [The Brothers Karamazov](#) who says to Jesus ›Entirely impossible what you have taught. That is why we created the church, distorted your teachings, and used you and your splendid personality but under the condition that you were dead. Again you are coming you fool trying to tell the people to live your way, and destroying our whole work. So again, we will have to execute you.²

¹ »M. Renan, that mountebank in psychologus, has contributed the two most unseemly notions to this business of explaining the type of Jesus: the notion of the genius and that of the hero (›héros‹) [...] Imagine making Jesus a hero! – And what a tremendous misunderstanding appears in the word ›genius‹! Our whole conception of the ›spiritual,‹ the whole conception of our civilization, could have had no meaning in the world that Jesus lived in. In the strict sense of the physiologist, a quite different word ought to be used here.« In: Nietzsche, Friedrich: [The Antichrist](#), 1895 [1888], § 29.

² This is a paraphrase of »Tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety then to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over his gift of freedom ... For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with Thy freedom, but now it is ended and over for good ... at last we have completed that work in Thy name ... Why, then, hast Thou come to hinder us? ... And why dost Thou look silently and searchingly at me with Thy mild eye? Be angry. I don't want Thy love for I love Thee not... I have turned back and joined the ranks of those who have corrected Thy work ... I repeat, tomorrow Thou shalt see that obedient flock who at a sign from me will hasten to heap up hot cinders about the pile on which I shall burn Thee for coming to hinder us. For if any one has ever deserved our fires it is Thou. Tomorrow, I shall burn Thee.« See: Dostoevsky, Fyodor: [The Brothers Karamazov](#), 1880, V, 5.

Dostoevsky pursued this line of thinking and in *The Idiot* he gives us the portrait of a man who is perfectly good in the sense of Jesus of Nazareth (who does all of those things that Jesus of Nazareth prescribed), and then goes on to show us that this is possible only because this man is insane. This man is an idiot. This man is infantile. This man does not have reason. He does not know the world and he will never know the world. He does not have the slightest sense of reality. Rather, he lives in a dream world all of his own. It is a miracle that he is able to live at all, because his way of life is entirely worthless. He might seem admirable for a moment, but only until one sees that he is not free. He is an automaton. His love is not love. It only seems to be love. Rather, he does nothing but let every other person have their own way with him. This incapacity to act humanly is idiocy, thus Nietzsche said ›Wasn't Jesus perhaps an idiot?‹

Nietzsche could never refrain from concerning himself with Jesus of Nazareth. He returned to him again and again, because he was fascinated by him. He once said ›This man, this young Jew, was one of the noblest men ever born. He just died too young. Imagine – he didn't have any opportunity to know the world. If he had lived long enough to be able to know the world and reality, then he would have confessed that he was wrong. He was noble enough to do so. He would have seen the world and he would have laughed at his own illusions. It was idealism, absolute infantile idealism, to think that human beings could live that way.‹³

³ »Verily, too early died that Hebrew whom the preachers of slow death honour: and to many hath it proved a calamity that he died too early. // As yet had he known only tears, and the melancholy of the Hebrews, together with the hatred of the good and just—the Hebrew Jesus: then was he seized with the longing for death. // Had he but remained in the wilderness, and far from the good and just! Then, perhaps, would he have learned to live, and love the earth—and laughter also! // Believe it, my brethren! He died too early; he himself would have disavowed his doctrine had he attained to my age! Noble enough was he to disavow! But he was still immature. Immaturely loveth the youth, and immaturely also hateth he man and earth.« Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883-85, I, § 21.

These then, are the opinions of the two most radical philosophers of our time, as to the thought and figure of Jesus of Nazareth. That he might be an idiot. A Moslem in the former [League of Nations](#) once said, before a gathering of Christians:

›Gentlemen, I concede that Christianity is the noblest religion ever invented. Unfortunately, it was never ›tried.‹

Same result! He said that the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth have never been tried, that they can, so to speak, never be tried. So again, Jesus of Nazareth was an idiot. From this judgement, only one single quality*seems to save him. Namely, that he was the Son of God.

