



Believing in Jesus Christ in This Postmodern World¹

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Over the last twenty-three years of teaching systematic theology in a Lutheran framework, I have become increasingly drawn to the use of theological autobiography as a legitimate and illuminating genre in theological articulation in our postmodern world.² Christian theology over the centuries has always had an autobiographical character, which contradicts the notion that theological articulation must strive for detached objectivity. One of the ironic benefits of postmodernity is the inescapable reminder of the historical conditionedness of all views about reality, reminding us that the meaning of our lives, indeed how our lives are constituted, is bound up with stories, narratives that both include and exclude; narratives that need to be centered, open, and fluid. For Christians, that essential, generative center is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Thus, every sermon and articulation of the Christian faith is to be an exposition on this generative center in which the hearer and reader are confronted with a christological exposition of the essential confession: God alone is the source of life, healing, and forgiveness.

¹The contents of this article were shared at the theological conference entitled “Jesus Christ: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow!” at Holden Village, Washington, September 2005.

²See my articles, “Theological Autobiography: Theologizing in Context,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 20/3 (1993) 187–196, and “Where Is God? Engaging a Religiously Charged, Post-Secular World,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30/3 (2003) 197–204.

There is an intrinsic intra-Christian and interreligious character to our conversation about Christian faith. The genre of story is one viable, fruitful, and necessary means of entering this conversation.

This essay is an attempt at theological discourse in story form, reflecting theologically on some personal experiences that have called forth evangelical responses, pursuing the identity and salvific meaning of faith in Jesus Christ. The underlying assumption in my theological approach is that we need to attend to the intrinsic intra-Christian and interreligious character of Christian theology, as well as the religious/Christian engagement with the secular-minded.³

LIVING WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

Confessing faith in Jesus Christ today continues the centuries-old practice of facing the pressing question of what it means to live in close proximity—for example, in newly created family matrices—with people of other faiths. Some years ago, I learned of the following story: The daughter of a member of a Lutheran congregation was planning to marry a Hindu, and her mother was concerned about her daughter's faith in Jesus Christ. Will she cease living her life of faith, and will the grandchildren be brought up as Christians? she wondered. They were to be married in the church.

The mother's question is not an isolated one, for our children and grandchildren face questions, both old and new, that are part of the fabric of the history of Christianity. In particular, they face questions that center on the identity and the meaning of Jesus Christ. How might we listen in a way that is both respectful—even in the face of essential, decisive differences—and evangelical? (By "evangelical" I mean "faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ," the generative center for any talk about God and God's saving work in the world.)

During the 1880s (as far as we know from family stories), my great-grandparents were brought to the Caribbean from northeast India, from what was, in British India, the United Provinces and Bihar, to work on the sugar plantations as indentured immigrants. The majority of the Indians who were brought between 1838 and 1917—close to half a million—were Hindus, but there was a significant number of Muslims and there were a few who already were Christian. In my own family of origin of high caste (Brahmin) Hindus, when my parents were married in 1949 (my father was an adult convert to Christianity and my mother a devout Hindu) it was agreed verbally before their marriage that the children born into the marriage would be brought up as Christians in the Lutheran church. (I am a Christian who lives his life of faith and witness within the Lutheran heritage; I am not a Lutheran who happens to be Christian!) It is therefore no accident that the four children were brought up as Christians.

Being part of an interfaith nuclear and extended family has meant and continues to mean living at the confluence of Christian, Hindu, and—in the context of the English-speaking Caribbean—Islamic interpretations of the identity and meaning of Jesus in our everyday living. Thus, an ongoing question for me and

³It is not in the purview of this essay to pursue the engagement with the secular-minded. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

many others has been and is: How might God speak to us not only through Christian sisters and brothers, but also through Hindus and Muslims, that such speaking might expand and further illumine our understanding of Jesus' identity and saving work? In the nexus of race, class, caste, patriarchy, and other defining differences, religious commitment was respected and lauded, indeed evoked awe, when such commitment avoided the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of closed-mindedness about God's inclusive graciousness to all for Jesus' sake. In this regard, my own theological horizon was challenged and widened in an unexpected way on the occasion of my ordination and installation in 1980 at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Georgetown, Guyana. I became the second member of Redeemer Lutheran Church (founded in about 1947 and served almost exclusively by U.S. American Lutheran missionary pastors) to be ordained in it, and I was the first Guyanese-born pastor to be called by Redeemer to an extended ministry.

