The true (moral) service of God, which the faithful must render as subjects belonging to His kingdom but no less as citizens thereof (under laws of freedom), is itself, indeed, like the kingdom, invisible, i.e., a service of the heart (in spirit and in truth). It can consist solely in the disposition of obedience to all true duties as divine commands, not in actions directed exclusively to God. Yet for man the invisible needs to be represented through the visible (the sensuous); yea, what is more, it needs to be accompanied by the visible in the interest of practicability and, though it is intellectual, must be made, as it were (according to a certain analogy), perceptual. This is a means of simply picturing to ourselves our duty in the service of God, a means which, although really indispensable, is extremely liable to the danger of misconstruction; for, through an illusion that steals over us, it is easily held to be the service of God itself, and is, indeed, commonly thus spoken of.

This alleged service of God, when brought back to its spirit and its true meaning, namely, to a disposition dedicating itself to the kingdom of God within us and without us, can be divided, even by reason, into four observances of duty; and certain corresponding rites, which do not stand in a necessary relation to these observances, have yet been associated with them, because the rites are deemed to serve as schemata for the duties and thus, for ages past, have been regarded as useful means for sensuously awakening and sustaining our attention to the true service of God. They base themselves, one and all, upon the intention to further the morally good and are: (l) (private prayer)—firmly to establish this goodness in ourselves, and repeatedly to awaken the disposition of goodness in the heart; (2) (church-going)—the spreading abroad of goodness through public assembly on days legally dedicated thereto, in order that religious doctrines and wishes (together with corresponding dispositions) may be expressed there and thus be generally shared; (3) (in the Christian religion, baptism)—the propagation of goodness in posterity through the reception of newly entering members into the fellowship of faith, as a duty; also their instruction in such goodness; (4) (communion)—the maintenance of this fellowship through a repeated public formality which makes enduring the union of these members into an ethical body and this, indeed, according to the principle of the mutual equality of their rights and joint participation in all the fruits of moral goodness.

Every initiatory step in the realm of religion, which we do not take in a purely moral manner but rather have recourse to as in itself a means of making us well-pleasing to God and thus, through Him, of satisfying all our wishes, is fetish-faith. This is the persuasion that what can produce no effect at all according either to natural laws or to moral laws of reason, will yet, of itself, bring about what is wished for, if only we firmly believe that it will do so, and if we accompany this belief with certain formalities. Even where the conviction has taken hold that everything in religion depends upon moral goodness, which can arise only from action, the sensuous man still searches for a secret path by which to evade that arduous condition, with the notion, namely, that if only he honors the custom (the formality), God will surely accept it in lieu of the act itself. This would certainly have to be called an instance of transcendent grace on God’s part, were it not rather a grace dreamed of in slothful trust, or even in a trust which is itself feigned. Thus in every type of public belief man has devised for himself certain practices, as means of grace, though, to be sure, in all these types the practices are not, as they are in the Christian, related to practical concepts of reason and to dispositions conformable to them. (There are, for instance, the five great commands in the Mohammedan type of belief: washing, praying, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage to Mecca. Of these, almsgiving alone would deserve to be excepted were it to take place from a truly virtuous and at the same time religious disposition, as a human duty, and would thus really merit regard as a genuine means of grace; but the fact is, on the contrary, that it does not deserve to be thus distinguished from the rest because, under this faith, almsgiving can well go hand in hand with the extortion from others of what, as a sacrifice, is offered to God in the person of the poor.)

There can, indeed, be three kinds of illusory faith that involve the possibility of our overstepping the bounds of our reason in the direction of the supernatural (which is not, according to the laws of reason, an object either of theoretical or practical use). First, the belief in knowing through experience something whose occurrence, as under objective laws of experience, we ourselves can recognize to be impossible (the faith in miracles). Second, the illusion of having to include among our rational concepts, as necessary to our best moral interests, that of which we ourselves can form, through reason, no concept (the faith in mysteries). Third, the illusion of being able to bring about, through the use of merely natural means, an effect which is, for us, a mystery, namely, the influence of God upon our morality.
held in the early Greek church, where it was believed capable, in an instant, of washing away all sins.

3. The ceremonial initiation, taking place but once, into the church-community, that is, one's first acceptance as a member of a church (in the Christian church through baptism) is a highly significant ceremony which lays a grave obligation either upon the initiate, if he is in a position himself to confess his faith, or upon the witnesses who pledge themselves to take care of his education in this faith. This aims at something holy (the development of a man into a citizen in a divine state) but this act performed by others is not in itself holy or productive of holiness and receptivity for the divine grace in this individual; hence it is no means of grace, however exaggerated the esteem in which it was held in the early Greek church, where it was believed capable, in an instant, of washing away all sins— and here this
illusion publicly revealed its affinity to an almost more than heathenish superstition.

