

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

Increasingly the discussion of Christology, both within traditional theological circles and among those engaged in the area of religious studies, has focused on epistemological issues. Unquestionably, metaphysical presuppositions lurk beneath the surface of any such study, and the ultimate context of discussion for a large portion of scholars is a metaphysics of "incarnation." Yet, it is the question of how Jesus Christ is known that has dominated the reflection of biblical scholars, historians and theologians for the past several decades. As never before scriptural exegesis and the attendant hermeneutical issues have become an intrinsic part of theological reflection about Jesus the Christ.

With this in mind, the 1978 seminar on Christology, hoping to lay the foundation for several years of sequential examination of key elements in present-day development of Christology, focused on the epistemological questions involved. As a springboard for the discussion a portion of Walter Kasper's recent book, *Jesus the Christ*, was utilized for pre-convention reading.

However, a number of the participants expressed a desire to pursue a bit further an issue that had arisen in the 1977 seminar discussion of Hans Küng's book, namely, the issue of Jesus' uniqueness. So, it was decided to spend an initial half hour in an attempt to arrive at a position regarding the extent to which Christian tradition allows for a genuinely new reinterpretation of Jesus' unique role and identity. The purpose was not to judge the verifiability of Christian claims about Jesus, but simply to clarify the extent of those claims: does the Christian confession of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God necessarily include the claim for his absolute finality and exclusive uniqueness.

As a structural help in presenting this issue, Paul Knitter volunteered to give a short summation of his article on the topic (which appears in the Fall 1978 issue of *Horizons*), a summation that fleshed out a bit the following outline: Must the Christian Confession of Jesus as the Christ/Son of God include claims for his absolute finality and exclusive uniqueness? Three Hypotheses:

- I. Claims of uniqueness not *necessary* for Christian identity and living
 - A. Not necessary for commitment to Christ
 - B. Not necessary for fidelity to Christian tradition
 1. In light of the eschatological-apocalyptic mentality of early community
 2. In light of the character of the incarnation myth
 3. In light of the distinction between classicist and modern-historical cultures (Lonergan).
- II. Claims of uniqueness not *possible* according to norms of theological and historical-critical method

- A. According to the revisionist method of theology
 - not enough data to establish claims of uniqueness
 - B. According to the historical-critical method of scriptural analysis
 - insufficient historical grounds for a reconstruction of the moral perfection of Jesus' life.
- III. Claims of uniqueness not *consistent* with contemporary interpretations of incarnation and resurrection
- A. According to interpretations of incarnation
 - revelational models allow for other instances
 - B. According to interpretation of resurrection
 - resurrection understood as a historically nonverifiable reality and as an "awakening of faith" allows for similar experiences via other religious figures.

Though time permitted only a brief reaction to Knitter's presentation, it became clear that a basic difference of opinion separated members of the seminar on this issue. Three questions emerged as basis for further conversation: (1) What according to traditional Christian teaching makes Jesus ultimate *for Christians*? (2) What according to traditional Christian teaching is Jesus' cosmic and historical role; and is this one of unparalleled uniqueness? (3) What is the justification for the Christian claims that have been made? And three distinct positions were suggested as tentative response to such questions. (1) Jesus of Nazareth is a person of ultimate uniqueness for Christians, but does not have this position for other humans. (2) In some way or other Jesus enjoys an absolute uniqueness for all human beings, though obviously the manner in which that functions for those outside Christianity is not clear. (3) For Christians the death and resurrection of Jesus are the ground of a message that has unique meaning and value for them, a message that provides an ultimate horizon for their worldview and their commitment to life.

Recognizing the basic importance of the question as well as its complexity, the seminar agreed to postpone further discussion until another year when it could be addressed as the principal topic and prepared for in advance. In the meantime, it was hoped that a careful examination of the kinds of knowing involved in the genesis of Christology would help clarify the exact nature and content of Christian claims about Jesus as the Christ and Son of God.

