

Chapter 3: Albert Schweitzer's Affirmations of Reverence for Life

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Marvin Meyer presented this paper at the international conference on "Albert Schweitzer at the Turn of the Millennium," held on the campus of Chapman University on February 19-21, 1999. The paper was given as a scholarly meditation in the context of an all-faiths service, which also included an ecumenical liturgy, organ music of Bach played by Schweitzer, and African Music and Dance performed by the Dembrebrah West African Drum and Dance Company of Long Beach, California. A slightly different version of this paper appears in Reverence for Life: The Ethic of Albert Schweitzer for the Twenty-first Century, published by Syracuse University Press.

One of the vivid images, among others, that comes to mind when I think of Albert Schweitzer affirming Reverence for Life is the image of Schweitzer with his ants. This image has been made memorable by the dentist, artist, and author Frederick Franck, who lived and worked with Schweitzer for a time in the late 1950s, and described his experiences in his book *Days with Albert Schweitzer: A Lambarene Landscape*. Among the charming drawings in the book is one with the caption "Dr. Schweitzer entertains his ants." Frederick was kind enough to present me with an artist's proof of the

drawing, and I have mounted it appropriately in my study among other drawings and prints. The drawing shows Schweitzer at 86, bushy of hair, mustache, and eyebrows, hunched over his writing table, with pages of a manuscript tacked to a wall, sheets of paper on the table, and ants crawling over the sheets. Frederick describes Schweitzer encountering his ants: “For some years he has been watching this particular family of ants, a few hundred or a few thousand quite benign and harmless ones, which live in a nest somewhere under the floor boards of his room. After every meal he puts a little piece of fish under the kerosene lamp on his table; immediately the ants crawl up the table leg, walk in a neat line across the top piled with papers, and start to tackle the fish offering from all sides. It requires five or six of the tiny insects to transport a huge fragment of two cubic millimeters of fish across the table, down the leg to their residence. Dr. Schweitzer and I watched with delight how first the softer pieces of fish were chosen in preference to older, harder ones.”

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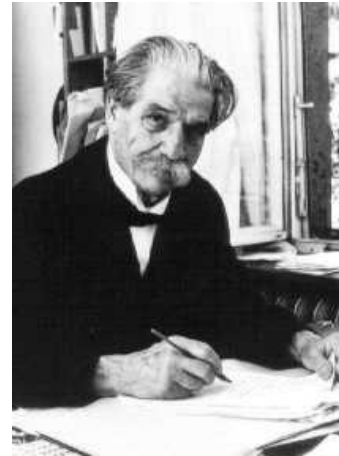
Schweitzer affirming Reverence for Life: Certainly Reverence for Life comes to expression in Schweitzer’s treatment of his ants, as well as his mosquitoes, his chickens, and his pelican Parsifal, but it should not be trivialized as being reducible to only that. Schweitzer considered Reverence for Life to be the elemental and universal ethical concept; he considered Reverence for Life to be the foundation for all sound moral thought and action; he considered Reverence for Life to be a necessity, a necessary conclusion, of clear thinking and reflection. When Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life, he affirmed the solidarity of all living things and the moral obligation of people who live in the midst of living things.

Schweitzer affirming Reverence for Life: Certainly Schweitzer was neither the only person nor the first person to advocate love and solidarity among humans and all living things. But when he affirmed Reverence for Life, he did so in his own inimitable way, with the variety of formulations and affirmations typical of the man who did so many different things so well.

It is my pleasure in this meditation to examine several ways – four or five ways – in which Albert Schweitzer articulated his understanding of Reverence for Life.

Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life autobiographically.