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Being sensitive about not making my ordination an occasion for drawing attention to myself, I did not make any special effort to invite people beyond the congregation to the worship service at which I would be ordained. However, my mother, a devout Hindu and a widow, had a different understanding of what it meant to invite family and friends in the community—most of whom were Hindu. One family was Muslim. For her, if there was a major public event in the family, it would be rude, to say the least, and a show of poor hospitality not to tell relatives and friends about it and invite them to come. In a curious way, she was motivated by both her Hindu sense of religious celebration that must be communal and also her understanding that Jesus would want others beyond the Redeemer congregation to be invited as an expression of authentic hospitality in Jesus' name. Thus, through word of mouth rather than by printed invitations, my mother sent out word to family and neighbors in the community, saying that I would be ordained on Tuesday, September 30, 1980, at Redeemer Lutheran Church, and she was inviting them to attend and celebrate the event. As expected, my Christian relatives, many on my father's side and a few on my mother's, were present. But my maternal grandmother, maternal uncle, great-uncle and great-aunt, and many aunts and other relatives, all Hindu, were also present at the service. They were there, proud to be present out of a Hindu sense of religious propriety and family support. At the end of the service, as I greeted those who had attended, my maternal great-aunt, who was a spokeswoman in the family, with a big smile and joy all over her face, hugged me and said, “Son, we are proud of you tonight. Remember that you are only fulfilling in the Christian way what your caste means.” She was referring to the

fact that as a Brahmin, I was of the priestly caste. In a very natural, matter-of-fact way, she had interpreted my call and ordination as a Christian pastor in Hindu terms. I was not surprised; she was fully consistent with her religious view of reality. I have reflected on her comment over the years, especially thinking of it as a salutary reminder to me not to be ashamed to interpret reality and the meaning of life in light of Jesus Christ as the generative center of our language about God and God's saving work.

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The story of Peter and Cornelius's encounter (Acts 10) places the challenge of discerning the inclusive significance of Jesus within cultures and religions right at the center. The Spirit had prepared them for their encounter with each other. Cornelius, we are told, was “a centurion of the Italian Cohort....He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God” (Acts 10:1–2). Cornelius, a Roman officer, occupied a place of power in the structures of the Roman Empire. For his part, Peter was an emerging pillar of the newly emerging community and he was a Jew. Cornelius's household shared in his “fear” of God. Peter, also, was awed by God's inclusiveness: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all” (vv. 34–36). Peter's confession leads the reader to ask: Who are the ones converted in this text? Was it a one-way street or did Peter have to learn something about the magnanimity of God's love? Peter's mind was changed even as Cornelius's and that of his household were. Through the Spirit, Peter and Cornelius met, and at the center of the encounter was the naming of Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. In the baptism of Cornelius and his household, we have a timely reminder that the Christian message is transcultural, transpolitical, and intergenerational. The work of the Spirit is centered in the message concerning Jesus Christ.

This brings me to a critical thesis: *We, more often than not, know or learn best what we believe by being in the company of others who do not believe as we do, where, therefore, we have to say what it is that we believe.* In that encounter, we are challenged both to speak what we believe and to be seen living by it. If this holism is absent, we are left with the questions: What is the generative center of Christian faith? What difference does it make to believe in Jesus Christ?

KNOWING WHAT WE BELIEVE

Jesus is who he is because of what he does—saves. Jesus does what he does—saves—because of who he is. For several years, we have used this thesis in the

examination in the basic course in systematic theology. The aim is to get the students to think about what the Christian message—the gospel—is. In Christian proclamation, to speak about God one must necessarily speak about Jesus of Nazareth, who came to be confessed as the Christ. Language about God is necessarily language in relation to Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God as divine and human participates in and interacts with created reality. God is not repulsed by created reality. God enters into the world God created and God is not thereby diminished. God is not less than fully God in entering human reality. What Jesus does reveals who he is. His identity is bound up with what he does. For example, those who opposed him wondered out loud concerning the basis of his authority. He was accused of casting out demons by Beelzebul (Mark 3:22). He forgives sins, but only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:5–12). Is Jesus blaspheming, breaking the first commandment, or does he have a unique relationship with God? That he can and does forgive sins, which only God can do, means that he is fully associated with God, who alone is the source of life, healing, and forgiveness.