Now I have recommended to you this book »The Man From Nazareth«⁴ by [Harry Emerson Fosdick](#), because he is the first man of whom I have the knowledge who agrees with me on one basic point: Namely, that if we consider Jesus of Nazareth merely as a man then (contrary to the above judgement) he grows and grows to a fantastic degree. He does not even discover him as a philosopher, because he himself is not a philosopher, therefore he does not see how new, decisive, and fundamental the ideas of Jesus of Nazareth were, but merely as a man. However he does see one thing. He sees the fantastic significance of the deeds of this man and how they go together with his teachings, and he adds tremendously to our historical knowledge of Palestine during the time of Jesus. It is an amazing historical book, and I am glad that it has been written and this job has been done so I don't need to go in that direction any more but can concern myself solely with the philosophy of Jesus.

That as a man he could have been considered to be an idiot is a very valuable point. It means that what he did and what he taught is absolutely daring in a sense that had never been seen before him. The impact of that event can be seen in this statement: Namely, that they say ›it is incomprehensible.‹ Yes! It is incomprehensible. If we could believe in the superman, or at least in the possibility of supermen (not to even speak of the Son of God) then we could say of his teachings and deeds that they are ›highly probable‹, because it would relieve us of one tremendous task!

⁴ Fosdick, Harry Emerson: The Man From Nazareth, and His Contemporaries Saw Him. New York, Evanston, London 1949.

Namely, to explain how it can be that what Jesus of Nazareth did and taught is within human capabilities, because it seems to transcend and negate that. But this much is true. The event, the very idea of this man is of such a nature that it becomes the hardest problem of philosophy to explain and comprehend how it was that this man could have been human. The moment we are told he was superhuman, everything is solved. This might be a wonderful position, but it doesn't even begin to explain the tremendous impact that his teachings have had upon the church and why it is that they are so easily believed. Nothing is easier to believe than that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, His only Son, whom God sent into the world and who was engendered through immaculate conception. There is nothing easier to believe, because otherwise he literally seems to come out of the mysterious, that is, out of divine mysteries which are believable, though not entirely explainable, and into a realm of human miraculousness so great that it is almost unbearable. It becomes an even greater miracle when considered in purely human terms than if we could believe that he in fact was the Son of God. That is the main trouble with the problem of Jesus of Nazareth.

We have first then to see why it is that he belongs to our line of philosophers. What, approximately, did he contribute? I said, in our last session, that when we came to Socrates the philosophy of philosophy was discovered. This means that philosophy is capable of self-reflection, that philosophy can check itself, can know about itself, and that with this discovery a whole new constellation of human capabilities became possible, all of which revolved around a center. With Socrates, everything seems to have been completed. Everything seems to be discovered. All the capabilities of the human mind seem to be there. Man, if only he would realize them, could now become creative and free ... or could he?

Then, there arrives this late comer, Jesus of Nazareth, and something new seems to come into play when Jesus enters the scene. Let us first see what he did for us historically, and by historically I do not mean the fact that through slight distortions the Christian Church came to be founded upon his teachings, but rather that through his personality many of his fundamental teachings have been preserved by the Christian Church. What service did he render? The service, when looked upon historically, is

absolutely fantastic. This man had the greatest impact on the history of mankind any man has ever had. The whole of Western development is unthinkable without him. It is most probable that the God of Abraham who is also the God of Jesus of Nazareth, the transcendent personal God, and the whole of the Jewish religion including the prophets would have been lost for humanity had it not been for this man. The entire achievement of the Greeks up to and including Plato (as well as their discovery of the possibility of political freedom for man) would have been lost; that the heritage of the Roman Empire as the last attempt to bring about an approximately free human community would have been lost as well. They all would have been lost, because none of them could have converted the barbarians. Only Christianity could do that, and once this had been accomplished then they could learn Latin, the great achievement of the Romans, and also help to preserve the Greek tradition. The same is true for the Jewish religion which also did not get lost.

