

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

"CHRIST PROCLAIMED"

First Session

The focus for this year's seminar was Frans Jozef van Beeck's *Christ Proclaimed* and the issues to which the book draws attention. Lead-in to the discussion was provided by Michael Cook's analysis of several strengths of Van Beeck's position coupled with the posing of related critical questions. The stress on the distinction between commitment to Christ and the invariably limited discernment of categories which express that commitment is valuable: it is a necessary reminder that Christology begins and ends with doxology. *But*—is the positing of this distinction sufficient in itself to relate the uniqueness of Jesus to the universal saving will of God? or to fathom whether this uniqueness claimed by Christians for Jesus Christ is absolute or relative? Again, positing the centrality of the resurrection for Christology is commendable and indeed necessary. *But*—is it not also necessary to grapple with the question of whether or not the resurrection is constitutive of the identity of Jesus Christ, i.e., ontologically transformative of Jesus, rather than only a confirmation of his life for our knowing? Again, emphasis that the first norm of Christology should not be its conceptual content but the presence of the three-fold rhetoric of inclusion, obedience, and hope (since Christology functions as an expression of the faith experience) is extremely important. *But*—do we not also need a rhetoric of God's personal self-involvement in creation and in the Incarnation as radical risk, i.e., a rhetoric of the divine so profoundly involved in our humanness that we must speak in terms of an identity-in-being?

Van Beeck's initial response in the seminar delineated an understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus as "inclusive": the uniqueness of Jesus is that he excludes no one. We must constantly recall when discussing the uniqueness of his person that metaphysical terms are not definitive but heuristic; they purport not to nail something down but to keep us thinking. The Scotistic rather than Thomistic concept of person is preferable for Christology today, but even when using it in reference to Jesus' uniqueness and personhood, the old adage applies: try to be precise and you are bound to be metaphorical.

Participants in the seminar raised the following questions:

1. Who is the audience for which this book is intended?
2. Is the category of "rhetoric" possibly too broad to be used to describe doctrinal language?
3. Is Van Beeck endorsing the position that when Christians speak of the uniqueness of Jesus, they are simply saying that he is unique "for us"?
4. Is not something wrong with the way question #3 is phrased? Should attention not rather be focused on the conditions under which such a statement would make sense?
5. What makes our rhetoric true?
6. Is there ever a possibility of heresy, according to Van Beeck's position?
7. Is rhetoric about salvation just an announcement about it, or is something actually accomplished?

8. Under the rubric of rhetoric, how does one understand the normative character of the Scriptures?
9. Is there not an artificial contrasting of the Resurrection to the Incarnation taking place in Van Beeck's approach?
10. If one simply starts with the Resurrection (and *assumes* it as one's starting point), is one not avoiding a fundamental theological task?

The theme that ran through the responses to these questions was the nature of Christological speech, and its function in the totality of the Christian faith experience. To understand Christology as rhetoric is to stand opposed to a 250 year-old falsehood which holds that truth can be established without serious commitment. Such a falsehood belongs to that phase of human history in which people thought unhistorically, without reference to situatedness. From a contemporary perspective, however, there is no incontrovertible objectivity. Christology must acknowledge this, and find its truth not in conceptual correctness so much as in its ability to function in Christian life with inclusivity, obedience and hope.

Second Session

Participants continued to discuss the unfinished questions from the first session. Is Van Beeck advocating functional language to the exclusion of deeper ontological issues? Is his position on the resurrection actually Bultmann *redivivus*? What happens to the pre-existent Son of God, the Logos, if Christology is rhetoric? What happens to the "ordinary person's" Christian imagination in the process? If Jesus "becomes" God in the resurrection, how explain the Abba experience during his life? Does the emphasis on the resurrection relativize the importance of Jesus' human existence, and the full reality of his humanity which is such a critical question for today's students? Is there not need for a philosophical exploration of necessity and possibility before one begins to discuss Jesus' freedom in human decisions? If Christology is to be based on a metaphysics of becoming rather than on a metaphysics of being, would the thought of Schelling be of service (see Thomas O'Meara's *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling and the Theologians*)? If there is any absoluteness to Jesus' uniqueness at all, does it not have to be based on hypostatic unity, for "grace," indicative of moral union, is not a sufficient category to carry identity of being between Jesus and God? More broadly, Van Beeck's is a Christology from one particular perspective growing out of a particular experience of worship; as such, it raises the question of how many Christologies there should be—for if experience is a primary category, and experiences differ so widely thus producing such varied Christologies, how will the theologian's and the Church's "blessed rage for order" be satisfied?

In sum: Van Beeck has rendered a great service in bringing to the fore the indisputable truth that those who speak of Christology are ultimately trying to speak the unspeakable. Given the fact that such speech does take place, more emphasis is needed on what may validly be said, and more analysis must be done on what in the process it actually and reasonably means.

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