

## SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

The Christology seminar dealt with questions pertaining to Jesus Christ which arise from the present day encounter of Christianity with the vitality of the world religions. In preparation for the seminar, active participants read Lucien Richard's *What Are They Saying about Christ and World Religions* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1981) and formulated a brief personal statement addressing a) what the proper formulation of the issue should even be, b) the direction of a solution, and c) the effect of the suggested line of thinking on Christology.

The first session of the seminar was attended by 45 persons, the majority of whom had come prepared. Most of the time was spent in hearing the personal position statements, with a few minutes at the end devoted to formulating one synthesis question for the morrow's session. The second session, participated in by 30 persons, consisted of an irenic but intense discussion of the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and its possible meanings or even validity in the face of the world religions.

*Session I.* Given the number and caliber of participants, the diversity of approaches evidenced in the position statements was quite striking. It was noted at the outset that to answer the Christological question now is premature, for this experience of the vitality of the world religions is new to our generation. As the statements progressed, it could be said that they fell, not neatly and not without remainder, into several identifiable constellations. Some posed the central question in direct fashion. How do we reconcile the universal saving will of God with the traditional Christian claim of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus? Since God's self-communication touches all people, why the Church and Christian mission? How do we maintain fidelity to the universalist Christian claim along with openness to dialogue? Is that something we *want* to be faithful to? How should we understand Jesus as the "concrete universal" given the limitations of all Christologies? How and in what way should we reformulate the divinity and unique mediatorship of Jesus, along with the idea of a unique revelation of God in him, in the face of dialogue? Other participants took a more linguistic approach, probing for the nature of Christological language as a key to interpretation: is Christological language fundamentally confessional, oriented toward the "for us" rather than the "in se"; what do we think we are doing when we confess Jesus as Lord and Christ; since meaningful language about Jesus Christ arises from personal experience, how does one move from the experience to making ontological statements? A third line of questioning asked whether we have so strapped Jesus into Greco-Roman categories that he cannot serve as a way to God for other cultures, and suggested that we should dialogue with indigenous Christologies of the world Church, rather than (as westerners) directly with world religions.

The call was made for a decentralization of Christology in favor of a more vigorous theology of the Holy Spirit. Positive suggestions for a reformulation of Christology included its stronger linkage with the doctrine of creation, and with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, as well as the development of an Adamic Christology which understands Jesus' historical humanity in solidarity with the whole human race. Others argued for a focus on the historical Jesus with a Christology from below, or for a reformulation of God's personal self-involvement in Jesus in a way not so of anyone else. It remained uncontested that secular culture challenges all claims about Christ as well as the validity of the world religions, and that this challenge should enter into methodology. In the end, a note of disappointment was sounded over the fact that we had talked mainly about conditions for finding a solution to the issue, but not about the content of Christology itself. It was hoped that a more substantive discussion would take place at the next session.

*Session II.* It did. The question posed revolved around the Christian belief and claim, rooted in the New Testament and appearing throughout the tradition, that in Jesus Christ the revelation of God occurs in a way that is unsurpassable. The Christian sense of what occurred in Jesus Christ and thus of his identity has been carried in the (perhaps inappropriate) adjective "unique." Our question is how and in what way is Jesus Christ unique? In what does this uniqueness consist? On what basis do we make this claim? What is at stake in discussing this claim (what would be lost without it, and what is non-negotiable?). Those who have had first hand experience of persons of other faiths were especially invited to reflect on how that experience impacted on their own evaluation of the Christian claim. The protest was noted that this formulation of the question keeps us within the bounds of Greco-Roman categories and would prove a blind alley.

The suitability of the very idea of unsurpassable revelation in Jesus Christ was debated, some contending we cannot make that claim but can only confess to potential universality from our own experience; some holding that the claim is essential to the Christian faith; and still others maintaining that it is not meant pre-emptively but intends to express the fact that we have not seen Jesus Christ surpassed. As the discussion progressed, contrasting positions were taken as to the basis for the Christian predication of unsurpassability to Jesus. Some held for personal experience: Jesus' compassionate and powerful love is so helpful to me that in principle the whole world could be saved by him. Some maintained that the apostolic witness is the ground of our belief; we trust their testimony and so confess that Jesus is the Son of God. Still others found the concreteness of the historical Jesus, his engaging particularity, to be the basis of the Christian claim.

Foundational issues were raised. What is truth? If one gives up the non-contradictory notion of truth and accepts that truth is always perspectival, one is more ready to enter into dialogue. What is the nature of Christological language and in particular of "one and only" language?

Is it confessional or witness language as opposed to exclusive or inclusive dogmatic language? Is symbolic language actually a mediated form of ontological language, or is there a greater difference between them? Even as ontological, Christological language is always to be understood analogically, i.e., not in direct or literal fashion. Language of the New Testament is mainly metaphoric, ecstatic, "caressing" language, while that of the Christological councils moves toward what is universally applicable and can be detached from history and culture. A counter proposal suggested that both New Testament and conciliar language are confessional, the first as "love talk" and the second as "truth talk", but both in the climate of belief, while a third kind of language, "power talk", absolutizes insight and becomes an ideological tool of institutional power. Whatever our categories, do we not want our words to refer to more than our own experience and to say something of what God has done in Jesus Christ?

There were varying evaluations of the fourth and fifth century councils as sources for Christology. On the one hand, they were judged to have made the mistake of turning the metaphoric language of the New Testament into literal, empirical language, analogous to a fundamentalist reading of Genesis. On the other, these councils were defended as evocatively expressing in their own time and place the event of Jesus Christ, while it was later interpreters who turned their words into blueprints of reality. These councils were the end result of a struggle in the early community, and made their affirmations in the Holy Spirit out of their lived experience of worship (similar to John's Gospel).

It was noted that the Christian idea of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is less puzzling to Hindus than to Jews or Moslems; the former already entertains belief in incarnation and can see Jesus as one among many avatars, although not the "one and only" which is interpreted as an instance of western imperialism. The Incarnation itself needs to be radicalized in Christian consciousness which frequently underplays it by tending toward monophysitism. A plea was made for a Christology as broad as the cosmos, taking into effect not only the world religions but the probability of life on other planets. Every aspect of the whole issue which was raised found response among participants for whom the claim of Jesus' unsurpassability was of the essence of the Christian faith and among others who argued for the legitimacy of the quest for a more dialogic position.

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