All of this was made possible by one single man, Jesus of Nazareth. Without Jesus of Nazareth no Christianity, without Christianity no Western world, – but with Christianity in the long run no Jesus of Nazareth, and with the Western world no Jesus of Nazareth or Socrates or any of the others we have been considering either. He is, so to speak, the flower of them all. It almost seems as if the whole discovery of the human Self which had been made by these philosophers would not have become a tradition without the teachings, ideas, and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps it would never have even come alive, because none of them could have reached the masses in the way that he did. We need only consider Socrates who had said it all before him, Socrates who had taught that every human being should be a philosophical being, that every human being should be free; Socrates could not reach them. Socrates taught the Athenians and they did not understand him. He, who really approached everyone in his daily life, he, who had this tremendous force of philosophy, who could permanently use the most apparently insignificant everyday experiences of human beings in order to show them how miraculous they are, how deep are the indications for the true life in every human person – he failed, in the most highly educated community of Athens. His entire basic approach would have been lost if it could not have been told to the masses, and this would be true despite Plato who came soon after him, and who established

the expert, the teacher, because he did not believe that any of that was possible, because he thought he knew that it can never be told to the masses.

Jesus of Nazareth was the one who told it all to the masses. His capacity to speak in parables, to speak in the terms of everyday life, was even greater than the capacity of Socrates. He did not make even the slightest use of philosophical terminology, even though his thinking contains a very consequent conceptual line. His concepts are as consistent and as related as Socrates' were. He doesn't even need to mention them all. He never speaks philosophically, even in the Socratic sense. He speaks in an everyday language, and he uses metaphors in order to create parables out of them, but more importantly, he does one thing more:

He shows to everybody, what everybody can do.

He makes out of himself a symbol for everyone, therefore it is said he brings hope into the world. The message of Jesus of Nazareth is the message of the final hope of man, the hope of eternity, of immortality, and of the forgiving of sins. There is a deep philosophical truth to that, (and we are considering here only philosophical truth). Jesus of Nazareth gave hope to man. Namely, the hope that every man could become the Son of God. This hope that nobody is left out, that nobody will ever be left out, is the hope that he brought into the world, and it is the hope by which all free men still live whether they know it or not. Socrates did not have hope. He had a certain certainty about the capabilities of the free and creative human being and this certainty is what he brought to man: but hope he did not bring.

It would be easy to dismiss Socrates as an exceptional human being (as Plato did), as someone who is superhuman, as someone who does the kinds of things that happen very rarely, the philosopher king, the born leader of humanity who should be the leader of humanity, because other human beings will never reach that. Jesus of Nazareth said, to one of the men who was crucified with him »Today still, you shall be with me in paradise«⁵. To everyone who came to him he said »your sins may be forgiven.«⁶ He excluded nobody. He expected that everyone could follow him, and he did not mean that it would be extremely hard to follow him, but rather that everyone has within him the capacity to be able to do so if only

⁵ Luke 23:43.

⁶ Matthew 9:2, 9:5; Mark 2:5, 2:9; Luke 5:20, 5:23.

he makes the decision for it. He can do it. Man is a being that can be: That can be the Son of God.

What does the Son of God mean here? One of our main points is to clear this up in a nonreligious sense and to see if it has a philosophical meaning, for if it does then we have made a big step. If it does not, then the whole phenomenon is incomprehensible, yet nevertheless true. It is true, because if we could ask of everybody (Jews, Moslems, etc.) the question: ›If anybody could have been the Son of God, who?‹, they would have to answer ›Jesus of Nazareth,‹ but why? What, is the secret of that? Why is this man in one sense, so exceptional, and yet in another sense, so general? Why is it so easy to believe that this man could be at one moment, the Son of God, and yet at another, the Son of Man.

