

## A RESPONSE (II) TO DONALD GRAY

As I read and reread Donald Gray's stimulating paper, "The Divine and the Human in Jesus Christ," I was hard put to know how to react to it. It struck me that John Cobb's reaction would be along the lines of his own recent study, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1975), and that Professor Cobb might say that Professor Gray has not gone far enough in his revisionist approach to the symbol of the incarnation. As a likely representative of a more classical theological viewpoint, I might be expected to say that Professor Gray has extrapolated the symbol of the incarnation beyond its historical and traditional usage, but he has himself said so explicitly: "In thus broadening the meaning of the language of incarnation, it consequently becomes impossible to restrict the symbol's application to one, single historical instance."

In going over Professor Gray's address, I used three *sigla* for the ways his positions struck me: the first category was simply explanatory, and my reaction standpoint neutral, in that Professor Gray was setting forth his starting point and developing his hypotheses; the second category was agreement and even admiration for the insights displayed; my third category was one of questioning or uncertainty about the model proposed. My comments will combine all three reactions: first, Gray's main thesis and approach; second, positive elements in his presentation, points I found appealing; third, aspects that struck me as requiring further elucidation.

Since the symbol of the incarnation occupies so prominent a place among expressions of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in Christian tradition, Professor Gray chose to reflect on this symbol. He started, as he said, "from above . . . from the side of the holy mystery that is God." Gray's main points are that the incarnation can be regarded as a symbol in three ways: (1) symbol of 'holy mystery,' hence a theological symbol; (2) symbol of Jesus, therefore both christological and anthropological; (3) thirdly, the incarnation is an existential symbol.

When the incarnation is taken as a *theological* symbol, as symbol of "the holy mystery," then God's graciousness is in the forefront. The classical philosophical attributes of immutability and impassibility are challenged "in the light of God's revelation in Jesus, the suffering servant," and "some type of divine passibility

or divine becoming" seems part of the holy mystery. The symbol of the incarnation, taken theologically, may possibly include, therefore, notions of divine experience, divine passibility, and divine alteration. Divine saving suffering matches divine saving action. Extending his perspective pastorally and catechetically even in this first section on the incarnation as a theological symbol, Gray suggests that suffering in the followers of Christ as in Jesus' own life-history is grounded in the "suffering love of God himself." "In other words," he writes, "the symbol of incarnation points to the immanence of the holy mystery in the world of creatures, but particularly in the world of man, as saving presence, action, suffering, and revelation."

Professor Gray himself raises the objection that this theological view of the incarnational symbol as pointing to the immanence of the holy mystery in the world as saving presence, saving action, saving suffering, and saving revelation is an outlook which relativizes the lines of mediation and ministry of the holy mystery. It may seem to subvert the absoluteness and uniqueness claimed for the Christian revelation. Gray replies that the concerns about Christian identity must take into consideration the new contemporary ecumenical situation. He asks: Is the Christian God "a radically incarnational God?" Is it characteristic of "the God incarnate in Jesus" to "seek incarnational visibility and agency throughout history?"

Here I put this question: if one holds with Professor Gray that the God incarnate in Jesus is a radically incarnational God, and that there are many incarnations of this God through which his saving presence, saving action, saving suffering and saving revelation come effectively into human life to transform human life, and yet insists with Gray that this God reveals himself *definitively* in Jesus of Nazareth, are we not dealing with two classes of incarnation(s)? For Gray insists also that the difference between Jesus and other saviors and healers in whom the holy mystery is incarnationally revealed is a difference not merely of degree but a difference of kind; is this not the same as admitting a difference of kind between the incarnation in Jesus and all other possible incarnations?

In its relation to other communities, the Christian community has what Professor Gray calls a "focal concern" for Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. The present and growing task of Christianity is to set other Christ-figures, other saviors, in relationship with

Jesus of Nazareth. I wonder if the term "incarnation" has not been broadened so much by Professor Gray as to have lost its force, especially when "definitiveness" is still so strongly, and in my judgment so correctly, attached to Jesus of Nazareth. Is the case of Jesus the unique instance of an "upper case" Incarnation, all others "lower case" incarnations? (See Avery Dulles, S.J., "Contemporary Approaches to Christology: Analysis and Reflection," *The Living Light* 13, 1 [Spring, 1976], pp. 119-44.)

Professor Gray comments on the recovery of the Trinity as an "economic" symbol, a symbol of the relatedness of God to the world of his creatures, and the consequent reluctance (his phrase) with respect to immanent trinitarian relations. Here, I must confess, I feel the same uneasiness as with other recent theological attempts to limit trinitarian theology to the "economic." It is a commonplace to admit that the language of "persons" can be misleading, since person is now taken to be a distinct center of self-consciousness and self-determination. Gray favors "modal language" in place of the traditional trinitarian persons. He suggests two modes of presence: God's presence to himself, and God's presence to creatures. I put this question: is the "trinitarian symbol" one and the same as the triune God, or is there such a difference of approach between Professor Gray and the older more familiar wording that the same language is no longer being used?

Professor Gray insists the modes of personal presence are also modes or ways of action, for the holy mystery is energy and power. He concludes the first part of his study with the summary: "There is a holy mystery savingly present and at work within and throughout the history of the world to bring about the transformation of life in Word and Spirit."

