

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

This year, in keeping with the theme of the convention, *Treasures Old and New*, the Christology seminar focused on the theology of the incarnation, a most ancient and central treasure undergoing its own share of reconceptualization in recent years. There were approximately thirty participants in the first extended session of the seminar, two-thirds of whom returned for the shorter second session the following day. The discussion proceeded in three phases: first, a consideration of the origin of the doctrine of the incarnation in the New Testament, using as a point of departure James Dunn's *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980); second, a probing of theological understanding of the incarnation, particularly as expressed in the alternative systems of thought of Karl Rahner and American process theologian John B. Cobb (with Rahner receiving the lion's share of attention); third, an identification of open questions uncovered by the preceding discussion which would be worth exploration in forthcoming seminars and in Christology at large. While hewing to the central theme, the discussion was far-ranging and naturally did not always proceed in logical fashion; this report presents in synthetic form the major insights, agreements, and points of difference.

1. *New Testament Origins.* Dunn's thesis, posed in the face of the Bultmannian idea that the early Christians appropriated an already existing Gnostic redeemer myth for their own purposes and also in the face of the recent British myth-of-God-incarnate debate, argues that the idea of a real, personal, pre-existent Logos becoming incarnate appears explicitly for the first time only in the prologue of John's Gospel. It is thus original to Christianity, a genuine community discovery which in turn contributed to the growth of such an idea in Gnostic and other groups. The author of John's Gospel conflated the personal, pre-existent Logos of the prologue with the Son of God Christology of his other sources. The result, through the complex interaction of prologue and Gospel, was the coming to birth of a new Christology of the 'pre-existent Son of God.'

In general, seminar members agreed at least with Dunn's procedure, seeing it as a working out of the understanding of early Christological development proposed by Raymond Brown whereby Jesus' unity with God was retrojected to ever earlier instances, from resurrection to baptism to birth to before time. Certainly no one argued against the insight that incarnation Christology did not originate with Jesus of Nazareth but is rather a later development, based on Jesus' eschatological mission and dedication to the Father. But questions arose regarding the actual origin of the idea. Dunn's insight that incarnation as such can and must be distinguished from personal pre-existence was seen as a fundamental contribution to the debate. The idea of incarnation was present prior to and independent of the idea of personal pre-existence, most notably in the Jewish tradition's Wisdom literature which spoke within a strict monotheistic framework of the incarnation of God's Word and God's Wisdom as a function of creation and revelation. Philo's corpus also gives evidence of

the existence of the idea of incarnation without personal pre-existence (although Dunn's emphasis on Philo rather than Jewish prayer sources as background to John was questioned). Similarly, the distinction is also applicable to material of the early Christian tradition, e.g. the hymn in Philippians, which is more suitably interpreted as an instance of Final Adam Christology (Jesus' self-emptying reversing the 'grasping' of the first Adam of Genesis 1-3) than as a clear instance of the incarnation of a personally pre-existent being.

Several fundamental assertions and counter-assertions developed from grappling with this basic insight. One can hold to the *homoousios* of Nicea without positing personal pre-existence (Jesus can incarnate the Wisdom of God without being personally pre-existent), vs. personal pre-existence is essential for the affirmation of the divinity of Jesus Christ since what is divine is eternal. Holding to personal pre-existence for Jesus makes correlation of the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus with the ontologically constitutive value of his life history and particularly of his death and resurrection virtually impossible, vs. two conceptualities which makes this thinkable: a straight two-nature Christology, having its own critical problems today, or the thesis of the ontological priority of the future (Pannenberg) which gives what happens historically constitutive power for being. Incarnation Christology makes the cross a mere accident, vs. it enables the cross to be interpreted as the way God acts in the world. A personally pre-existent Son of God who undergoes ontological change at the resurrection is hardly possible to imagine and thus pre-existence needs to be questioned, vs. personal pre-existence is "in possession" of the faith tradition and therefore one needs a stronger reason to dissent. The doctrine of the incarnation has implications for the doctrine of God (God becomes triune through incarnation), vs. it has no direct implication (God is triune eternally). The Trinity understood in Lonergan's concept of three subjects sharing one consciousness is the condition for the possibility of God's agapaic love and protects the deity of God from becoming dependent on what happens in time, vs. it is more fitting to understand God as divine love which takes initiative and involves the divine reality in creation and in time as a new reality even for the being of God.

All through the discussion, the old and unresolved question of the meaning of the word "person," evoked in the idea of personal pre-existence and in God as triune, surfaced and sank in a continuous arc of unresolved differences. This portion of the seminar ended with the caution against trying to force all New Testament Christologies into one system. Rather, they should be allowed to stand in their ascending and descending pluralism even though this goes against the grain of systematic theologians who see their role as one of ordering thought, frequently falling prey to their profession's original sin which is the lust for unity.

