

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

In keeping with the theme of the convention, Catholic Theology in the North American Context, the seminar in both of its sessions discussed the christological proposal made by one of its members, William M. Thompson, in his book *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). The author was present and led off by describing the elements which influenced his proposal. His idea developed as he mentally dialogued with three great partners: the Enlightenment, critical psycho-social analysis, and global awareness. Each of these partners corresponds to distinct transitions from classical thought, and clearly influences Christology. The humanistic values and rational inquiry of the first transition, the Enlightenment, have been with us the longest and Christian thinkers have become adept at addressing its questions and using its methodologies. The Christologies worked out by European theologians in the 1970s are the result of dialogue with this particular partner, and in his proposal Thompson endorses their achievement. Dialogue with the most recent transition, the budding awareness that the earth is a global village and we are all related to each other, had already occurred in Thompson's previous works. He noted that this dialogue leads Christian thought to a nerve issue, namely, how to assess Jesus Christ in the face of the vitality of the world religions.

What was new for the author was grappling with the insights of the second great transition, the realization of the shadow side of human existence and subsequent critique of the evil found not only in persons but especially in systems and institutions. The insights of Marx, Freud and the critical social sciences are part of a trajectory which today includes liberation theology and feminist theology. To integrate and not merely append the insights of this dialogue partner into his Christology was for the author a real *via dolorosa*. In addition to these three modern dialogue partners, a fourth partner's presence pervades the whole work. It is the Christian tradition—Scripture, the conciliar decisions, and, uniquely in the hands of this author, the experience of martyrs, saints, and mystics, each a source for reflection on Jesus as the Christ.

The insights gained from dialogue with all of these sources went into the crafting of the author's christological proposal, which is that Jesus Christ is the one who mediates a new vision and praxis of our human relationship to God, to ourselves, to our social relations, and to our bodies and the natural world. Apart from this interrelational model, Christology has become needlessly fragmented. One reviewer has judged this to be more of a soteriology than a Christology, but Thompson argued that the two cannot be divided. Why Jesus is the Christ rests on what flows through him to others; his inner constitution cannot be discussed apart from his impact on us. The author has no wish to depersonalize Jesus, but rather to deprivatize him, to understand his person relationally. The whole point of the

Jesus event is that God is in him and vice-versa in the kenotic form of justice, love and peace. This makes itself known in the flowing out of justice, love, and peace through all the interrelationships of human beings. Thompson's Christology is one done according to a relational model. The author concluded his introductory remarks by noting that this is a Christology clearly done from a North American perspective, which is both its blessing and its limit.

The discussion began with considerations of methodology. Out of all of the methods of contemporary biblical interpretation, has the author given primacy to literary criticism? If not, how do the various methods which he uses interrelate? He has given a fine account of Ricoeur's and Tracy's positions, making the point that primacy belongs to the subject matter, to which both the symbol and the interpreter, or text and reader, are tending. Should not historical critical methods be given less importance, since in faith reflection the language of story, of symbol, of metaphor have a primary value which historical methods tend to ignore?

In response, Thompson aided by others argued that no one method has priority. All are potentially equally valuable. In fact, literary criticism is not yet as developed as it might be. It is true that we should not move too quickly from sense to reference, from symbol to explanation. There are dimensions of biblical symbols such as Abba, the name Jesus, and the Kingdom of God which will never be totally explained, and we should not reduce Christology simply to an explanation of the meaning of an historical figure of the first century. But in dialogue with the modern mentality, historical methods are important, for such a mentality thinks "if it didn't happen, why bother with it?" We need to integrate historical critical methods, a point which even Ricoeur appreciates. Perhaps Schillebeeckx is the best example of this so far, with his use of a critical narrative Christology.

Three methodological areas which could benefit from further thought were suggested to the author. The relation between liturgy and Christology, with attention to the ways these symbols and stories actually function in the life of the community, was one. Another was the differentiation between reflective Christology and actually living the Christian life, a distinction not always clear in the book. A third was more self-critical attention to the author's own initial wager or hunch about the Jesus event which, if made clearer, would lead to greater understanding for the reader.

Turning attention to questions of content, the longest discussion revolved around the evaluation of Jesus in relation to the savior figures of other world religions. (I note parenthetically that in various forms, this question has haunted virtually every session of this seminar for the last decade. It is truly one of the theologically unresolved issues of the seminar.) Thompson's treatment of the issue was praised first of all for its organization of positions taken by the scholarly community: the relativist position of the left; the exclusivist position of the right; and the centrist position of inclusivity. Within the centrist position, Thompson has proposed a kenotic approach to Jesus' uniqueness, which issues in the hypothesis of "complementary and critical uniqueness." The author was clear on the point that his own judgments are put forth under the rubric of hypotheses, for this is a new and delicate question, and the answer needs to be received by both the Christian community and the world religions.