Part Two was on the incarnation as a christological and hence anthropological symbol, that is, symbol of man's relationship to the holy mystery. Touching Christ two factors are involved: the call by God to be the peculiar instrument of the saving presence and work of the mystery, and the response, the human acceptance of the call, permitting the mystery to make itself present in a special way. Among the many men and women healers and saviors among us, "for Christians there is One who does so supremely and definitively." It is not fully clear to me that in Gray's hypothesis Jesus of Nazareth would be regarded as representing the "chief and definitive presence and action of the mystery" not only for Christians, but for all men and women, even those in other reli-

gious traditions past and present. I regard the centrality of Christ not as an exclusivist idea, but as an all-inclusive reality, even though I can admit there are other exemplifications of incarnation taken in a broader sense. In the discussion at this convention yesterday afternoon at Professor Monika Hellwig's seminar-workshop on "Christology: Exclusivist Claims and the Conflict of Faiths," one participant also argued for the centrality of Christ as an inclusive rather than an exclusivist concept.

Professor Gray sees the response of Jesus as part of a larger history of human response. He pleads for a study of the human freedom of Jesus as a key to his humanity. Comparatively little has been done here in christology, except for the intricate debates of times past on reconciling Jesus' freedom with the Father's command to lay down his life. We must also face the connected question of our Lord's freedom from sin, even more of an antecedent preservation from the possibility of sinning. The gospels insist Jesus was tempted, like us in all things except sin. Respectable theologians are suggesting that an antecedent inability to sin, *impeccabilitas*, is inconsistent with true human freedom, but I would demur and ask if "being tempted" and "being able to sin" are co-terminous, and I would ask for further consideration about the gift of God's love so dominant in the singlemindedness of Jesus the man. Is ability to sin, so common to our human experience, a necessary ingredient of human freedom? Is not the divine initiative, God's call, what Gray calls "the unique vocational initiative of God in Jesus' regard," an ingredient also in his human response? Do we know, short of Jesus, the full dimensions of human freedom? Is the paradigm simply our human experience, or can it be, as theologians have often thought, that we learn about man and his possibilities from Jesus the man?

How is the human freedom of Jesus connected with the incarnation? Gray answers this question by saying the human freedom conditions the incarnation in part: "God's incarnational initiative, even in Jesus, partakes of the risk and ambiguity which seem to characterize all of human existence. Consequently the victory of God against the demonic powers at work in human life is all the greater and all the more humanly significant." He writes of the "essential continuity between Jesus and ourselves without ignoring the significant discontinuity both in terms of his own mission and ministry and his own definitive realization of the divine/human relationship."

Human acceptance enters into the incarnation, so that a processive understanding of the incarnation is required; in his life-history Jesus becomes in functional fact the image of God in human history; the death and resurrection are the climax of the incarnation. A conclusion Gray draws from this is that "the moment of incarnation can no longer be identified with the moment of the virginal conception." I would ask whether there is a true dilemma here: is the idea of the incarnation as a developing reality, passing through stages, incompatible with the unique divine presence in Jesus from the start?

Professor Gray says some of the views he proposes may sound adoptionist, and recommends the re-incorporation of some of the adoptionist christology of the earliest Christian community. Short of a more specific appeal to Christian history, which Gray had no opportunity to do in his paper, I cannot say more by way of reaction than to recall ancient councils, as Nicea, which faced certain forms of adoptionist christology and found them seriously wanting, indeed as gravely erroneous. I concede there may be trends of early christological thought, biblical and patristic, that were submerged by the more dominant patterns that came to prevail, but I confess uneasiness at the large rubric, "adoptionist christology."

Professor Gray's final division, "the incarnation as existential symbol," is his shortest section. "In a very real sense," he writes, "the meaning of salvation lies in the *imitatio Christi*. . . ." Who can gainsay that, yet I would like to see it brought into relationship with other aspects of Jesus as Savior and our own salvation. Gray has made his goal to make available again the numinous power of the symbol of the incarnation, which he finds has suffered from "over-objectification." What soteriological theories would Gray place under the censure, "distortion by doctrinal objectification"? (See the paper from last year's convention, Francis Schuessler Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology: Toward an Understanding of Atonement and Redemption as Emancipatory Solidarity," in *CTSA Proceedings* 30 [1975], 63-110.)

One can only agree with and applaud the goals of Professor Gray's endeavor, a christology that will assist the healing of self through right relationship to the holy mystery, and although his time limits did not permit him to go further into it, he states clearly that our right relationship to the holy mystery is inseparable from ministering to the ministry on behalf of others. A further consider-

ation which he touched on in a footnote and which offers enormous undeveloped possibilities is the insights from Christian mystical tradition and the bond between that tradition and the similar experiences in other world religions.

And a final small comment, though I too may be personally guilty also of the abuses against which Professor Gray inveighs in his conclusions, as he pleads for a christology that is catechetically and pastorally viable, that is, the abusive congeries of "arcane language, abstruse conceptualization, and merely academic quarrels"; I offer the complementary reflection that the exact formulations of doctrine, especially by the councils, are great helps, not inhibiting factors, in the development of wider theology. Researches like Aloys Grillmeier's on the background of the Chalcedonian definition, out again recently in a completely revised and expanded second edition (*Christ in Christian Tradition. Volume One: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975]) are liberating studies, for we can learn from what Chalcedon failed to do as well as from what it did so well for the needs of its own time in setting forth the inexhaustible riches of Jesus Christ, true God and true man.

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