This means that any absolution that says in effect “Today, I feel so good—on top of the world—therefore, I tell you, your sins are forgiven” would be idolatrous. It is God alone who is the source of forgiveness, and for Christians God forgives in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus is not ancillary. Jesus announces the reign of God, which has come in his person. Jesus’ coming makes God’s reign real and concrete because it is happening in and through him. God’s reign is already here, and God’s reign is yet to come in its fullness. Doing what he does, Jesus does not thereby become who he never was. That would be adoptionistic. His act of forgiving sins, for example, does not make him divine. He can forgive sins because he is fully God.

When people come to worship, or we visit them in their homes and other settings where we practice the mutual conversation and consolation of believers, our parishioners and others should be able to assume and/or should hear clearly that their sins are forgiven by God alone on account of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, if we offer ourselves or some other created reality as a source of forgiveness, we have left people with more burdens to bear than when we first began the conversation. Idolatry has decisive negative consequences.

SPEAKING WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

I would like to return to the point I made earlier that theology has both an intra-Christian and an interreligious character. Another very personal example illustrates this thesis. A few years ago, when I arrived in Guyana for my annual one-month summer visit, a relative, who was a medical doctor and a devout Hindu, called me up and said, “Winston, welcome back to Guyana. You know we have a prayer group in our house.⁴ Thursday night we will have our meeting and we want you to come and give a talk on what Christians believe about Jesus.” He had invited

⁴They had built a kind of praying place located in the downstairs, which, in Guyana, where houses are built on stilts or posts, is not a basement.

me to come and talk to a group of Hindus, who were followers of Satya Sai Baba, not about what Hindus believe about Jesus, but about what Christians believe about Jesus.

Invariably, on the occasions when I have shared this story, someone has asked, “What did you talk about?” In teaching systematic theology, a primary part of my pedagogy is telling stories in order to get my listeners to think in concrete terms. It continues to be a challenge: getting people both to ask a good question and to live with it. Stories that present life as lived at the confluence of religions, cultures, and so on are a fruitful genre for theological reflection and articulation.

When I arrived, I noticed two things about the seating arrangements. First, the meeting place was arranged with women on one side and men on the other, a common practice in some Christian groups as well, especially in earlier generations. Second, they were sitting on the floor, but I was supposed to stand in front. It is very common in Hindu gatherings to sit on the floor. I asked to sit on the floor, but was told, “No, you are the professor; you have to stand.”

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In my lecture, I made a conscious effort to avoid negative references to Hinduism or engage in a comparison between Hinduism and Christianity. I was asked only to give a lecture, and so it was not an occasion for formal dialogue. It was incumbent upon me to honor my hosts and their gracious invitation. I talked about what I knew other Christians would recognize and acknowledge as fundamental to what Christians believe about Jesus. In other words, in that *interreligious* setting, I was conscious of attending to the *intra-Christian* concern to be faithful to the Christian message. I had not been asked, “Winston, would you come and talk about what you, Winston, believe about Jesus?” Obviously, faith as trust (*fide qua*) and faith as that which is believed (*fide quae*) belong together. When we speak of the holy catholic faith, we speak of the faith that we hold in common.

It is salutary to welcome the challenge to avoid the use of technical, doctrinal language and, instead, to use nontechnical, everyday language that is faithful to the substance of the doctrine and teaching under consideration. This is not to say that this is an easy task, or that there is no place for technical, doctrinal language. The use of nontechnical language is not to say less than what is articulated in the technical language. Rather, the challenge is to get at the substance by means of a different kind of language and not to speak down to the audience. Intrinsic to the Christian message is its infinite translatability.⁵

⁵See Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

In my lecture, I emphasized the following:⁶

- Christians, like people of other faiths, confess that God alone is the source of life.
- God alone creates and gives life.⁷
- Christians believe that God did not create and stand back; but God came into the world.
- Human beings were created to trust God.
- To trust in other things that were created is idolatry.
- All human beings, instead of trusting in God, have trusted in other things. All have distrusted God. If human beings were created for trust, it means that human beings are to trust God.
- Promises are made, and God is the faithful, trustworthy Promiser.
- God did not give up on human beings and the creation.
- God determined to come and be with us where we are.