For the answer to these questions we must look at the story of his life as it is told to us in the Gospels, but just the story, nothing more, and here another miracle happens. The miracle is that the story convinces us. It is one of the most convincing stories ever told. I said before that no barbarian could ever have been converted to Judaism, to the Homeric religion, or to the teachings of Socrates, but that he could be converted to Christianity, and this is because the whole of Christianity is really contained in this simple story of the life and deeds of Jesus. This story is not meant to be comprehended. It does not even need to be understood. Rather, it hits everyone right in the center of his own being. We have not even begun to explain the success of those early Christian missionaries of former ages (when they still were more Christian than they are today), when they really did not need to sell rum and whiskey and gunpowder together with Christianity (and the flag) but rather, like the Jesuit Fathers who traveled all over Asia, went into the darkness of Germany to utter the words of, the Gospels to barbarians who could not even be subdued by the sword of the Romans. And they convinced them, they converted them to Christianity, and they had basically nothing to tell them at first except a simple story, a story that in its most simple form is told in the Gospel of Saint Matthew.

It is the story of a child being born and of a great hope being brought into the world. Of a young boy growing up and of a man creating a life all of his own and dying for that life on the cross. There is no more to the story. It contains birth, life, and death ... nothing else, but it contains those three fundamental and eternal facts of every human beings existence in such a way that it gives a meaning to them that has never been excelled and cannot be excelled. It is the story of the essence of man himself. It applies to everybody and is told in a form so simple that the utmost meaning is given to it. It also has an historical indication. Every nation has its stories, and the Roman world at that time was full of stories. We have the rich mythological stories of India and we have the Mediterranean world which is full of the most amazing and meaningful stories, all of which deal with birth, life, and death. Yet this simple story has been victorious over them all, this story which, if it is concerned with an illegitimate child, then it is a very special kind of child. Once again, we have been told many stories of children like that, for instance there is the story of [Theseus](#). Here, a great Athenian king goes to a foreign Greek province, and the daughter of the man who rules this province suddenly realizes that this man, this Athenian king, will engender a child, that shall be born to rule, and so both father and daughter decide they will seduce this man so that his daughter might have this child. This child is Theseus, but he is a king. Abraham is the leader of a tribe, Moses the creator of a nation, Buddha is a king who leaves his kingdom.

Here, a nothing is born, a naked babe in misery with no social standing. For the first time the story is told of an absolutely naked infant – which we all are essentially in such a way that the entire thing is boiled down to its essentials. Let us see what the inherent value of every human being can be if we deprive that human being of everything that makes him valid and give him only himself.

This child is the symbol of everybody being nothing but himself. There it is given to us, and it disillusiones the whole world at first. This fantastic

being surprises everyone. We have the kings of the East, the wise kings (The Magi) who see a star, and as if by a miracle, they know that someone absolutely significant has been born. What do they expect? They expect to come into the great palace of a great king (for where else could such a miracle take place, where else would the most significant human being be born), and they find instead, a naked infant in a manger under circumstances that are almost unbelievable for a significant birth.

The significance is the birth itself, nothing else. The birth of a human being is the most significant fact in man's world ... that is what the story is trying to tell us. It gives hope by itself, because with this child only the grace of God has provided. Everybody can identify himself. The hope that is in man and in every man's birth is discovered here. Every child born into the world is an infinite hope for mankind. It can be born under the most insignificant of circumstances, however just by being born as a human being it has infinite value, that is what the story tells us, and it continues and proceeds along the same lines. Everything that happens gets its tremendous significance out of its very insignificance. There we see Jerusalem where Jesus is finally coming to meet his end, and almost the whole of the Jewish people believe that this is the Messiah, this is the king of the Jews who has come to deliver them from the Romans and erect a Jewish kingdom again. And finally, as the whole crowd waits to welcome him, the king finally comes on a donkey with a branch of palms in his hand.