The basic question is this: can one preserve the Christian "substance," maintaining the normativity of Jesus, and at the same time preserve respect for other mediators of salvation as honored in the world religions by not claiming that Jesus is "superior"? How can one desist from saying that Jesus is superior, and still not be simply a relativist? Thompson argues that for hard-core relativists there are no norms at all. But his position is based on the logic of multiple, inclusive, decisive norms; there can be norms, different from each other, which can transform one another, and none of which become a super-norm. If we admit the experience of God in any world religion, then it is an experience of God and can be full and true. The patristic writers expressed this with the idea of the seeds of the Logos taking root everywhere in the world. Christians say yes, but the Logos created a special form for himself, Jesus Christ. Thompson says yes, but what about Gandhi? Could not Buddha possibly have something revelatory to express to Christians? This is not to say that Jesus is not unique; the paschal mystery, for example, is not found in Buddhism. Can we say that Jesus is unique and normative, and still not claim that he is superior? Is the category of superiority essential to Christian faith? This is the question we struggle with. Basically it is not correct to say that we have a finished doctrine about Jesus, because dialogue throughout the centuries has changed it and will continue to change it, especially now in the encounter with world religions.

One participant wondered why all the worry about this question. Other world religions do not make the claim to uniqueness and superiority as Christians do, so there is really no conflict. In addition, it has never been made explicit what Christians really mean by claiming that Jesus is unique, nor have the criteria for arriving at such a decision been clarified. Do we need to rank world savior figures? Another participant offered an intriguing analogy: Catholic theology has worked out a doctrine of the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ in conjunction with the mediatorship of Mary and the saints. Could there be a parallel between that insight and what we are seeking for as a model of the relation between Christ and the saviors of the world religions?

The question of the Resurrection in relation to Thompson's category of "critical, complementary uniqueness" was raised. One participant argued that the Resurrection as an ontological reality means that Jesus, transformed by the power of the Spirit, has begun the transformation of the world into a new creation. Christians proclaim this, speak and live toward it, but the reality of its mystery always transcends us. Even philosophical definitions do not grasp it. The Resurrection is a metaphor which evokes a claim about the whole of reality. We need a listening, kenotic attitude, a willingness to see the new creation through the eyes of Buddhists, and so forth, a willingness to hear of it in their metaphors. Not that we all have the same core experience; there is great specificity in the different traditions. But Christians can learn from others more about their own tradition's understanding of the world being transformed into a new creation.

Spirited discussion ensued. Nirvana is not simply the same resurrection reality in another metaphor. The two may be complementary but they really do evoke quite distinct experiences, non-being and self-emptying vs. the presence of ego in a transformed state. Thompson questioned whether the Resurrection should be given so much emphasis as the unique point of Christianity, preferring instead to

talk about the whole Jesus-event and its impact on the world. The suggestion was made that not the Resurrection but the Incarnation is what is truly unique in Christianity, since in it we have the greatest instance of God's getting involved with the world.

To probe Thompson's claim that the Jesus event is a unique explosion of the reality of God, God in Jesus and Jesus in God in the kenotic form of justice, love, and peace, it was queried whether the outbreak of devastating nuclear war would render a negative verdict on such (or indeed any) Christology. Is the willful extinction of the earth compatible with the victory of the God of justice, love and peace? Someone mused that the Resurrection, as all of Christian faith, stands under the sign of the cross, but no agreement about the answer to the question was arrived at.

Several areas which could use further thinking were suggested to the author. One was a theology of the Trinity, which was made explicit but not sustained in an integrated way. Another was the relation between Christology and the natural world, which was commendable as to its inclusion, but truncated as to its scope. A third was the emphasis on the community which Jesus founded as a community of justice, love, and peace; given the shadow side of the Church and peoples' negative experiences with the Church, too much emphasis on it could lead to loss of audience.

In conclusion, Dr. Thompson drew attention to the feminist way of thinking which he integrated into his work, and suggested that working on the problems suggested by the feminist critique might well bring theology a long way toward solving some of Christology's thornier problems. The seminar thanked the author for the christological project which he had proposed and carried out so thoughtfully and so gracefully. The author thanked his colleagues in the seminar for their insights, critical questions, and probings into his Christology, and expressed appreciation for the discussion.

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