

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY: EXCLUSIVIST CLAIMS AND THE CONFLICT OF FAITHS

Contemporary christology is characterized by a nagging anxiety over the credibility or the truth claim of the assertion of the unique salvific mediatorship of Jesus, when seen over against the assertions of other religious traditions. This anxiety is evident both in contemporary efforts to elaborate the "story" or to retell it, and in contemporary critical reflection on the "story" as told by the churches now and in the past.

This anxiety seems to arise from the historical and cultural changes by which the outsiders' questions have become the insiders' questions. As expressed by Charles Davis in the seminar discussion, we used to tell the stories that shaped our world comparatively untroubled by distant traditions that shaped a different world with different stories. Now we have no world of our own, shaped by our Christian story, which is not interpenetrated by other traditions. It is not because others question us about our claims that the questions have become urgent, but because we are unable to hear our own "story" or shape our own world without these questions intruding themselves as our own questions. What makes Jesus mediator of salvation in a sense more final and absolute than Buddha? What makes the Christian reading of the scriptures of Israel more valid than a Jewish reading which does not give Jesus of Nazareth a central place in the coming of salvation?

Clearly, these are not one-dimensional questions. They cut across many levels of religious language and many perspectives. They can be asked and answered at the level of "story," where they can function naively or at a more or less critical level of reflection. They can also be asked at the level of "doctrine"—a level of systematization or critical reflection within the faith stance of a particular "story"—where they can function simplistically (with inappropriate naivete) or more or less critically. Finally, the questions can be asked at the level of the "history of religions," where the answer must satisfy equally the outsiders and the insiders to the "story"—an achievement generally agreed to be impossible.

At all three levels, an answer can be attempted in metaphysical, ontological terms ("he was in the beginning, divine, and he came down and assumed humanity"), or in historical terms ("he

lived and taught as no man ever did before, and in the event of his presence, his death and his resurgence as experienced by his followers, the human situation has in fact been transformed"). In fact, concretely it becomes very difficult to distinguish between "story" and "doctrine"—a point made repeatedly in the seminar discussion by Patout Burns, Quentin Quesnell, Peter Schineller and others, quoting the New Testament.

At all three levels the question and the answer can be seen in perspectives that are primarily exclusive or primarily inclusive, as pointed out by Donald Gray, who cited the development of christology in terms of Logos as an attempt to be inclusive and at the same time as an expression of a certain awareness of relativity of perspective. But whether the mode of expression is exclusive (attributing mediatorship to Jesus that is not to be attributed to anyone else) or inclusive (attributing to Jesus what all others have only in a lesser way and only in relation to him) the assertion of the uniqueness, ultimacy and unsurpassability of Jesus still sets the Christian claim in opposition to other traditions.

A study by several members of the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago presented at the CTSA Convention and discussed in the christology seminar, has attempted to classify contemporary christologies with respect to the way in which they deal with the question of credibility of the claims in the light of other traditions. Discussion yielded the following conclusions: that the real area of dispute could be identified in the question whether the mediatorship of Jesus is to be seen as constitutive of salvation or only normative but not constitutive; that this distinction tends to be the distinction between a classical metaphysical approach on the one hand and an historical approach on the other. The latter option, however, does not remove the "scandal" of a claim of the superiority of Jesus over the heroes of other traditions, though it expresses it in more muted tones.

Given this contemporary experience, it would seem that theologians must now ask themselves: can there be a non-exclusivist christology, i.e., one which does not make unmatchable, unsurpassable claims for Jesus? In this respect, should a difference be made between the "story" level and the "doctrine" level? The point was made by Charles Davis in the discussion that inclusive or exclusive absolute claims belong to the style of myth, the style in which the "story" is couched, but acquire a completely different and restrictive sense when maintained at the

level of "doctrine." To this, several others countered the observation that historically the Christian "story" cannot be disentangled from "doctrinal" reflection. The question was raised whether the making of exclusive and absolute claims was not precisely what distinguished "doctrine" as the insider's critical reflection on "story" from "history of religions" as the outsider's critical reflection on the whole tradition including its "story" and "doctrine."

The question whether there can be a non-exclusivist christology, can only be answered after the question: what are the parameters for a christology? This in turn is obviously answered differently according to denominational and other loyalties, but as the seminar discussion clearly demonstrated, whatever those parameters are taken to be, a non-exclusivist christology only becomes possible with a positive answer to the most radical question: can we change the "story" substantially from what was handed down to us from the beginning? There is no doubt that the Christian "story" makes claims of uniqueness, universal mediatorship, and unsurpassability for Jesus. If the work of the "doctrine" level of reflection is that of the insider who accepts the "story," the reduction of those absolute claims to something less seems to be precluded.

Here the issue is, however, complicated by the meta-theological questions: what is the function of exclusivity in religious claims in general? Is it different in the language of "story" and the language of "doctrine"? What is the function of exclusivity in christology in particular? Is it different in the language of "story" and the language of "doctrine"? The role of theology is very much at stake here. Even assuming that the term, theology, is properly applied only to the insiders' task of critical reflection, does the task of theology consist of explicating an existing stance or of devising a new stance? In the praxis/theory relationship that necessarily exists here, *whose* praxis is involved? As a matter of fact, theologians commonly combine explication of the existing stance with innovations of their own devising, acknowledged or not, and these become part of the tradition if a sufficiently audible segment of the recognizable church community accepts the formulation. Every theological attempt has this element of risk. In fact, our "story" as well as our "doctrine" is constantly modified by theological discussion, but only to the extent that the community recognizes the new version as "essentially unchanged," substan-

tially continuous with previous versions. It seems, in this context, impossible to concede a non-exclusivist christology, although the meta-theological questions must be raised, and the work of theology must be done with a critical awareness of these meta-theological questions.

Beyond this, there appears to be a hidden agenda in the whole discussion. "Exclusivist" is a derogatory term with the strongest feeling tone in the contemporary cultural context. It may be necessary to consider this and ask why christology is a focal expression of the Christian stance and may be expected to shape itself accordingly. Discomfort with a particular style of christology is likely to be discomfort with a whole complex understanding of Christianity and all that it entails. Is the Christian stance properly oppositional to most or all secular promises of salvation? to some or all promises of salvation in the other religions? and most particularly, to the dominant Jewish understanding of salvation in all times since Jesus? Discomfort with an "exclusivist" christology may be a manifestation of discomfort with Christianity understood as an oppositional stance.

There were several different responses to the question of possibility or desirability of a non-exclusivist christology arising from the seminar. The discussion was marred mainly by the fact that within the available time sufficient agreement was not reached on the use of key terms, as a number of participants had come with fairly well defined positions, already elaborated in their own vocabulary. There was general agreement with the observation made that such a discussion could only achieve a genuine meeting of minds after a rather lengthy preliminary session defining the participants' positions and vocabulary in soteriology, leading up to a reciprocal understanding and critique of positions taken in christology. Soteriology was recommended as an urgent topic for the next annual convention.

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