

CHRIST AND CHRISTOLOGY IN THE WIDER ECUMENISM

We have been in the habit of envisaging the wider ecumenism from the Christian perspective on the model of the Jewish-Christian exchange. In the area of Christology at least this is misleading and may be cutting off many fruitful areas of exchange. The following are some reflections based on practical experiences of dialogue with people of faiths not related to the Hebrew Scriptures. During the past decade it has been my good fortune to take part in a number of international interfaith exchanges: in Rome and in Paris with Asians and Africans of other faiths present and actively participating; in Istanbul and in Zürich with Asian and African Christians speaking of their minority experiences among other faiths; in Hong Kong with East Asians in the very large majority; in New Delhi with South Asians of other faiths in the overwhelming majority.

From these encounters, and from the correspondence, publications, and personal friendships that followed, I have drawn these reflections.

1. The tendency of Christian participants in interfaith dialogue to see the divinity claim for Jesus as an ultimately insuperable obstacle is a false generalization from a certain phase of Jewish-Christian dialogue (in which I have also participated). For most representatives of the Asian and African traditions, the fact that we claim divinity for Jesus is quite tolerable but not a matter of primary interest. Divinity is an aura of great religious figures. That Christians should claim it for Jesus is to be expected. That they should assert that it belongs uniquely to Jesus is also acceptable as the rhetoric of personal religious commitment, and becomes offensive only when it becomes the basis of evangelizing pressure tactics. All this, however, is not of primary interest because that belongs to the way of life taught by Jesus and practiced (at least ideally) by his followers. All the Asians whom I had the privilege of hearing and engaging in exchange had an easy tolerance for the fact that most self-proclaimed Christians are not in fact heavily committed to that way of life. At the same time they were keen to know what is the way of life taught by Jesus as understood by those who take it very seriously.

2. At the Hong Kong meeting, among those of the Chinese cultural traditions, there was an immense interest in Jesus as a teacher of wisdom (not, however, in the Gnostic sense of the *Gospel of Truth*, but in an eminently practical political, economic, and familial sense of concern with the building of the good society and the living of the good life within society). When asked whether Christians considered Jesus a sage, it occurred to me immediately to wonder why I had not regarded him in this light. In fact, it occurred to me in the course of the discussions that perhaps Christian tradition has falsely moralized Jesus, too

frequently presenting his recorded sayings as moral admonitions when they might better be seen as deep insights into the truth of human existence. These reflections found an interesting complement in the New Delhi conversations, where interest in Jesus focused not only on the teaching of wisdom but, by analogy with the *bhakti* traditions, on the presence of caring, the practice of compassion, and devotion as a way of life.

In every case in these conversations, the interest was practical in terms of the difference that the example and teaching of Jesus should make in the behavior of the followers. Ontological questions about Jesus were not of interest to the adherents of the other traditions, but were seen as a strictly intra-Christian issue quite secondary to the "real questions" of the kind of presence, actions, way of life involved in the event of the historical Jesus, and in the Christian commitment of the followers of Jesus. In the light of this it is instructive to note that Christians, considering among themselves the possibilities of the wider ecumenism, should make such heavy weather of the exclusivity of the divinity claim.

3. These observations have led me to reflect how odd the history of our Christology really is. In the varieties of Christology to be found in the New Testament, titles and models of divinity certainly occur, but they do not make up the main bulk of the text. Nor does any definition of the divinity claim constitute the test of faith, or the basis for Christian mental anguish. The test of true faith in the risen Christ seems rather to be the willingness to live a very different kind of life from that commonly seen as normal. The focus of the Gospel narratives ranges over the impact Jesus made by the kind of presence he was among them, by his teaching, his compassion, his wisdom, and his total subordination of self-interest to the common well-being. One might say that the New Testament Christologies are really concerned with what it is that makes Jesus the anointed savior-figure, and how his concern to welcome God's reign in the world is to be continued in various ambients by his followers. This, surely, is the basic religious question with which theology should be concerned.

As has been pointed out often enough, the preoccupation with making the divinity claim rationally intelligible began as a debate with certain philosophical representatives of one particular culture by the Christian authors whom we call appropriately the Greek Apologists, in the pattern set particularly by Athenagoras. The process was carried on into the next century by another set of Christian philosophers in the Greek cultural setting, namely, the Alexandrians. The focus was changed from a functional to an ontological one intended to safeguard the reality and trustworthiness of salvation through Jesus Christ. The trend was, so to speak, set in stone in the great councils of the fourth and fifth centuries. But all the while we have enshrined and honored these ancient monuments in stone, we have failed to note that not the truth but the intelligibility of these formulations depends entirely on a metaphysics that is not universal but conditioned by the historical traditions of a particular culture that was indeed seminal for

Western thought and culture, but which even there is now only accessible to those able and willing to devote long and intensive study to it. The process, not only of clinging to verbal orthodoxy while closing our eyes to the semantic shift taking place in the terms of the formulations, but also of making these particular abstract philosophical reasonings the very center and focus of our Christology, has been a process of alienation in the full sense of that word.

The interest and focus of the Asian and African participants in interfaith dialogue suggests a radical critique of the way in which our Christology has developed through the centuries. This is not only a question from outside, as it were. Rahner's reflections on Christology from below have already moved in this direction. Leslie Dewart's tentative explorations into the "Hellenization of dogma" has moved in the same direction, as has Bernard Cooke's theme of the "distancing of God." But in sharp profile, the questions of learned and serious practitioners of the other great religious traditions of the world have brought attention to the distancing of Christ, and therefore of the understanding of Christian discipleship, from human encounter to divine otherness and from functional relevance to ontological unintelligibility. It is a critique that finds its correspondences within the life of the Catholic community of our post-Vatican II times in the tendency to give attention to Scripture and the present, bypassing the whole tradition in between.

4. It is this focus on wisdom and compassionate caring which also throws a sidelight on the question that continues to arise in relation to the Jewish-Christian dialogue, namely, the question of one covenant or two. Looking at this question while in conversation with people of other traditions who offer so much of self-validating truth and goodness, one must ask, "If two covenants, why not dozens?" As I have long proposed, Hebrew tradition has already provided a viable one-covenant theory. The tradition proclaims that as there is but one God so there can be but one divine covenant with all creation and all creatures. The creatures participate in the one covenant in different ways according to their being and their calling. The all-inclusive and fundamental level of this is the covenant of creation. Within it the covenant of Noah includes generically all human beings, who are responsible agents, called to observe and understand the harmony of creation and to cooperate with it in responding to the creator and source. Within the covenant of Noah the people of Israel are called to a more specific participation, witnessing to the one God of all by the observance of the Sinai covenant. A Christian adaptation of this which can be reconciled with Paul in Romans 9-11 is that the new covenant in Christ, breaking through the boundary between Jew and Gentile in the one Christian community, is also a more specific participation within the Noachic and creation levels of the one covenant. This need not preclude the possibility of many specific ways of participating in the one covenant.

Those who have consistently opposed a single covenant explanation have not paid attention to the fact that this one covenant is not seen as linear in time, each

new phase outdating the previous one. Rather it is a single global covenant with many evolutionary phases of differentiation and convergence in a rich variety of patterns all contained within the relationship of all to the source. Such a one-covenant model includes every instance of openness to revelation in the many variations of language, culture, and religious imagery. It includes all striving towards the true and the good as expressed in life and worship.

For those who cling to Greek ontological speculation as the very heart of Christology, the solution will continue to be problematic. But the refocusing of the dialogue in the wider conversation suggests a way beyond the dilemma.

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