The seminar turned then to its principal discussion, that of the modes of understanding involved in the genesis of Christology during the first two generations of Christianity. This emphasis on the epistemological question was triggered by what many in the group felt was a certain ambiguity in the position taken by Kasper's *Jesus the Christ*. On the one hand, Kasper seems reluctant to accept the approach of "Christology from below"; at times he is explicitly critical of theologians who proceed in this fashion. On the other hand, he insists on the need to ground any theological speculation in the historical reality of Jesus, and advocates the use of critical historical methods to examine this historical reality. Moreover, it is not clear what kind (or kinds) of

knowing would be involved in Kasper's alternative to "Christology from below."

To initiate the seminar's discussion, six ways of understanding were suggested as present at the beginning of Christian reflection about Jesus:

1. The first kind of understanding of Jesus would have been that which occurred in the historical experience which Jesus' disciples had of him during his life and particularly during his public ministry. This seems to be very straightforward (granted the difficulty that we might have in ascertaining what precisely that historical experience was). In itself it was immediate common-sense perception and apparently without great complication. However, we know that the apparent simplicity of this way of knowing is quite misleading, for the simple reason that those who perceived Jesus interpreted that experience according to the cultural presuppositions, current and expectations and Jewish modes of religious interpretation which they had inherited or developed. No human experience is uninterpreted, so also the experience which Jesus' disciples had of him differed from one disciple to another even prior to any early Christian community interpretation. Moreover their interpretation to quite an extent would have been falsified by the unjust prejudices and presuppositions which, as the New Testament itself indicates, Jesus' disciples possessed at the beginning of their exposure to him, falsifications which he gradually challenged as his teaching ministry unfolded.

Though not in itself the same experience as this direct historical experience which belonged to Jesus' disciples it seems that one should link to it for purposes of clarification the experience of later generations which share vicariously in this initial experience. Such vicarious sharing in other people's experiences is a natural part of our human experience; we are daily engaged in it, and it provides a large element in all our historical understanding. At the same time, validation of such vicarious experience is often quite difficult. In the instance that we are discussing the difficulties are considerably amplified because of the transformation that took place in the memory of Jesus' disciples as a result of the experience of his death and resurrection. However, it is important to keep in mind that one of the ways of understanding Jesus is that of sharing through historical communication the experience which Jesus' disciples had of him prior to his death.

2. The more critical experience in many ways than the one which provides the focus for most Christological controversy was the so-called Easter experience of Jesus' disciples. For the sake of clarification, the Easter experience must be seen as involving the reality of both the risen Christ and the communication of his Spirit. Mysterious as this Easter experience was, and inconsistent in many respects as the New Testament accounts of it are, it seems that a few elements of key importance run through the New Testament reflection of this experience.

One element that is basically important for Christological reflection is the continuity in the Easter awareness of the experienced Christ with the historically known Jesus. However it was that the early disciples experienced the risen one, it seems clear that they were conscious of

experiencing the Jesus whom they had known prior to his death. There is no hint in the New Testament literature that somehow another figure, an eschatological Son of Man or a new cosmic redeemer comes as replacement for the Jesus who had ministered in Galilee and Jerusalem.

Again it seems quite clear that a basic current of awareness which forms part of the Easter experience is that the risen Jesus is seen as somehow eschatological. He is "fulfilled" and this eschatological fulfillment is viewed particularly in functional terms. Whatever it was that Jesus had started to do during his public ministry as part of the establishment of the Kingdom of God has now come to its final stage. Whatever role or mission he had begun to exercise he now exercises in fulness of power and authority. It is in his resurrection that he becomes the Messiah and the Lord.

Finally, it seems quite clear that the Easter experience is an experience of the continuing presence of the risen Jesus, but a presence which cannot be divorced from his being present in his Spirit. It is not that the Spirit replaces the risen Christ, or that somehow the Spirit is the principle of presence in any kind of detachment from the risen Christ. It is exactly in the communicating of his Spirit (which incidentally he shares with his Father) that the risen Christ is present to his disciples in this newness of life. Incidentally, it is above all in this third aspect of the Easter experience that one can point to some kind of continuity throughout the historical experience of the Christian community. This would seem to indicate that there can be no independent development of Christology and Pneumatology; rather the development of a Pneumatology will be an intrinsic component of a more adequate Christology.

