

## SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

### CHRISTOLOGICAL DOCTRINE AS GENRE AND OTHER GENRES

The Christology Seminar decided to pursue the convention theme—"The Linguistic Turn"—as it pertains to christology, dwelling upon christological doctrine viewed as a literary genre during the first session, and upon complementary/corrective genres during the second session. The suggestive comments of David Tracy on the doctrines genre in his *The Analogical Imagination*, esp. 266-68 and 293-94n57, served as the basic source for generating thoughts about doctrine-as-literary-genre. Paul Ricoeur's seminal essay, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," also served as a basic source, aiding us to think about the complex relationship between form and content, genre and meaning or truth. While that essay does not talk about doctrine specifically, it does speak of the way in which revelation seems to modulate itself in different kinds of literary genres, and it suggestively analyzes several representative kinds of genres. This was particularly helpful, both as background for Tracy's own views, and as a launching pad for our discussion of christological genres in general. For example, doctrine seems to express some of the characteristics of what Ricoeur considers prescriptive and wisdom discourse. Perhaps it is a kind of mixed genre, its mixed nature partly explaining its loss of gripping tension characteristic of some of the more central genres of the New Testament. The many examples of genres pursued by Ricoeur were also helpful in "provoking" some good and hard thought about possible genres (other than doctrine) needing resurfacing in christology today.

The seminar felt that, at least with respect to doctrine, it was breaking new ground to some extent. Other than Tracy's suggestions, mainly confined to the "early catholicism" texts of the New Testament (viz., the pastoral epistles), there does not seem to be much on christological doctrines considered precisely from a literary critical point of view as a genre. Karl Rahner's important essay "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?" dwells chiefly upon historical and philosophical facets of doctrines (their historical conditionedness, their ecclesial-theological significance, and so forth), with only a slight mention of their necessarily analogical nature. It is this last point that begins to skirt the literary issue. Gerald O'Collins' work, *The Case against Dogma*, does surface some considerations about dogma from a linguistic analytic viewpoint, dwelling upon the meaning and truth of doctrinal propositions. But again, the specifically literary interest—how the form moves us to meaning and truth—is underplayed.

Ricoeur quite explicitly views his essay as a critique of "closed" doctrines imposed by a magisterium. He helpfully speaks of three levels of faith transmission: from the confession of faith, where *lex credendi* and *lex orandi* are fused; to

that of ecclesial dogma which is still living, historical, and open; to that of a closed body of doctrines. As one moves through these, they become increasingly "contaminated," as it were. The second level was that of the seminar's first concentration, and Tracy connected with this in his helpful views. Echoing Ricoeur, doctrine as genre is "secondary," not as tensive and primary as some other genres of revelation, according to Tracy. Like realist literature and painting, it expresses the need for ecclesial clarification through an explication of revelation's content and a mediation of that content in the ordinary language and concerns of people at large. The extraordinary finds here a needed domestication in the ordinary.

But doctrine is plagued by two great struggles. One can overestimate its ability to clarify, as if we could render obsolete the more original symbolic expressions of revelation upon which doctrine reflects. Hegel's *Begriff*, which actually claimed to sublimate and thus do better what the more "positive" and "material" *Vorstellung* does for the historical religions, is an example of such overestimation brought forward by Tracy. This is the heresy of paraphrase, from a literary viewpoint, as if such a paraphrase were actually a clearer expression of something more ambiguous. It was suggested that we could actually test this for ourselves: when we are asked to explain a good novel we've read, we know that our paraphrase leaves out far more than it clarifies. The paraphrase has its role, but it also limits and obscures something which is far richer.

The opposite danger is that of underestimating the role of doctrine. One might view it as a spent genre which has seen its day. Perhaps, in a kind of "romantic" reaction, one might think of it as an abstraction from the symbolic, seeing no positive role to abstraction's ability to clarify through reflective distance. Was this the problem of some forms of "modernism," recognizing the complexity of that category? Or one might have a rather individualistic view of religion and theology (perhaps like some of Harnack's thought?). In that case, doctrines, as communal and ecclesial faith expressions, necessitated by the community's need for clarification and order, get undervalued.

In general, the seminar seemed persuaded by Tracy's suggestion that doctrine has a necessary and helpful role of clarifying, intensifying, ordering, and at times harmonizing aspects of the more originary event of revelation. It is relatively less adequate than the more originary expressions of revelation, needing to be in service to them (there was tacit agreement in the seminar on Tracy's suggestion that christology is correct to begin with the more "originary" expressions in Scripture).

