

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

In keeping with the theme of the convention, the Christology seminar discussed the critically responsible use (the academic element) of the sources of Scripture and tradition, especially the formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon (the ecclesial element) in doing Christology. Both of these elements were considered in the light of a third element which the convention theme omitted, namely, particular societies served by Christology. As a test case which could demonstrate the successful or inadequate interplay of all three elements, the seminar focused on feminist theology's critique of traditional Christology and on its constructive proposals for the re-envisionment of Jesus Christ as Savior. Discussion was cordial but vigorous.

The text for the first day's session was Monika Hellwig's *Jesus, The Compassion of God* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), which argues that Christology's academic responsibility is to test Chalcedon against the biblical picture of the historical Jesus (whereupon Chalcedon is criticized for lacking concreteness, relationality and historicity); Christology's ecclesial responsibility is to prevent reductionism by testing the historical Jesus against Chalcedon (which yields an understanding of Jesus as the one in whom God is personally present in the world). Both the New Testament and ongoing tradition are actually codifications of past Christian experience. They need to be put in relation to another source of Christology which is present Christian experience, described as experiences of conversion, community, conflict and peace. The particular society which Hellwig envisions Christology most properly serving is the suffering ones of the earth; hence her argument for Jesus as the Compassion of God, which brings together for those who follow both personal trust in God and commitment to social justice. In this approach the Chalcedonian formula is not really a source, neither an end or beginning, but a guideline, a marker along the way. To say this is not to evacuate Christology of its ecclesial orientation but to enliven it through rootedness in Christian life and worship.

Dr. Hellwig was present as the seminar in its first session took up the challenge of her book. In a few brief opening comments, she sketched her principal line of thought. From a formal perspective: theology today is trying to mediate between the symbols of the tradition, the systematization made in the tradition, and certain contemporary experiences and questions. Several operations are thus involved. It is not enough simply to take an image from the first century and ask—will it work today? Granted, a certain kind of theological archaeology is necessary before constructive work can be done. But, like the early Christians, we have to draw on our own experience and imagination. Usually we are not free enough to do this; the pneumatological aspect of our faith is vitally important to enable us to take our own experience seriously. Like the early Christians, our anchorage is in

the person of Jesus as the risen Christ. Like them we need to give voice to contemporary expressions of the salvation experienced in him. Like them we need to be comfortable with a variety of christological expressions, seeing them as complementary rather than conflictual and not rushing to outlaw others as heterodox. From a material perspective: the New Testament uses mostly nonpersonal images to express Jesus' relation to God's action in the world: he is God's Word, Light, Truth, Way, Wisdom, and so forth. The most developed image in the tradition, however, became the personal one of Son of God. Due to the centuries' old semantic drift of the word "person," which in our day has come to mean a center of reflexive self-awareness, problems with the image of Son of God are manifold. It moves Jesus outside of the human sphere, making his genuine humanity unimaginable to many. It seems to be taken more literally than nonpersonal images, opening the way for the projection of a pre-existent human person. Thence it tends inevitably toward tritheism as three persons/people in God are envisioned. To those who say that this is not the intent of the Son of God image, correctly understood, Dr. Hellwig responds that images influence us far more than academics want to acknowledge. A final point: the same arguments do not hold true in the case of calling God Father. Calling God Father does not attack the unity of God, or our relation to Jesus as the expression of God. It affirms the personal character of God. And it has an "ecclesial echo," striking a responsive chord in the worshipping Church (whereas liturgical prayer to the Ground of Being does not work).

In the discussion which ensued, the following points were raised by members and responded to by Dr. Hellwig.

—"Person" in Christology and Trinity talk can be defended. We do not want the three to be *less* than personal. Also we need this language not to fall short of the affirmations of Nicea and Chalcedon. Finally, Trinity and the Ground of Being are not mutually exclusive: the trinitarian God easily shifts to the Ground of Being and the one (Jesus) who discloses that ground. *Response:* Yes, Jesus is God acting, speaking, shining in the world, and the Spirit is God breathing in the world. God is personal. But talk of the three persons or of God and his Son, if this is the primary imagery in which the tradition is passed on to the next generation, breaks the unity of God in most people's minds. The formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon are not immediately evident as to their meaning today; in some ways they are even alienating. They need interpretation.

—The text for the second day's session, Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), was introduced in a comparative way. Hellwig wants to work with the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulas, freeing our imaginations to deal with them. Ruether, on the other hand, sees that these formulas do set up male imagery of God (Father and Son) as normative and do patriarchalize the internal life of God. Thus the tradition is named as exploitative of women, and other, broader sources not seen through the eyes of faith are introduced in order to provide christological reflection which liberates. There is tension between the tradition and present experience. *Response:* It is doubtful whether members of the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon did patriarchalize God deliberately. It happened, and in their own cultural setting they just assumed it. Ruether is not interested in theology being ecclesial, but in theology helping society. I am interested in being an ecclesial

theologian, and have a desire for an ecclesial echo and ecclesial reception of my work. I am not a prophet, outside throwing stones; but I am inside wanting to build with what is there. Yes, I argue that we should give the early Judeo-Christians equal time with Nicea and Chalcedon, but as a strategy we should not let go of these formulas.