3. Flowing from this realization that somehow Jesus has achieved a state of fulfilled function, there took place a very rapid process of extrapolation. It would seem that this forms a very early stage of the "trajectory" which begins with the earthly life experience of Jesus and carries into the historical developments of Christology. To oversimplify the process, we can say that first-generation Christians proceeded, e.g. from the identification that had been made of Jesus as prophetic toward his being the greatest of the prophets, beyond that to his being the fulfillment of the prophetic ideal and the epitome of the entire prophetic movement, but even further to the ultimate identification as divine word; or again the experience of Jesus as a wise teacher projected to his being the wisest of teachers, one wiser even than Solomon, moving ultimately to identification as divine wisdom.

Given the background of Jewish biblical thinking with its typological interpretation of history, it would seem that the kind of extrapolation we have just suggested would have coalesced with a nascent "theology of history," a theology that situated Jesus in relation to the prophetic context of Israelite history as enshrined in the biblical texts. Perhaps it is precisely this kind of understanding which explains the apparently loose reference to Old Testament prophecy on the part of the New Testament documents.

One participant suggested a somewhat different approach to the origins of Christology à la theology-of-history: the early Christians in the

process of "searching the Scriptures," prayerfully and non-technically, developed functional categories drawn from their religious view of God's action in history and applied these to Jesus. Thus, they were led to identify Jesus closely with God.

4. If the process of extrapolation took place as suggested it would have terminated in understanding the risen Christ as Word, Wisdom, Law. Not only would these have intimated some coincidence with the strictly divine, it would almost inevitably have interacted with already existent Jewish reflection about Word, Wisdom and Law as "realities" in some way co-existent with God. This is another way of saying that the question of "pre-existence" would have arisen unavoidably at this point. No matter how the "pre-existence" of the risen Christ would have been understood, it is quite clear that if it did involve some kind of identification with the strictly divine then the mode of thinking involved must have been essentially mythic. This is not to say that it would have been unjustified or untrue; it is only to acknowledge that, when confronted with the need to reach toward the transcendent, human understanding has no alternative but to move into myth and to employ metaphor.

One element, however, should be noted: the reflection of early Christianity upon "the divinity" of Jesus still moves within the area of functional rather than the ontologically constitutive. Not only were the identifications to which we already referred (Word, Wisdom, Law) clearly functional appellations, but the most basic and common designation of the risen Christ's ultimate power—his title of "the Lord"—is essentially a functional designation.

5. Though not later in development than the understandings we have already indicated and inseparably linked with them, the doxological or liturgical mode of understanding does need to be pointed to as distinctive. The incorporation of liturgical poems or hymns into the earliest New Testament documents indicates that the early Christians in their worship gatherings gave expression to their understanding about the risen Christ. This they did, not by way of catechesis or by what one might call theological reflection but in terms of faith proclamation of what God had done and was doing in and through his Christ. However one wants to read passages such as Philippians 2, it is quite clear that they reflect a mode of understanding which must be investigated critically if we are to understand more accurately the emergence of early Christian Christology.

6. Sometime prior to the composition of the New Testament literature, an explicit theology of history was developed to give coherent explanation to the person and activity of Jesus as well as to the event of his death and resurrection. The New Testament literature in its redactional principles is grounded in such a theology of history; and this remains the dominant approach to theological reflection about Jesus the Christ until the time of Irenaeus. It is perhaps important to stress that this more formalized theology-of-history-explanation was itself grounded in the tendency, already present among Jesus' disciples during

his public ministry, to understand whatever it was that he did in the light of their Jewish understanding of the divine guidance of history.

While it was clearly recognized that one cannot draw a sharp line of division between the kinds of understanding just suggested and the kinds of understanding which come into the picture with the exposure of Christianity to Hellenic thought, and more specifically Hellenic philosophical thought, it was thought appropriate not to enter into that further chronological development for the moment. Instead the seminar would try to distinguish carefully the nature and the potential of the various ways of understanding associated with the origins of Christology.

