

A RESPONSE (I) TO DONALD GRAY

What is most remarkable about my presence here as a Protestant theologian is that it is so unremarkable. We have come a long way in Catholic-Protestant relations, and the movement is due to your initiatives. When I was a student in the Chicago Divinity School, I was in a program called "constructive theology." Our task, as the title suggested, was to work out our own theologies. We had unlimited freedom as to the materials we could use and were bound only by tenets of responsibility to the community of inquiry. We knew this was risky business, and we looked with a certain wistfulness at what we supposed was the monolithic fortress of Roman Catholicism, where a great tradition survived intact and commanded the loyalty of great scholars and profound intellects. We preferred our dangerous freedom, but we liked to think that if we fell from the highwire on which we tried to walk, the Catholic tradition provided a net which could catch us.

All that has changed. We have discovered that there was neither a fortress nor a net but, instead, a great ferment. We have learned that not only we distant outsiders but many insiders as well felt that the great tradition had ossified. We have encountered a desire like our own for freedom of inquiry and full participation in the contemporary world. Today there seems little that divides us. As I hear a paper such as this one by Donald Gray, I hardly notice that it is written by a Catholic rather than by a Chicago-educated Protestant engaged in "constructive theology."

Yet there is a difference. Catholic theology continues to be produced within a community of liturgical celebration, whereas many of us Protestant theologians do not participate in such a community. This grounding in a living community is the special strength and attraction of Catholic theology. If in our time it can combine rootedness in a historical community of faith with the full freedom of "constructive theology," the special vocation of liberal Protestant theology will be at an end, and the intellectual leadership of the Christian world will pass back into the Catholic Church. It was the genius of Teilhard de Chardin that his rootedness in Christian faith freed his mind for radical vision, and his radical vision deepened his rootedness. If this becomes the type of Catholic theology, the main providential reasons for the existence of Protestantism will be ended, and only sociological and cultural reasons will remain.

I said "if." There have been times in the past when rootedness and freedom have gone together and have supported each other. But there have been other times when rootedness has been preserved only by restrictions on freedom. As long as this danger exists, we outsiders will have our function for your sake as well as for our own.

Donald Gray's paper is a good example of the high quality of the union of rootedness and freedom in contemporary Catholic theology. Yet it also suggests the danger that the tension between rootedness and freedom may be dealt with, in contrast with Teilhard, by moderation and even by compromise. I sense a cautious use of freedom felt to be in possible opposition to rootedness, and a slight reduction of rootedness for the sake of freedom. Catholic theology can seize the leadership and become the vanguard of all Christian thinking only if the depth of rootedness itself nurtures freedom and the radical exercise of freedom deepens the rootedness. Teilhard still offers a paradigm whose potential contribution to all of Christendom is far from exhausted.

Apart from this mild complaint that Gray's paper lacks the boldness that is needed to further the cutting edge of the theological task, I find little to oppose. I am comfortable and at home in most of his formulations. Hence my contribution will be limited to three extended footnotes.

(1) I appreciate Gray's recognition of the value in starting his christology from above rather than from below. As counterbalance to the dominant recent trend, this is important. But I would like to underscore, what is clear from Gray's formulation, that the distinction is subtle, if not confused. Gray understands that the "above" with which he "starts" is one of which he knows only from "below." Personally and historically he thinks of God incarnationally only because of Jesus. Similarly it is their views of the above that determine what those who start from "below" find there. Pannenberg finds in Jesus a total focus on the future consummation in part, at least, because of his own conviction that without such consummation life is meaningless. The truth is that we all start where we are, and where we are is a product of complex historical and intellectual currents that deal with both above and below. When we lay out our argument, a sequence appears which may or may not reflect the way the understanding for which we argue actually arises for us or others.

This point is on my mind because of the difficulty I found in deciding how to organize my own christology. I went back and

forth between beginning "above" and "below." Like Gray I finally opted for "above." But the choice did not entail any important difference in what I had to say either about God or about Jesus. What I believe about God is bound up with Jesus, and what I believe about Jesus is bound up with God.

(2) Gray commends his incarnational christology partly on the grounds that it provides a good basis for pursuing interfaith discussions. He is correct, but he says too little for me to be sure whether we agree as to how this will work. Presumably incarnational theology allows the Christian to see the presence of God in the founders and practitioners of other faiths and thereby to appreciate them and to be open to learn from them. So far, so good. But in most approaches to other faiths motivated by this spirit, a second step has followed: when God is seen at work in the other, this working of the God we know in Jesus is what is celebrated or sought after in the other as well. As a result we find in the other only the echo of what we already know.

I can explain my concern best with an example. The most creative interfaith work I know of is being carried on by Catholic missionaries in Japan who have involved themselves deeply in Zen Buddhism. They are not naively supposing that there are no profound differences between Zen and Catholicism. They are honestly seeking to understand each in its own integrity and to appreciate what is different in the other as well as what is similar. Yet as I read their writings I feel a limitation. There seems to be a deep assumption that what is realized in Zen meditation and what is related to in Christian faith must ultimately be the same—that which Christians call God.

But a tension exists between this assumption and what actually occurs. It seems that what is realized in Zen Buddhism is not God but a different ultimate. As a Christian I believe that I can discern God leading Zen practitioners to the realization of that other ultimate and can also see the contribution that Zen can make to us. But I doubt that we will fully profit from the encounter with Zen until we have allowed the depth of the difference to impress itself upon us. The incarnational view of God that opens us to the treasures of other traditions is in danger of imposing too limited a meaning upon those treasures.

(3) My sense of the depth of the diversity among the great world traditions also carries over into my sense of the depth of the difference between the incarnation in Jesus and in us, his follow-

ers. Gray recognizes a difference, and since he even quotes me with approval on this subject, I can hardly disagree with him. Yet I would like to accept this point still more.

As long as we think that being human is being something very much like what we know in ourselves, the deepest differences among humans cannot be acknowledged. Until this assumption of homogeneity is broken, our assertion of Jesus' humanity implies that his humanity was very much like ours. In *our* experience there is a marked overagainstness between our individual selfhood and the divine person. What we do and what God does in the relationship between us is fairly clear. This means that when we ask the question of Jesus' humanity and Jesus' divinity, we ask about two quite distinct subjects and their separate activities or agencies; and the right and necessary affirmation of Jesus' full humanity drives us necessarily toward adoptionism. We have no better answers than the Nestorians as to how the divine and the human are truly united.

I find Gray's paper vague on this point—as is most recent christology. I do not disagree with what is said. I only ask for bolder efforts to make clear and meaningful the distinctive unity of the divine and the human in the one person, Jesus Christ. I believe that we can do this today in ways that were closed to us in the past. As long as we took the human self or person as something ontologically or metaphysically given there seemed no way to understand it as at once human and divine. But in the encounter with Buddhism we are forced to reconsider this basic tenet of so much of Western thought. When we have done so, we must radically rethink what we mean by the self or the person. In doing so, I am convinced, we will find ways to make sense of what was so awkwardly and paradoxically affirmed at Chalcedon.

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