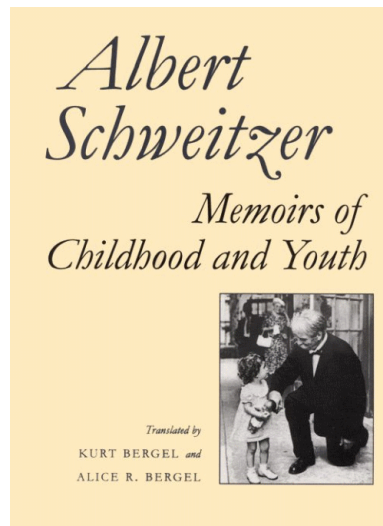
First, Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life autobiographically. In his *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth* Schweitzer traced his sensitivity to the pain and suffering in the world back to his childhood, and he recounted stories, now familiar to us, of his concern for living things from the days of his early childhood. I quote from the translation by Kurt and Alice Bergel: “Already before I started school it seemed quite incomprehensible to me that my evening prayers were supposed to be limited to human beings. Therefore, when my mother had prayed with me and kissed me goodnight, I secretly added another prayer which I had made up myself for all living beings. It went like this: ‘Dear God, protect and bless all beings that breathe, keep all evil from them, and let them sleep in peace.’ ” Again: “I had an experience during my seventh or eighth year which made a deep impression on me. Heinrich Bräsch and I had made ourselves rubberband slingshots with which we could shoot small pebbles. One spring Sunday during Lent he said to me, ‘Come on, let’s go to the Rebborg and shoot birds.’ I hated this idea, but I did not contradict him for fear he might laugh at me. We approached a leafless tree in which birds, apparently unafraid of us, were singing sweetly in the morning air. Crouching like an Indian hunter, my friend put a pebble in his slingshot and took aim. Obeying his look of command, I did the same with terrible pangs of conscience and vowing to myself to miss. At that very moment the church bells began to ring out into the sunshine, mingling their chimes with the song of the birds. It was the warning bell, half an hour before the main bell ringing. For me, it was a voice from Heaven. I put the slingshot aside, shooed the birds away



so that they were safe from my friend, and ran home. Ever since then, when the bells of Passiontide ring out into the sunshine and the naked trees, I remember, deeply moved and grateful, how that day they rang into my heart the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.' ” Schweitzer told other stories about an old horse being dragged to the slaughterhouse in Colmar, about his own dog Phylax and his neighbor’s dog Löscher, about the revolting experience of impaling worms and hooking fish, and about the treatment extended to Mausche the Jewish dealer when he passed through Günsbach.

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When reflecting on his childhood, Schweitzer observed that the commandment not to kill and torture impacted him in a powerful way in his childhood and youth, and such may well be the case. It may well be that Schweitzer was predisposed from childhood and influenced by childhood experiences to feel a kinship with other living beings, a feeling that may anticipate his later affirmations of Reverence for Life. Yet Schweitzer’s reflections published in his *Memoirs of*



Childhood and Youth are based upon his sessions, in 1922, with the psychologist and pastor Oscar Pfister in Zürich, when Schweitzer was depressed and in need of counsel. His reflections in his *Memoirs* allowed him the subsequent opportunity to present his own interpretation of the experiences of his childhood and youth, and while James Bentley’s charges of “emotional duplicity” seem to me to put the matter too

strongly, I suggest that Schweitzer may in fact project his values as an ethical thinker in his mid-forties back upon the experiences of his childhood. In his *Memoirs* we may learn as much about the values of the adult Schweitzer as we do about young Albert in and around Günsbach.

*Schweitzer affirmed
Reverence for Life
exegetically.*

Second, Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life exegetically. Albert Schweitzer grew up as a PK, a preacher's kid, and from an early age he was exposed to the interpretation of the Bible in an open, liberal, Lutheran context. He was given a copy of the New Testament, he says, at age eight, and he apparently entered the world of critical biblical scholarship already in his youth. If wise men from the East visited baby Jesus and offered him valuable gifts, young Albert asked, why was the holy family so poor? If shepherds saw the holy child in the manger, he wondered, why did none of them become followers of Jesus? And, not to leave out critical questions pertaining to the Hebrew scriptures, how could a rainstorm lasting forty days and forty nights produce a cataclysmic flood according to Genesis, he questioned, when a similarly heavy rain in Günsbach produced nothing of the kind? (His father's answer: In the old days it came down in bucketsful, not in drops as it does today.)