2. *Contemporary Reinterpretation.* Rahner's theology of the incarnation became the focus for discussion in this section of the seminar, with references to process theology's understanding of Christ brought in by way of comparison or illustration. Repeatedly noted was the power of Rahner's

seminal joining of Christology and anthropology with its attendant results: definition of the human as *capax infiniti*; the incorporation of human experience into Christology; a radical Christian humanism in which affirmation of humanity is fundamentally affirmation of God; the universal relevance of Jesus Christ vis-a-vis the whole human race and the religions of the world. But within this conceptuality has justice been done to the uniqueness of Christ? Opinions differed. It was proposed that for Rahner the uniqueness of Christ comes into the picture only from Christian doctrine, a source which is extrinsic to his philosophical basis. While in agreement that the uniqueness of Jesus was not to be found in Rahner's metaphysical system, it was counterproposed that such uniqueness derives for Rahner from the historical event of Jesus Christ. In disagreement with both, it was proposed yet further that Rahner's metaphysical anthropology held the key, in that if one defines the human as the finite structured toward the infinite, then if and when the divine initiative is exhaustive in a human being in both a giving and received way that human being is the self-expression of God and is so totally, irrevocably, irreversibly, in a way different from any other human being. Underlying the debate is an ambiguity in Rahner, reflected in his shifting between efficient and formal or quasi-formal causality to characterize God's relationship with the world. For if God as self-expressing *ad extra* becomes a human being and if humanity is thereby the grammar of God's self-utterance then, although Jesus is the fullest instance of this, other human beings are also instances of incarnation and in some sense divine. The uniqueness of Jesus is left unclarified.

Valuable ancillary observations supported the major thrust of the discussion. Linking up with the earlier question of pre-existence, it was found to be significant that Rahner conceptualizes pre-existence not in literal personal terms but as the capacity of God to realize the divine self in the other, the possibility of God uttering the divine reality outward. Rahner's indebtedness to Heidegger and Hegel with regard to both content and dialectical mode of thinking was testified to, with brief though important mention made of his use of the philosophical understanding which relates finite to infinite as a moment within the encompassing whole instead of the disjunction between the two which characterizes scholastic thinking. The shift of the later Rahner from a descending incarnation Christology to one which takes seriously the contingent happenings of the death and resurrection and proceeds in greater dialogue with recent biblical exegesis was noted; so too was his important analysis of the analogical use of the word "is" in the sentence "Jesus is God."

Two major points were noted regarding Cobb's process Christology. On the universality-uniqueness question, while the Logos is universally incarnate in the world as creative transformation, the "I" of Jesus is co-constituted by the Logos, which gives him the fullness of creatively transforming energy and renders him unique (an understanding not unlike Rahner's albeit in a different philosophical system). Secondly, an advantage of the process mode of thought is that it goes beyond substance categories; two "events" can come together and become one without

displacement or other troubling results, making it a useful conceptuality for understanding the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus.

Both Rahner and Cobb were critiqued for starting with the abstract, the general, rather than with the concrete story of Jesus who reveals the meaning of humanity and divinity beyond our *a priori* suppositions. Certain forms of incarnation Christology were also critiqued for yielding a Jesus Christ so supremely divine that he could not possibly be a model for us, and for leading imperceptibly to an understanding of the church as also divine and therefore not a fitting subject for criticism. In the end, however, the seminar members gave a ringing affirmation to the value of incarnation Christology. It underlies the sacramental orientation of the Catholic tradition and, with its radical affirmation that God is at the heart of humanity and of all creation in Jesus Christ the real-symbol, gives Christianity its distinctiveness.

3. *Open Questions.* As with last year's seminar, the sessions ended with an identification of important questions which are still open and in need of further exploration. The most salient of these:

- What is at stake theologically in the incarnation model of Christology? How and with what conceptuality can what is essential be interpreted in contemporary categories so that the problems connected with the classic presentation of incarnation Christology can be circumvented? Concomitantly, what elements are analogous to the existence of circumcision in the early church, and can be let go in the light of the preaching of the gospel in a new culture?
- How do we reconcile the universal saving will of God and the universality of the relevance claimed for Jesus Christ with the reality of the world which does not believe in him? In particular, will the growing awareness of the religious power of the world religions lead to a modification of the Christian claim and its subsequent missionary thrust? Should it? If not, how relate Christ and the world religions?
- How can we express the difference which Jesus' life, death and resurrection makes? Or, why should the proclamation of the gospel make anyone glad?
- What is the relation of incarnation Christology to eschatology, to the reign of God, and in particular to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Is this relation not fundamental to answering why and on what basis we affirm the unique self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ?
- Is incarnation Christology compatible with the feminist perspective? Is it male-dominative, male-glorifying, anti-feminist, open to a hermeneutic from the perspective of the reality of women, or completely irretrievable?
- How and in what way is the following of Christ as action on behalf of justice related to the church's affirmation of who Jesus Christ is?
- To what extent should philosophy be used in Christology? What is the relation of philosophy to revelation in this area? Can we find a

common basis which would unite us in our philosophical pluralism?

- Do we need better concepts, or rather fewer concepts and better images and narratives and vigorous Christian living out of which newer understandings can emerge? In other words, are we not in a situation comparable to that of the early Christians, and should we not use their experience as a guide, not rushing to philosophize and analyze too soon?

These and other questions provide an unfinished agenda for the future of the continuing seminar in Christology.

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