It has been said frivolously, and unfortunately by an American, that Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest salesman that ever lived, because he sold his goods to almost everybody. In a not so frivolous way we might say that he was the greatest human relations agent that has ever lived, if we only take human relations in the real sense of the word. He certainly knew how to signify an idea, to nail an idea down by a gesture or by a deed. It is one of the greatest things ever staged, so to speak, this entrance into Jerusalem with a whole people waiting for the unusual, the exceptional, the great king who shall deliver them, and there he comes as unusual as no one would ever expect. So unusual that you almost cannot recognize how unusual

it is. It is, so to speak, too damned unusual for the crowd that see him.

Again, the insignificance that is of the greatest significance. So it is with his death as the Gospels relate it. He seems to have said only a few words: Namely »My Lord, my Lord, why hasn't thou forsaken me?«⁷ Others relate that he also said »forgive them Father, for they know not -what they do«⁸. These words are certainly spoken in his meaning. Perhaps he spoke them too, and then the other words were added. I, for my own part, think that he did not speak so many words, only those first few. It is again the significance of insignificance. With those few words he confesses to suffer like every human being suffers who in the hour of death will always think that God has forsaken him, when he has not. He has to die on the cross as everyone had to die who opposed the Romans, or who was opposed to the violence of their times. Almost insignificant death which seems only singular to us, but it was the common death of everyone who did not conform to the power of that time, and we often forget that he died with two others, who died the same death as he, and who also say how insignificant it is. Again, there is the greatest significance possible, because here it is shown that the cross is the thing we are all nailed on. That every human being who has his validity only in himself might in the end have to take his cross upon himself, because he dared to go a way that leads to real human life and so this has to be paid for by death. A simple story. Now, the teacher comes in.

Let us first consider the political deeds of this man, because we will never understand him – or still think that he is partly an idiot – if we do not. It is always claimed that he did not understand anything about politics, that he was, so to speak, apolitical, and that his actions (when considered within the historical and political context of Palestine at that time) were foolish. I think that Reverend Fosdick already to a great extent clears this up, because out of his research Jesus of Nazareth emerges as a man who had a tremendous knowledge of the politics of his time and who apparently almost devised all of his doings as a political strategy that aimed at more than politics and that transcended politics. It was, so to speak, not pre-political as Abraham's position had been, but trans-political, and in order to

⁷ Mark 15:33.

⁸ Luke 23:34.

make it trans-political he had to first go back to the pre-political position of - Abraham himself. So we will have to make a small analysis of the political situation of that time and what he was doing in it, how he tried to use it for trans-political purposes while still retaining a full knowledge of the social and historical conditions of his people.

Religiously, he was of the same awareness. He wanted to be, in a way, the last of the Jewish prophets, the one who came to fulfill the law for the Hebrews. Since he didn't want to be anything else, he had to act in full consciousness of the religious conditions of his time, and in the process he developed a strategy that enabled him to maneuver within the strange mixture that was the political and religious state of the Jews in Palestine. He had the most brilliant insight into every one of those conditions, and the strategy moves accordingly trying to make the best out of all of them. If we can prove that, and we will start too in the next session, then we will already have approached him as a man of tremendous knowledge. He had almost all of the knowledge of his time. We know today that the old legend of Peter and the Apostles being illiterate men is a thing that grew out of later Christianity. We had believed that, because of the hope that the most simple of men could do anything, was made into a legend. Historically, they were all entrepreneurs of fishing in Galilea and were highly educated men who spoke several languages. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Babylonian, as did Peter, and we can suppose this to be a fair guess because recent discoveries seem to indicate that Galilea was the cultural center of the entire East and West of that time. Everything moved through Galilea, so if those men were in fact simple souls, then it could only have been in the greatest sense of simplicity, but they certainly were not simpletons, or men to whom it was given to speak out of nothingness.

This then, will be our approach: To find out first what this man knew, to find out his actions, and then to find what he wanted, what he taught, and what he decided for us to do.