Later, as a young man involved in military service for Germany, Schweitzer spent some of his leisure time opening his Greek New Testament and reading a text that was to play a powerful role in his exegesis of the Bible and his interpretation of the person of Jesus: Matthew 10. (Today I might prefer to refer to this as the Matthean version and revision of the mission speech in the synoptic sayings source Q.) In



Matthew 10, Jesus sends out the twelve followers to announce that heaven's kingdom is near, and he reassures them that, although they will be opposed, they will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the child of humankind – conventionally called the son of man – comes. The child of humankind who is coming, Schweitzer recognized, is the apocalyptic figure announced in

the book of Daniel and elsewhere, who will return to usher in God's kingdom at the end of time.

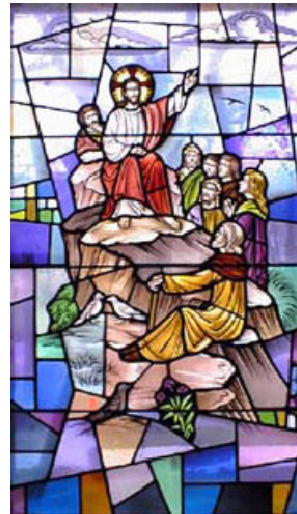
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Schweitzer's radical proposal, following Johannes Weiss, was eventually published in *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* and *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. The latter work in particular was a masterful piece; James Robinson observes that the reader must be "amazed at the undistracted persistence with which Schweitzer worked out a brilliant thesis as he worked his way through enormous masses of literature." Schweitzer proposed that Jesus was convinced – mistakenly, tragically – that the end was at hand, and that he was to be the instrument by whom the final kingdom would be brought in. Through Jesus' efforts, and through his death, God's kingdom would come. Of this Jesus was convinced, but he was wrong, heroically wrong, dead wrong. Schweitzer depicted Jesus' grand and misguided efforts in this manner: "There is silence all around. The Baptist appears and cries, 'Repent, for heaven's kingdom is at hand.' Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that he is the coming son of man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of humankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign."

Jesus, according to Schweitzer, is a stranger to our modern world. "He comes to us," Schweitzer writes in his conclusion to his *Quest*, "as one unknown, without a name." Schweitzer scoffed at the many scholars who engaged in a quest for the historical Jesus and ended up creating a modern Jesus in their own image, after their own likeness, reflecting their own values of their own world. Thus with regard to Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*, Schweitzer charges, "It is Christian art in the worst sense of the term – the art of the wax image. The gentle Jesus, the beautiful Mary, the fair Galileans who formed the retinue of the 'amiable carpenter,' might have been taken over

in a body from the shop-window of an ecclesiastical art emporium in the Place St. Sulpice.”

Schweitzer’s reconstruction of the life and death of Jesus is not above reproach, however. In the face of a great deal of the scholarship of his day, and scholarship to the present day, Schweitzer stressed the primary place and importance of the Gospel of Matthew. He chose his own scholarly path, passing by his brilliant teacher Heinrich Holtzmann, who championed the hypothesis of the primacy of Mark among the synoptic gospels. I believe in this respect Holtzmann was probably right and Schweitzer was probably wrong. Yet Schweitzer also needed Matthew, he needed Matthew 10, he needed the apocalyptic historical Jesus of Matthew 10 in order for his strange, foreign Jesus to emerge as the eschatological child of humankind. Though scholars in his day and ours have seen Matthew 10 as the creation of the later Christian church imposing its apocalyptic vision upon its portrait of Jesus, Schweitzer disagreed. He thought the apocalyptic Jesus to be the historical Jesus. Schweitzer’s apocalyptic Jesus has remained one of the truly compelling images of Jesus throughout the twentieth century, but it is no wonder that many of us now gravitate to a different paradigm of Jesus, a non-apocalyptic paradigm of Jesus as a teacher of wisdom.



Sermon on the Mount --
Stained-glass window in
Christ Church, Pompton, NJ

Schweitzer was touched by Jesus’ ethic of love, and he was moved by the Sermon on the Mount.