The seminar used various ways to give expression to what seemed like the two-sided nature of doctrine-as-genre. From a positive viewpoint, echoing its ability to enrich through reflective distance, we can speak of doctrines as "unveiling," or as "propositional utterances" conveying truth and meaning, or as a form of "testimony" or "witness" to the more originary event of revelation. A special emphasis was given to doctrine's sacramental-ecclesial nature as providing linguistic rules for community consciousness and practice. The "we" expressions of the great creeds are particularly expressive of this, as well as their looking back to the traditions of the earlier ecclesial community (Chalcedon, for example, refers back to Nicaea and Ephesus). Perhaps an analogy here to the community as-

pect of doctrines can be had in Plato's *Laws*, the great dialogue pointing up the need that communities have for order through clarification and prescription. This community dimension is also present in Tracy's notion of doctrine as a subgenre of catholicism in the New Testament. Related to this is the thought that doctrines give expression not simply to any meaning and truth, but to those that bear a kind of "universal" or "paradigmatic" significance for the church at large. There seems to be a distinction between meaning, truth, and doctrine: insofar as the first two are crucial for the church at a given point, and able to be expressed in a helpful way for the church at large, then we can speak of doctrine.

From the other side, we can speak of doctrine, not as unveiling, but as concealing, as Heidegger suggests. Or as a language of compromise, necessitated by community needs. Or as a doctrine which tends to derail into "dogma" (the doctrine-dogma distinction surfaced more than once, and is often employed by historians of doctrine). This aspect of doctrine points to its need to be in continual relationship to the relatively richer, more compact, originating language of revelation. It does not paraphrase, but only highlights aspects of a much more complex reality. For example, the Logos christology of the great creeds surely intensifies the divine dimension of Jesus pointed to in the New Testament. And this intensification and thus clarification was and is necessary for full ecclesial consciousness. Yet it cannot replace the need to expose ourselves to the fuller, richer narratives about Jesus in the gospels which relate that Logos christology to a richly lived human life.

There was continual agreement, it seems, on the need to keep doctrine in tension with other christology genres, just as the New Testament canon seems to do. If you will, the relatively relaxed and somewhat "domesticated" christology of doctrine needs enriching and correcting by many other sources of christology, many of which are pointed to by Tracy. Narrative christology especially came to mind, given its centrality in Scripture and in much recent christology. The example of John of the Cross came to mind: his back and forth movement between poetry and theological commentary is a kind of paradigm of the need to keep reflective distance tied to relatively more compact, originary expressions of revelation. The "science of the saints" practised by the French School of spirituality (Bérulle, Madeleine de St.-Joseph, Olier, Eudes) is another example of the attempt to mix theology (= science) with lyrical prayer/spirituality (= the saints/the originary expression of revelation). The arts and iconography (in the wide sense of engaging students in art), poetry (the rich poetic imagery of Chardin was mentioned: viz., Christ the Omega), biography and autobiography (the saints, for example, and mystics), liturgy—all these were pointed to as enriching genres needing greater use in christology. It was suggested that we continually need to struggle against the monophysitic tendency: perhaps a greater attentiveness to the rich plurality of christology genres is a way to do this.

The relationship and difference between doctrine and theology surfaced a number of times. Each seems to be a distinct genre. They share in common the emphasis upon the enriching power of abstraction or reflective distance, as well as the need to remain linked to the originary (= participatory language). Perhaps doctrine as a genre has a more *volkisch* character, not unlike popular wisdom: more compact, less "discursive"? It is perhaps less pretentious than a more systemat-

ically discursive theology? That might be one of its contributions to theology, while the latter perhaps helps to keep doctrine critical?

Animated discussion occurred on the nature of narrative christology, which is enjoying significant popularity today, perhaps in reaction to the emphasis upon doctrine-moving-toward-dogma which has characterized much recent ecclesial christology. One participant suggested that the recent language of the "Jesus event" tended to obscure christology's need to focus upon the person of Jesus himself as a unique individual. Narrative christology, it was suggested, was an attempt to do just this. Another participant suggested that the language of "Jesus event" or "Christ event" gave expression to a more dialogical or interpersonal notion of Jesus. His personhood both constitutes and is co-constituted by others. Mary is what she is in virtue of Jesus, yes; but Jesus is partly what he is because of Mary. Such a dialogical christology is difficult, since it needs to clarify the respective roles of Jesus' uniqueness relative to the role of others. But in line with this, perhaps there is a more dialogical kind of narrative. Some scholars view Dostoyevsky's and Solzhenitsyn's novels in this way, and this may be fruitful in considering gospel and other forms of narrative christology. In any case, the discussion is only beginning, it seems.

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