4. The oft-repeated ceremony (communion of a renewal, continuation, and propagation of this churchly community under laws of equality, a ceremony which indeed can be performed, after the example of the Founder of such a church (and, at the same time, in memory of him), through the formality of a common partaking at the same table, contains within itself something great, expanding the narrow, selfish, and unsociable cast of mind among men, especially in matters of religion, toward the idea of a cosmopolitan moral community; and it is a good means of enlivening a community to the moral disposition of brotherly love which it represents. But to assert that God has attached special favors to the celebration of this solemnity, and to incorporate among the articles of faith the proposition that this ceremony, which is after all but a churchly act, is, in addition, a means of grace—this is a religious illusion which can do naught but work counter to the spirit of religion. Clericalism in general would therefore be the dominion of the clergy over men’s hearts, usurped by dint of arrogating to themselves the prestige attached to) exclusive possession of means of grace.

* * * * *

All such artificial self-deceptions in religious matters have a common basis. Among the three divine moral attributes, holiness, mercy, and justice, man habitually turns directly to the second in order thus to avoid the forbidding condition of conforming to the requirements of the first. It is tedious to be a good servant (here one is forever hearing only about one’s duties); man would therefore rather be a favorite, where much is overlooked or else, when duty has been too grossly violated, everything is atoned for through the agency of some one or other favored in the highest degree—man, meanwhile, remaining the servile knave he ever was. But in order to satisfy himself, with some color of truth, concerning the feasibility of this intention of his, he has the habit of transferring his concept of a man (including his faults) to the Godhead; and just as, even in the best ruler of our race, legislative rigor, beneficent grace, and scrupulous justice do not (as they should) operate separately, each by itself, to produce a moral effect upon the actions of the subject, but mingle with one another in the thinking of the human ruler when he is making his decisions, so that one need only seek to circumvent one of these attributes, the fallible wisdom of the human will, in order to determine the other two to compliance; even so does man hope to accomplish the same thing with God by applying himself solely to His grace. (For this reason it was important for religion that the attributes, or rather the relations of God to man, which were conceived of, should be separated through the idea of a triune personality, wherein God is to be thought of analogously to this idea in order that each attribute or relation be made specifically cognizable.) To this end man busies himself with every conceivable formality, designed to indicate how greatly he respects the divine commands, in order that it may not be necessary for him to obey them; and, that his idle wishes may serve also to make good the disobedience of these commands, he cries: “Lord, Lord,” so as not to have to “do the will of his heavenly Father.” Thus he comes to conceive of the ceremonies, wherein certain means are used to quicken truly practical dispositions, as in themselves means of grace; he even proclaims the belief, that they are such, to be itself an essential part of religion (the common man actually regards it as the whole of religion); and he leaves it to all-gracious Providence to make a better man of him, while he busies himself with piety (a passive respect for the law of God) rather than with virtue (the application of one’s own powers in discharging the duty which one respects)—and, after all, it is only the latter, combined with the former, that can give us the idea which one intends by the word godliness (true religious disposition).

When the illusion of this supposed favorite of heaven mounts to the point where he fanatically imagines that he feels special works of grace within himself (or even where he actually presumes to be confident of a fancied occult intercourse with God), virtue comes at last actually to arouse his loathing, and becomes for him an object of contempt. Hence it is no wonder that the complaint is made publicly, that religion still contributes so little to men’s improvement, and that the inner light (“under a bushel”)2 of these favored ones does not shine forth outwardly in good works also, yea, (as, in view of their pretensions, one could rightly demand) preeminently, above other men of native honesty who, in brief, take religion unto themselves not as a substitute for, but as a furtherance of, the virtuous disposition which shows itself through actions, in a good course of life. Yet the Teacher of the Gospel has himself put into our hands these external evidences of outer experience as a touchstone, [by telling us that] we can know men by their fruits and that every man can know himself. But thus far we do not see that those who, in their own opinion, are extraordinarily favored (the chosen ones) surpass in the very least the naturally honest man, who can be relied upon in social intercourse, in business, or in trouble; on the contrary, taken as a whole, the chosen ones can scarcely abide comparison with him, which proves that the right course is not to go from grace to virtue but rather progress from virtue to pardoning grace.