It was not that Schweitzer was willing to bypass the wisdom of Jesus. Schweitzer was touched by Jesus’ ethic of love, and he was moved by the Sermon on the Mount as much as Tolstoy, Bonhoeffer, Gandhi, and others. For Schweitzer, the sayings of Jesus communicated the message of love that was to remind him, increasingly, of Reverence for Life. Already in 1905, in a sermon he

preached at St. Nikolai's Church on Sunday, November 19, he exclaimed, "What kind of a living person is Jesus? Don't search for formulas to describe him, even if they be hallowed by centuries. I almost got angry the other day when a religious person said to me that only someone who believes in the resurrection of the body and in the glorified body of the risen Christ can believe in the living Jesus . . . Let me explain it in my way. The glorified body of Jesus is to be found in his sayings." If for Schweitzer those sayings are the sayings of an apocalyptic preacher announcing the end of the world, they remain the purer and stronger because of that. They are the charged ethical sayings about the life of love in the interim, in the brief time before the end. They are the sayings about how to love when everything is at stake, when there is no room for weakness and vacillation. In his *Quest* Schweitzer describes our encounter with Jesus and his sayings as an encounter with "Jesus as spiritually risen within people," and Schweitzer himself becomes a proponent of "Jesus mysticism."

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Salvador Dali

Sacrament of the Last Supper

Later Schweitzer emphasized these sayings of Jesus even more emphatically, when he suggested that Jesus actually only used the language of apocalyptic to communicate his primary message, his ethical message of love. In his 1950 preface to *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* he wrote, "It was Jesus who began to spiritualize the idea of God's kingdom and the messiah. He introduced into the late-

Jewish conception of the kingdom his strong ethical emphasis on love, making this, and the consistent practice of it, the indispensable condition of entrance. By so doing he charged the late-Jewish idea of God's kingdom with ethical forces, which transformed it into the spiritual and ethical reality with which we are familiar. Since the faith clung firmly to the ethical note, so dominant in the teaching of Jesus, it was able to reconcile and identify the two, neglecting those utterances in which Jesus voices the older eschatology."

For Schweitzer, then, Jesus becomes preeminently the proclaimer of love, and for Schweitzer Jesus becomes – like Schweitzer himself – the proclaimer of Reverence for Life. In the epilogue to *Out of My Life and Thought* Schweitzer puts it quite succinctly: Reverence for Life is the ethic of Jesus, "the ethic of love widened into universality." Suddenly Jesus, who was said to come to us as one unknown, does not seem so much a stranger to our times after all. He seems to be, as Henry Clark put it, the first liberal Christian, who under the guise of old-world apocalyptic preached a modern, humanitarian message of love and compassion. It is somewhat ironic, but perhaps also indicative of Schweitzer's own humanity, that the person who called scholars to a self-critical stance in the face of their modernizing portraits of Jesus, himself concluded that he and Jesus articulated the same basic ethical message for today.

Third, Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life religiously, I mean in his study of world religions. Schweitzer was a student of world religions, but he was no disinterested student. Rather, he betrayed the nearly desperate spirit of a scholar who – one of my colleagues noted – was writing his books on world religions "as a drowning man looking for something – anything – to grab onto." He frantically searched – that same colleague said he ransacked – the religions of the world to find an appropriate ethic that would allow for an active affirmation of life. The result of his academic and personal search was *Christianity and the Religions of the World, Indian Thought and Its Development*, and the still unpublished *Chinese*

Thought and Its Development. Schweitzer examined and evaluated, in addition to Christianity, ancient Mediterranean religions and Asian religions. I find it unfortunate that he did not pay any particular attention to the African religions around him, just as he did not learn an African language or study African music. Among the world religions that he did study, he appreciated features of many of them, particularly ancient Stoicism, Chinese religions, and aspects of Indian religions.

Schweitzer was especially fascinated with the ethical piety of Lao-tse and Meng-tse, among others from China. In *Indian Thought and Its Development* Schweitzer cites several Chinese maxims and stories that are indicative of the ethical stance of active compassion that he found so attractive in Chinese

An Indian ethical principle that seems to have made a significant impression upon Schweitzer was that of ahimsa, literally nonviolence or non-injury.