Without saying it, I was implicitly using the Nicene Creed (a reference that would not mean anything to the audience). I pointed out that God as God came into the world and that not less than God came:

- The Word always was (as the writer of the Gospel of John declares).
- In Jesus Christ, the Word came down and lived with us (I could see sparks, as people's eyes lit up).
- In Jesus' coming—the Word-become-a-human being—God did not give up on human beings and the world.
- Because of his faithfulness to the One he called Father, Jesus' life ended in death on a cross.
- The story of Jesus did not end with his death.
- God raised him from death and through his death God gives life to all.
- Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

That was how I talked about what Christians believe about Jesus Christ.

At the end of the lecture, a professor from India, who was teaching at the University of Guyana, sitting right in front of me, got up and very politely said, "Professor, it was so nice to hear you; it was so wonderful to hear you tell us what Christians believe. Now, you know, we Hindus believe that Jesus is one incarnation of God. In Hinduism, the belief is that there are many avatars, incarnations. So Jesus is one." He had pointed out a fundamental difference. With respect we acknowledged the fundamental difference in our views on Jesus' identity. I said, "Thank you very much. Yes, you do indeed believe that. For Christians, Jesus is not one among many; he is the unique one." I said that and they asked a few more

⁶This story, including the essentials of what I said, appears in a SELECT course in systematic theology released in spring 2007.

⁷Here the accent was on "creation out of/from nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*).

questions. Everything was nicely done, and we went away mutually respecting each other. I thank God for that experience.

TWO CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIANS

This story reminds us of two primary challenges with which we Christians are faced: (1) to know the fundamentals of what we believe personally and subjectively—which is crucial—and the fundamentals of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic faith; (2) to learn something about others, what they believe, and to have conversation and dialogue in a manner that is respectful.

Every proclamation, every teaching and articulation of the Christian faith, is to be done as both an intra-Christian event and an interreligious event, and as an event in which we address the secular-minded. There are many who are post-Christian. They live as if understanding reality in religious terms, including Christian views of reality, is not liberating and humanizing. This is further exacerbated by the erroneous assumption that all who identify themselves as Christian have some sense of the Christian story. And it is erroneous to assume that when we talk about the Christian faith only Christian people can understand anything of the fundamentals. There is a lot more fluidity in cultures and religions, even in these United States. Contextually, we may talk as if everybody understands the Christian story in some measure. Simultaneously, we need to talk about the Christian faith as if it were being told for the first time.

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Because the Christian faith is a story that incorporates our stories and transforms them and thereby we receive life, forgiveness, and the hope of eternal life through Jesus’ death and resurrection, we have to find ways—including ordinary ways in the fabric of our lives—to share what it means for us to be baptized into Christ and to have faith in him. A few years ago I received a call from a gentleman who had been given my name by a mutual friend. The caller explained that he was concerned about the Christian upbringing of his grandson, whose baptism was imminent. The grandfather’s dilemma had to do with the fact that his daughter-in-law had come from an interfaith background (her father was Indian Hindu and her mother Catholic) and was not strongly committed to worship and church life. His son, who had been brought up Christian, followed his wife’s leading. As we talked, I shared with this concerned grandfather that he and his wife might consider writing a joint letter or separate letters to their grandson on the occasion of his baptism and giving them to the child’s parents on the day of the baptism. He should ask the

parents to read the letter(s) to him when he is able to understand and, when he is older, to give the letter(s) to him. I suggested to him that they share with their grandson what their baptism means to them, how they love him greatly, that they would pray for him, and what they understand his baptism to mean.

The challenge to Christians to know the fundamentals of what we believe—both our personal, subjective appropriation of what is believed (this is certainly crucial) and the fundamentals of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith—is an ongoing process. I thank God for the dilemma we are faced with now. To learn something about others, what they believe, and to have conversation and dialogue in a manner that is respectful are essential to Christian witness to Jesus Christ today. Christians do not know the complete meaning of God's coming to the world in Jesus Christ. Through sharing and declaring our faith in *mixed* company, we come to learn in new and surprising ways the saving meaning and power of the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for the sake of the whole world. ⊕

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