—Are not prophets also inside the Church? Why is the feminist critique necessarily outside the tradition? What Church are we talking about, and whose tradition? *Response*: I distinguish between Church as ecclesiastical hierarchy and Church as ecclesial community. I wish more to serve the latter. I am influenced by a peasant tradition, shaped by communities of the illiterate and the poor. If something is discredited by the official hierarchy, it is not able to be of service to the little people. I do not think U.S. feminism represents the poor. The women I want to serve are too busy trying to survive, to feed their children, and so forth, to care about sexist language.

To this there were responses pointing out that once one realizes the interlocking of oppressions, it is precisely this poverty which is a major concern of feminist theology, for these women are victims of an oppressive patriarchal economic system.

—Ruether's criterion for the truth of theology and therefore of Christology is whether it promotes the full humanity of women and thus of all human beings. It is an ancient principle, that of the *imago Dei*; what is new is that women are claiming it for themselves, Hellwig's emphasis on praxis, on not only Jesus' Abba experience but on his engagement in liberating praxis, would indicate some agreement here. *Response*: Yes, I would have to abandon the Christian faith if it appeared that the faith was not the way to the realization of full humanity.

—If we push Metz's idea we can set about recovering dogma as a dangerous memory. Nicea presents an idea of God in which there is no subordination but rather a community of equals. Chalcedon distinguishes between person and nature, giving us a tool to oppose all *isms* (sexism, racism, etc.) which reduce persons to nature.

—An unexplored strategy would be to use saints and mystics as a source for christological reflection.

The second session saw seminar members grapple directly with the christological issues raised by feminist theology, particularly that of Ruether in her chapter entitled "Can a Male Savior Save Women?" (pp. 116-38). Amidst cross-questioning of each other by men and women in the seminar, and intensely thoughtful reflections on the alienating situation of women in the Church, the following points germane to Christology were made.

—Jesus' original vision and personal praxis show him to be against dominative structures including patriarchy. But what if future historical criticism were to show that Jesus was in truth a supporter of patriarchy? Would we have to say that this is Egypt, and leave? Some members answered yes, pointing to the fact that a number of women have already done this. Other members argued that we should have more confidence in what we already know through historical criticism. There are no texts which depict Jesus saying that women are inferior and should be sub-

ordinated. A value of Ruether's work is that she tries to show that the gospels have their own intrinsic liberating impulse (as opposed to the Pastoral Epistles).

—Ruether tries to exonerate Jesus from the distorted use which the Church has made of him regarding women. Jesus is not the same as the tradition about him. But does she not establish a canon within the canon, making too sharp a division between the Jesus of history and the patriarchalization of Christianity after the resurrection? Where is the continuity between Jesus and the tradition? Similarly, she too cavalierly brushes aside later christological development, including Chalcedon, and bases her Christology on the synoptic gospels alone.

—On the question of the Christ: some members agreed with Ruether that Christhood resides in Jesus' liberating stance toward all, including and especially women; also that the Christ is not exclusively encapsulated in the Jesus of history but is found throughout liberated humanity. The redeemed in turn become redeemers. Others criticized her position as being ultimately more of a Jesus-ology rather than Christology, and suggested categories such as new creation, Sophia, and Spirit to fill out reflection.

—Regarding salvation, the more fundamental question is what it is and how anyone, male or female, can save anyone else. Phenomenologically, if women see Jesus as representing oppression, he will not be savior to them. Such is the case when a patriarchal church uses Jesus in an oppressive way against women. Yet Jesus' maleness is not relevant. He redeemed what he assumed which was human nature, not maleness as such. It is the transmission which is at fault. Furthermore (some argued), Jesus provides the impulse for liberation from patriarchy, and in this he is savior. Salvation needs to be understood not in exemplary perspective, with Jesus as exemplar of all human action, but as victory over death and the forces which bind.

—The emergence of women is a new moment in the history of human consciousness. Christian theology needs a new imagination in the face of the new situation. The early disciples made the decision to drop circumcision; facing the world religions as well as the question of women, Christianity needs to make analogous decisions in order to be truly universal while all the time tied to the particularity of Jesus. Perhaps Hellwig's insight into divine compassion operative within human freedom is a way to keep alive the essential dialectic of transcendence and immanence as we reflect on Jesus Christ in this new perspective.

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