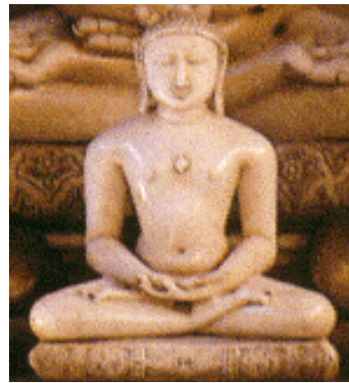
Jungle Whispering to Reconnected Human
watercolor by Susan Cohen Thompson

sources. “Have a pitiful heart for all creatures.” “One must bring no sorrow even upon worms and plants and trees.” “One does evil who shoots birds, hunts animals, digs up the larvae of insects, frightens nesting birds,” and so on. “Do not allow your children to amuse themselves by playing with flies or butterflies or little birds. It is not merely that such proceedings may result in damage to living creatures: They awaken in young hearts the inclination to cruelty and murder.” Such statements of ethical wisdom are reminiscent of Schweitzer’s own statements, stories, and actions having to do with birds, worms, and insects – recall Schweitzer’s ants. (Could Schweitzer have carried these Chinese maxims into his own writing and his own life?) Compare also the following story about the wife of a Chinese soldier. She was, it is said, ill and near death: “As a remedy she was ordered to eat the brains

of a hundred sparrows. When she saw the birds in a cage, she sighed and said, 'Shall it come to pass that to cure me a hundred living creatures shall be slain? I will rather die than allow that suffering shall come to them.' She opened the cage and let them fly. Shortly after, she recovered from her illness."

Schweitzer at times returned to a conviction that Christianity, and particularly the gospel of Jesus, may represent the best articulation of a living spirituality and of Reverence for Life. He once wrote, "Christianity alone is ethical mysticism," whereas the union with the divine found in Eastern religions represents a less active form of personal spirituality. Schweitzer was not appreciative of the renunciation of the world, of life, and of action that he considered characteristic of Indian religions.

Nonetheless, I am convinced, with Ara Barsam, that Schweitzer was deeply influenced by religious expressions from China and India. An Indian ethical principle that seems to have made a significant impression upon Schweitzer was that of *ahimsa*, literally nonviolence or non-injury, as preached and practiced among Jains and others.



Mahavira

Jainism was established in the sixth century BCE by a reformer of Hinduism named Mahavira. The Jains believe that the universe is alive with suffering souls and agonizing lives: A person is hurt, an insect is crushed, a tree is cut, a stone is kicked – in our infinite cycle of births and deaths and rebirths—*samsara*—our souls have known indescribable pains. Since our human lives are bound together with the existence of all other beings in the world, Mahavira affirmed, "One who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water, and vegetation disregards his own existence which is entwined with them." To live rightly and well in this sort of world requires that we repudiate all the violence and the killing that can increase the stain of *karma* (the causality that shapes our

destiny and determines the character of birth and rebirth). Thus, the Jain Sutras proclaim, “All things breathing, all things existing, all things living, all beings whatever, should not be slain or treated with violence, or insulted, or tortured, or driven away.” A deep commitment to a life of *ahimsa* may be seen in the everyday practices of observant Jains. Jains ordinarily observe a strict vegetarian diet, and even the vegetables—that are, after all, living things to be killed or eaten—are evaluated for their karmic weight. Jains advocate that kindness and consideration be shown to animals and support programs for the prevention of cruelty to animals. Some Jains even wear masks to prevent the inadvertent slaughter of tiny insects that otherwise might be killed as people breathe in and out; some sweep the surface of the ground ahead of them lest they trample living things. Such radically nonviolent practices, extreme as they sometimes are, illustrate a lifestyle that is mindful of the precariousness of life all around and the need to exercise care and gentleness in the presence of other living things. Jains compare this restrained and gentle life to that of “the bee that sucks honey in the blossoms of a tree without hurting the blossom and strengthens itself.”

In his evaluation of *ahimsa*, Schweitzer admitted that the proclamation of *ahimsa* is of great importance in the development of ethical thought. “The laying down of the commandment not to kill and not to damage is one of the greatest events in the spiritual history of humankind,” Schweitzer announced in *Indian Thought*. “Starting from its principle, founded on world and life denial, of abstention from action, ancient Indian thought – and this in a period when in other respects ethics has not progressed very far – reaches the tremendous discovery that ethics knows no bounds! So far as we know, this is for the first time clearly expressed by Jainism.” Schweitzer goes on to praise Buddha (with qualifications) for making this ethic of nonviolence an ethic of compassion, and he lauds Gandhi for transforming *ahimsa* into a principle of active compassion and affirmation of life – an ethic comparable, as Gandhi also recognized, to the ethic of Jesus as enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount.