In the brief discussion on these original ways of understanding it was suggested that several things should either be added or emphasized: first of all, the kind of understanding associated with "story-telling," a mode of literature very much discussed at the present time, should be applied to the process of post-Easter extrapolation from Jesus' life. Again, the function of metaphor, both in story and in other contexts, needs to be investigated in so far as it applies to Jesus' historical teaching and to the post-resurrectional understandings of Jesus, particularly in the mythic. Thirdly, attention was drawn to the mode of understanding associated with faith insight or mystical experience. Certainly, elements of this would have pertained to the Easter experience itself as well as to the liturgical consciousness of the early Christian communities. Still another mode of understanding the identity and the function of Jesus, both in his historical existing and as the risen Lord, would have come in terms of what one might call "proleptic understanding": seeing Jesus' activity in history in terms of what one understands the full eschatological achievement of that activity to be. Again, closely associated with the faith/mystical experience type of understanding would be the insight which came to early Christians in the very experience of "being Christian": a consciousness of being related to the risen Christ and involved in carrying out the mission which he had initiated. Finally, the suggestion was made that there be more attempts to draw from present discussions of structuralism as it has been utilized in investigating the parables of Jesus—the reference here referred particularly to the ongoing discussion of the SBL Workshop on the parables.

Associated with suggestions for further kinds of understanding that might be involved in the origins of Christology were three specific questions: (1) Does the "Christological judgement" of early Christianity lead intrinsically to an affirmation of Jesus' divinity? (2) What kind of knowing undergirds the Easter proclamation in first century Christianity? (3) What kind of an understanding of "revelatory event" functions both in early Christian understanding of the mission of Jesus and in present-day theological investigation of the manner in which God is revealed in Jesus and in the primitive Christian kerygma?

On the final day of the workshop attention was concentrated on the first of the suggested modes of understanding, namely, the historical experience of Jesus which was enjoyed by his immediate disciples during his public ministry. A preliminary question asked: did the work-

shop participants agree or disagree that clarification of this point was critically important for Christian faith and for the development of Christology. Though there was no clear indication of the relative weight of opinion, it was clear that there was not total agreement on the importance of this particular historical investigation. Some opinion was voiced that it was not critical to examine any experience prior to Jesus' death; rather it was in the experience of Jesus' death and above all in the Easter experience that the Christian kerygma was rooted.

Actually, the discussion of the workshop did not advance very far in the direction of reflecting on the nature of that experience which Jesus' disciples had during his public ministry. Instead, it became quite clear that there was a continuing question regarding the relationship of the New Testament accounts of Jesus' ministry to the "actualities" of the historical happening. To put it quite simply, there was considerable airing of the questions with which we have become familiar through the Bultmannian critique, the so-called "new quest for the historical Jesus," and the more recent raising anew of the methodological difficulties inherent in any attempt to get "behind the New Testament texts" to the actual happenings of the ministry of Jesus. Obviously, such questions touch upon the very possibility of a "Christology from below" and it became evident that further developments of the Christology workshop must take systematic account of these textual/historical problems. At present there is considerable difference of opinion within the seminar regarding the extent of historical happening one can reasonably "recapture" as a foundation for theological reflection.

One aspect of this difference of opinion seems to merit special attention because of its constant recurrence during the seminar discussion. This is the matter of the relationship between the risen Christ and his Spirit, the relationship therefore between any development of Christology and the development of Pneumatology. One can, for example, describe the situation of primitive Christianity as one of ongoing experience of the Spirit and do so in such a manner which seems to indicate that this replaces the experience of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, one can see the Spirit as precisely the Spirit of the risen Christ and the principle of his personal presence to the early Christian community.

In either case, it seems quite clear that until there is a more consistent theology of the Spirit, a theology that works out of the community experience of primitive Christianity as we find this reflected in the New Testament literature, there cannot be anything approaching an adequate description of the manner in which Christology emerged during the first century of Christianity. Apparently—this is something which will have to be decided upon by the group as it pursues its investigations—there must be a parallel or perhaps an integrated discussion of both Pneumatology and Christology. While this undoubtedly extends rather massively the area of projected discussion, it may be that such an extension is unavoidable if an appropriate undertaking of Christology is envisioned.

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