Topic: Christian Identity and the Communication of Ethics
Convener: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University
Moderator: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University
Presenter: Robert Gascoigne, Australian Catholic University, Sydney
Respondent: David Hollenbach, Boston College

Robert Gascoigne set out to develop an understanding of the role of Christian ethics that is faithful to the particularity of Christian revelation, while limitless in its inclusiveness and concern. He began by outlining three understandings of Christian identity in contemporary theology. The first, shared by thinkers as different as Johann Baptist Metz and Stanley Hauerwas, stresses praxis as both response to gospel narrative and the primary means of witnessing to it. The distinctiveness and liberating power of the gospel, such an approach believes, may be blunted by attempts to mediate between the gospel and other religious or metaphysical systems. A second conception is more universalist, looking to the gospel as ultimate truth which encourages us to seek to understand the meaning of all human attempts to know and respond to God. This mediationist model is shared, among others, by Karl Rahner and David Tracy. Finally, a third understanding sees Christianity as a self-contained tradition which possesses universality within the narrative and offers culture a cure for its ills. The Protestant version espoused by George Lindbeck and John Milbank can be compared with its Catholic counterpart, as evidenced in the thought of Joseph Ratzinger.

Preferring the second conception, Gascoigne proceeded to outline a theology of revelation to support this theology of mediation, utilizing the concepts of mystery and historicity. In this dialectical and reciprocal understanding, the unique and irreducible particularity of the historic revelation remains open, as mystery, to all of history and creation. Christian revelation is an event whose meaning develops in relation to all narratives and languages. In a critical, dialogical, and conflictual interpretive process, hard-won insight alternates with the affirmation of the commonality of the search for truth.

In the final section of his paper, Gascoigne explored the implications of his views for the question of ethical communication. Arguing that the ethical context of liberal societies is one of a tension between pluralism and consensus, the speaker offered a consideration of the issues based on the three categories of witness, vision, and norm. The primary form of ethical communication is the practical witness of the Christian community to a specific form of life, but developed through encounters with the world of the other, and thus exhibiting the tension between particularity and universality. The witness must be complemented by the visionary and normative dimensions of ethics. The former, utilizing the richness of Christian religious discourse, presents the Christian narrative as a vision of human fulfillment that makes public truth claims appropriate within the public forum. The latter must normally eschew any reference to religious premises, to argue for the practical meaning of ethical principles on the basis of the manifest human good

they can enable. The theology of mediation that underlies this understanding of the role of ethics is revealed as a form of Christian discipleship in solidarity with those engaged in the conflicts of human history.

In his response, David Hollenbach placed himself in fundamental agreement with Gascoigne and offered several additional observations. He noted that Gascoigne negotiated his way skillfully between those who would see Christianity as an unrelieved countercultural identity and those who view it as one path among many equally valid approaches. What is needed, and what Gascoigne provides, is help to discern when the affirmation that "Jesus is the Lord" should lead to countercultural resistance, and when "God is the creator of heaven and earth" should lead to cooperation with non-Christians in pursuit of a universalist agenda. We cannot grant primacy to one or the other on theological grounds alone. While seeking to remain faithful to both, Christians need to look to what is actually going on in the culture. Sometimes prophecy will be called for, sometimes listening. Theological, theoretical wisdom and practical, ethical prudence, will both be needed in the continuing story of the development of Christian identity and the Christian story. Neither is yet fully formed, nor is the identity of the human race or the story of human history.

The ensuing discussion centered around considerations of the role of power and the renunciation of force in dialogue, and particularly on the question of whether it is or is not true that the proclamation of Jesus as Lord in the context of interreligious dialogue in effect stops all dialogue. How do we negotiate the claim to uniqueness and the openness to the other?

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