“The idea of Reverence for Life came to me as an unexpected discovery... And when the idea and the words had come to me, it was of Buddha I thought...”

Schweitzer’s affirmation of Reverence for Life compares well, in several respects, with the ethic of *ahimsa* of Jains and



Buddha

others. If *ahimsa* is an all-encompassing ethical principle that fundamentally shapes the nonviolent lives and commitments of Jains and others, so does Reverence for Life for Schweitzer. If *ahimsa* embraces the value of all life – humans, animals, and plants – and proclaims solidarity among humans and all living things, so does Reverence for Life for Schweitzer. Schweitzer goes so far, in his *Philosophy of*

Civilization, as to see, with Schopenhauer, a will to live not only in humans, animals, and plants, but even in crystals. And if *ahimsa* implies something of a gloomy, pessimistic assessment of life in the world – we cannot, finally, avoid the taking of life – so does Reverence for Life for Schweitzer. Mike Martin notes the guilt-mongering of Schweitzer; James Brabazon reminds us that we might equally well speak of debt rather than guilt. Schweitzer himself says that since we cannot avoid destroying and injuring life, we necessarily incur guilt or indebtedness. “The good conscience,” he wrote, “is an invention of the devil.”

It is not entirely surprising, after all, to remember what Schweitzer told Charles Joy about the origin of the idea of Reverence for Life: “The idea of Reverence for Life came to me as an unexpected discovery, like an illumination coming upon me in the midst of intense thought while I was completely conscious. And when the idea and the words had come to me, it was of Buddha I thought . . .”

Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life philosophically.

Fourth, Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life philosophically. In his correspondence with his soon-to-be wife Helene, Schweitzer acknowledged that he was essentially a philosopher, though a philosopher who was caught by Jesus. (“Basically I am philosopher – but I let myself be caught by

him, the greatest, the most divine of all philosophers, in whom the most sublime thought leads back to the most simple. Because of this obedience he will forgive my heresies . . .”) In his correspondence with Oskar Kraus, Schweitzer explained that in his philosophical writings he employed exclusively the language of philosophy and logical thinking, and thus referred to “the universal will-to-live” rather than “God.” Schweitzer’s most complete and arguably most compelling discussion of Reverence for Life is given in his philosophical writings, specifically *The Philosophy of Civilization*. There he considers Descartes’ starting-point for philosophical discourse, the dictum *cogito ergo sum*, and pronounces it paltry and arbitrary. Instead, Schweitzer suggests that true philosophy begins with another sort of immediate awareness, in which each of us lives and moves, he claims, day by day: “I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.” From this awareness Schweitzer derives disarmingly simple and straightforward definitions of ethics, of moral goodness, and of evil: “Ethics consist, therefore, in my experiencing the compulsion to show to all will-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own.” And, as for good and evil: “It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.” Schweitzer never allows these descriptions of good and evil to degenerate into either relativism or legalism. Reverence for Life remains absolute, to be sure, but the application of Reverence for Life in concrete situations, in which we inevitably must make hard decisions that will sometimes – but only when necessary – destroy and obstruct life, requires the application of thoughtful reflection and ethical responsibility. Hence, as we have seen, Schweitzer’s assertions about the need for clear thinking and a sensitive conscience.

“It is good to maintain and to encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or to obstruct it.”

Schweitzer maintained that this exposition of Reverence for Life discloses that Reverence for Life is a logical consequence or necessity of thought. James Brabazon is helpful in his discussion of what Schweitzer meant by “thought,” *denken, auf Deutsch*. When Schweitzer asserts that Reverence for Life is a necessity of thought, Brabazon explains, he is not referring only to intellectual argumentation and logical proof but also to other sorts of reflection: meditation, intuition,

mystical reflection. Brabazon quotes Schweitzer approvingly in this regard: “If rational thought thinks itself out to a conclusion, it arrives at something non-rational which, nevertheless, is a necessity of thought.” In spite of the best efforts of Schweitzer and Brabazon, I still do not think a strong case is made for Reverence for Life as a necessity of thought. Schweitzer himself admits that “the world is a ghastly drama of will-to-live divided against itself,” that the world is, as we also recognize to our grief, a dog-eat-dog world, or, for Schweitzer, a hippo-eat-hippo world. For this question, this issue, Schweitzer has no answer, and he calls the contrast between creative will and destructive will an enigma. Further, even if necessity of thought is not judged to be logical necessity, few thinkers other than committed Schweitzerians buy into the necessary relationship Schweitzer poses between rational and non-rational thought, nor do ethicists feel compelled to draw the same conclusion as Schweitzer. Reverence for Life remains a powerful, appealing ethical option, but it does not appear to be a necessity of thought.

Foundational to Reverence for Life, I would propose, is reciprocity...

Nevertheless, it may be possible, in another way, to demonstrate a universalizing tendency in the principle of Reverence for Life.

Foundational to Reverence for Life, I would propose, is reciprocity, the recognition that it is right and proper to balance my expectations and actions for myself with my expectations and actions for others. Thus Jesus, speaking out of his Jewish tradition, advises, “Act toward others the way you want others to act toward you.” (the golden rule, which sometimes is articulated in the negative as the so-called silver rule), and he commands, “Love your neighbor as

yourself” (love that includes love for enemy, as Jesus states in the Sermon on the Mount). Schweitzer himself preached a



Confucius:

“Do not to others
what you do not want them
to do to you.”

But there is an additional way, arguably the most important way, in which Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life. ... He lived Reverence for Life.

sermon on love for neighbor on February 16, 1919. These ethical rules of reciprocity are to be found all around the world among devotees of the religions of the world. Hinduism praises one who looks on neighbor as self. Buddhism announces a universal love for all beings, a love that overcomes the hatred of others. Confucianism proclaims, “Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.” The Tao-te-Ching observes, “One who loves the world as one’s own body can be entrusted with the world.” With these affirmations we are close indeed to Schweitzer’s affirmation of Reverence for Life.

In September, 1915, Schweitzer says, he came up with the phrase Reverence for Life while passing through a herd of hippopotami on the Ogowe River, and thereafter he found a variety of ways to affirm Reverence for Life – autobiographically, exegetically, religiously, philosophically. But there is an additional way, arguably the most important way, in which Schweitzer affirmed Reverence for Life. He did so daily, actively, in his life. He lived Reverence for Life. As a medical doctor for Africans



and Europeans who were in need of medical attention, as the head of a village hospital that welcomed and nurtured people and animals, Schweitzer practiced Reverence for Life for half a century at Lambarene and in the equatorial jungle around. Like Goethe, in *Wilhelm Meister*, Schweitzer chose Reverence as the category to explain life in the world, and like Goethe, in *Faust*, Schweitzer considered the opening of the Gospel of

John, *en arche en ho logos*, “In the beginning was the word,” and understood it, “In the beginning was action.” Before going to Africa, Schweitzer promised to be quiet as a fish, and he maintained that his life was his argument.

Schweitzer found Reverence for Life when he found Lambarene and lived in Lambarene.

It remains for us, then, to evaluate for ourselves these affirmations of Reverence for Life. I do not anticipate that many of us will emulate Schweitzer by encountering and entertaining our own family of ants, but what shall we do? How shall we understand the challenges of moral goodness, evil, and ethics in the world? How shall we see ourselves in the context of other living beings in the world? How shall we assume our responsibilities, and act upon our responsibilities, in a world of painful and perplexing ambiguities? Finally, our consideration of Schweitzer's understanding of Reverence for Life may become a call to us, not unlike the call that Schweitzer describes at the end of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, the call to which he responded by going to live and work in Africa. This call has been issued, in different places and different times, by Buddha, by Mahavira, by Jesus, and by others, and in Schweitzer this call is a call to ethical action. How do we understand Reverence for Life? How shall we affirm life and Reverence for Life? How shall we find our own Lambarene?

Albert Schweitzer's Autobiography:

