



Preaching Christ in an Age of Religious Pluralism

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Harvey Cox has written another best seller, a timely book reflecting on his personal encounter with people of other faiths. The book is entitled *Many Mansions*, constructed from the passage in John's Gospel, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you" (14:2). This book makes its contribution to the new pluralistic theology that holds that all religions are pretty much equal as "ways of salvation." So far as there is any theology in the book, there is not much with which I can agree. But there is one of his proposals that I think is right: the place to start one's approach as a Christian in dialogue with persons of other religions.

There are two poles in the Christian approach to other religions: the universalist and the particularist. The universalist looks for common ground, comparing beliefs and rituals, finally ascending to some ultimate reality or higher essence above and beyond all particulars. You may call it "God" or the "Really Real." For Christian universalists, the strategy is to prefer talk about a "cosmic Christ" to the concrete historical figure of Jesus. There may be something "Christic" about Jesus, but not exclusively so—not in a categorically unique way. Harvey Cox confesses that he has sat through many rounds of inter-faith dialogue based on some version of this universalist model, and he finds them boring, a "tedious exercise," and a "repetitious exchange of vacuities."¹ The strategy of Christian universalism has generally been guilty of "soft-pedaling the figure of Jesus himself."²

Harvey Cox recommends that Christians begin with what is of utmost personal passionate interest to them. That is never something abstract and

¹Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions* (Boston: Beacon, 1988) 4.

²Ibid., 5.

conceptual, but rather their experience of faith in Jesus Christ. He says, "After all, Jesus is in some ways the *most* particularistic element of Christianity."³ There is, of course, a kind of particularism from which Cox would clearly distance himself, and so would I, and that's the fanaticism that tries to ram Jesus down the throats of other people. But such fanaticism does not necessarily accompany particularism. In fact, people of other faiths want to hear about Jesus, who is much more interesting than some abstract belief in a super-essential something or other beyond all predications. Cox says that from his experience—and he has had a lot of it—the Jesus factor is surprisingly just what the non-Christian participants in dialogue are most interested in and most eager to talk about. Cox candidly confesses, "I too tried to avoid talking about Jesus too quickly, but I soon discovered my interlocutors wanted me to."⁴

I. WHICH JESUS?

After that point of agreement with Harvey Cox, we come quickly to the parting of the ways. For it is not enough simply to talk about Jesus, certainly not any old kind of Jesus. The question is: which Jesus are we talking about? Or, whose Jesus are we prepared to call our Lord and Savior? When it comes to talking about Jesus, there are two ways which have been tried over and over again, both of them very old-fashioned and still very much in vogue. The one we will call by the ancient label, the Ebionite Jesus. This approach focuses on “the life and teachings of Jesus.” Jesus is pictured as a great moral teacher, certainly one of the top ten, along with Gautama, Lao Tsu, Socrates, Confucius, and Muhammad. Jesus was a rabbi, a prophet, and maybe even a mystic. But in the end, after all the superlatives are exhausted, Jesus is merely human, not more than human, and that is what the Ebionites old and new believe. At best Jesus can be a model for us, because of his morality, his piety, his life-style, or whatever; the choice is up to us.

The other approach lies at the other end of the christological spectrum. We will call it the docetic Christ, using another ancient label. The key concept is the ancient Greek idea of the “Logos,” first used philosophically by Heraclitus. The Logos is the divine power present in all things. Seeds of the Logos are sown in the world, making things what they are—accounting for their movement, structure, and meaning. Armed with this knowledge about the universal Logos, acquired through reason and experience, we may apply it to Jesus of Nazareth and call him the Logos because he expressed or exemplified this principle in his life and teachings in an eminent way. This Logos-principle is the ideal Christ, who does not coincide with the historical Jesus. It is the Logos that saves, and this Logos is universally reflected in all the religions. Jesus bears witness to the Logos, and we can even speak of the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus, but not in a categorically unique way. This type of christological thinking is docetic (from the Greek *dokeo*, meaning to “to seem”) because the concrete history of Jesus is not definitive

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Ibid., 8-9.

and constitutive of his Christness.

At bottom there is not that much difference between the Ebionite and docetic approaches. In the end, Jesus is not categorically unique. He is not different from us “in essence” but only “by degree.” We are in control of the christological project. The meaning of Jesus is defined by *our* experience, self-understanding, moral idealism, worldview, or philosophical system. The long history of christology has been zig-zagging between an Ebionite Jesusology and a docetic Logology, and this kind of weaving from side to side abounds in contemporary christological efforts.

II. THE NAMING OF JESUS

Each generation is addressed by the question Jesus put to his disciples on that road to Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8): “Who do the people say that I am?” They told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets.” And Jesus asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” Ever since that time, Christians have wondered about who Jesus really is and how best to name him. According to Mark’s

Gospel, the questions came pouring out in Jesus' own lifetime: "Who is this one who teaches with authority?" "Who is this one who forgives sins?" "Who then is Jesus of Nazareth?" What are we prepared to say about him and about how to confess him? What is the meaning and relevance of Jesus in our global situation? Many people in our time would chime in with Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus and cry out, "Who are you, Lord?"

What do we have to go on in answering Jesus' original question, "And who do you say that I am?" We have the word and witness of those who loved him and knew him best. But we don't have as much as we would like to have. People are still eager to search in newly discovered ancient manuscripts for more information about Jesus of Nazareth. St. John came to the end of his Gospel and said, "But there were also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25). Our libraries are now bulging with books that have been written imagining things that the authors wished Jesus had said or done, or worse, apologizing for some the shocking things he did say and do. As Albert Schweitzer demonstrated in his classic study, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, "Each epoch found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character."⁵

There is still no scholarly consensus regarding the true identity and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. The infamous Jesus Seminar now underway has scholars voting on every saying in the four Gospels, but no overwhelming consensus is emerging. There may be something about our sources and methods that defies giving a definitive answer to Jesus' own question about his identity. There may also be something about the mystery of the Person that accounts for the difficulty.

⁵Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1910) 4.

A gigantic painting at Oxford University visualizes a story told about the great St. Augustine of Hippo, who was writing his book on the Trinity. As he was walking along the coast one day, he met a small boy pouring seawater into a hole in the ground. Augustine watched him for some time, and eventually asked him what he was doing. "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into this hole," replied the boy. "Don't be so stupid," replied Augustine, "you can't fit the sea into that little hole. You're wasting your time." "And so are you," replied the boy, "trying to write a book about God."

Maybe we are a bit stupid to try to improve on the answers coming from the word and witness of the evangelists and apostles to the question of Jesus' true and identity and meaning. Yet, we cannot live—or for long—on borrowed answers. The history of christology goes on, and today a new chapter is being written in the encounter with different claims to the way of salvation. Jaroslav Pelikan has recently written a wonderful book entitled *Jesus through the Centuries*.⁶ We may believe with the book of Hebrews that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8), but our pictures and interpretations of Jesus change over the centuries and across the cultures. Pelikan's study of the history of the portrayals of Jesus shows a remarkable kaleidoscope of images. In the second century Jesus was preached as the light of the Gentiles. To the Romans Jesus was preached as the King of kings, giving people a choice between Christ and Caesar. In the third century Jesus was proclaimed as the cosmic Logos, an apologetic bridge to the intelligentsia of the epoch, with highly ambiguous results (yet the

Orthodox Fathers were careful to teach that the Logos was not essentially a metaphysical principle, but was nothing else than the flesh and blood person of Jesus Christ). To the Jews and the Greeks and the Romans, the early Christians confessed that their faith lay not in a set of laws, ideas, or beliefs but in a person. In the Christian faith the person of Jesus is the heart of the matter, the secret that makes it work.

Professor Pelikan takes us back through the centuries on a tour of all the major ways in which people have responded to the question, “And who do you say that I am?” Poets and monks and mystics and prophets and reformers have been grasped by this question. In Byzantine culture Jesus is the perfect icon of God and the inspiration of all its mystical devotional literature. In medieval times Jesus is depicted as a monk who transforms the world through monastic discipline and self-denial, embodying the ideals of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Today the image of Jesus as liberator has captured the enthusiasm and commitment of more Christians around the world than perhaps any other. For many centuries the church of imperial Christendom pictured Jesus as the preserver of the status quo in state and church, as the chief guarantor of the eternal order of things reflected in temporal institutions. Now, at least in many parts of the world, people are looking to Jesus as the great source of the freedom for which they long, as the liberator who challenges every oppressive social or political or economic system. As with every image applied to Jesus, there is a risk involved. Who fills the image or symbol with

⁶Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985).

page 248

its definitive meaning? As with the Logos concept, we can approach Jesus with our minds made up about the meaning of the Logos, taken from our favorite philosopher (Whitehead? Heidegger?), or we can allow the concrete history of Jesus to define what we mean by the term.

Today we need to let that concrete history as narrated by the evangelists and apostles define for us the truest and deepest meaning of liberation. There are kinds of so-called liberation movements which have little or nothing to do with the freedom which Jesus was sent to deliver to all people. For many people liberation means license, licentiousness, libertinism, the freedom to be yourself, to do what you please, to secure your own. So that we are not guilty of promising people liberation whose hidden agenda is the freedom of the autonomous self—the absolute narcissist who turns the whole world into a means of self-fulfillment and self-gratification—we need to let Jesus—through his suffering, death, and resurrection—define for us the kind of liberation that God intends. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” And so his liberation is not necessarily the kind the world is clamoring for.

Of course, we would like to recruit Jesus for our own cause. We seem to have a powerful drive to define Jesus in accordance with our own needs and wishes. Instead of accommodating ourselves to Jesus’ liberation movement we find ourselves accommodating Jesus to our own. Books and articles have been written recently proving that: Jesus is a guerrilla fighter, like a Che Guevara; Jesus is a mushroom eater; Jesus is gay; Jesus is black; Jesus is a feminist—Christa. From the sublime to the ridiculous, Jesus is pictured as the perfect model of what each group understands itself to be. Like plastic surgeons making over the face of the patient in their own image, we make Jesus a prisoner of our own fads and fashions.

III. NO OTHER GOSPEL

I know only one way to prevent us from veering to the side of an Ebionite Jesus or a docetic Christ and that is to conform our thinking to the normative witnesses to Jesus that we have in the New Testament and to the secondary normative interpretations and definitions that we have in the ecumenical creeds of the ancient church. If we ignore or suspend these norms, christology will become modeling clay that we use to make Jesus look like ourselves.

The question whether the promise of salvation is in the name of Jesus, and in no other name, is fast becoming a life-and-death issue facing contemporary Christianity. In the churches this issue will become the test of fidelity to the gospel, a matter of *status confessionis* more urgent than any other. Legion are the christologies now on the market that promise salvation through other names. For Langdon Gilkey, religions are “roughly equal” in their ability to communicate saving grace and truth. For Paul Knitter and John Hick, this is a “Copernican revolution”—the good news that there are other ways of salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Writing to the Galatians, Paul called this kind of teaching a “different gospel” (Gal 1:6).

How can we know what is true salvation and true liberation? It was

page 249

the conviction of the people of God in the old covenant that only God can save. Israel was reminded time and time again that she could not save herself, nor could she be saved by the idols of the nations round about her. It is the Lord, and the Lord alone, who can save. Knowing full well that it was only God who could save, the first Christians nevertheless preached Jesus as Savior, and that there was salvation in no other name. Jesus saves his people from their sins (Matt 1:21); only in his name is there salvation (Acts 4:12); he is the pioneer of salvation (Heb 2:10). Jesus is represented as doing what every good Jew knew only God could do. Sooner or later believers who wanted to think through their faith reasoned that if Jesus acts as God, and if Jesus acts for God as God’s absolute plenipotentiary, then we have here in Jesus’ person the final revelation of God—Immanuel, God with us, God deep in the flesh and blood of this human being.

So also Jesus was declared to be the Lord, not merely in the everyday sense of “Sir” or “Master,” but in the Old Testament sense of the sacred name of God. When Joel says that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:31), he is referring to Yahweh; but when this passage is quoted in Acts, Peter declares that “*God* has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (2:21). Many contemporaries became infuriated that Christians were so recklessly hijacking terms and titles reserved exclusively for the one God to speak of the identity of Jesus. To make matters worse, not only was Jesus addressed as Lord and Savior, but also worshipped on a par with God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. That is a scandal; this is an offense. It was so then; it is equally so today. To complete the story of this offense, we would have to go on to show how and why the early Christians modified the strict monotheism of their Hebrew origins into a christocentric trinitarian monotheism that finally reached its zenith in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

According to the New Testament and the Nicene Creed Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and the world. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and human beings, the person of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Martin Luther rejoiced in the “happy exchange” that occurred in Jesus Christ between God and humanity. Today Christians are

challenged to make sense of their confession and experience of Jesus as Lord and Savior in the context of the missionary encounter with the world religions and modern ideologies. We must be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us, to witness credibly to our belief that Jesus means God's own salvation and liberation—not only for us who already believe, but for the whole world and all those who do not yet believe in his name.

When Christians interact with peoples of other religions through evangelization, mission, dialogue, and service, the Spirit of God will open our lips to new ways of proclaiming the gospel and new ways of naming Jesus. There is one eternal gospel, but a myriad of forms of its contextualization as the history of preaching and christology show. There is one heavenly treasure in many different earthen vessels, but this treasure is not separable from the personal identity and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth recorded in the Scriptures. All the words and titles that New Testament Christianity used to preach Jesus as Savior had been used before in Jewish, Babylonian, Greek,

and Roman religions. Religious pluralism is nothing new. The gospel entered into a religiously pluralistic culture. Christianity did not invent a new language; it adopted fragments of the old languages, converted and baptized them in the process of preaching the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ. When Jesus is called the “Lamb of God,” Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross invested that symbol with new meaning. The same thing is true about such other words as Father, Son, Spirit, King, Lord, Messiah. All of these took on radically new meanings when their roots were planted in the soil of the gospel.

The same thing is happening around the world today in the encounter of the gospel with the world religions. The new wine of the eternal gospel is being poured into the old skins of all the religious traditions of humanity, and the skins are bursting open. New history of mission and evangelization is being made. There are many faithful witnesses who have not surrendered the claim: No other name! No other gospel! Many have surrendered—their number seems to be growing—not only in academic circles but in church bureaucracies. The message we have to bring to the nations is still very much a matter in dispute. Christians are still being martyred for their faith in many parts of the world. There are gloomy predictions that Christianity is rapidly becoming a minority religion and that other “isms” will sweep us off the face of the earth—secularism, atheism, Marxism, or some other. There are billions of people who do not know and believe in Jesus as the Christ of God. At the same time, there are still millions who are prepared to confess the name of Jesus, no matter what it costs, and to bear witness that God was in Christ working out the world’s salvation.

Those who stand in the Reformation tradition of Martin Luther place a strong emphasis on the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God and the justification of the sinful world have been communicated to the world on account of Christ alone, for in Christ God has broken down the barriers of human sinfulness and divine wrath. It is the overwhelming power of God’s love that drives Christians to meet all other neighbors in the sure confidence that this love is wide enough to include all who are now separated from their maker, that Christ died for all and was raised for the world’s justification. There is no need for many ways of salvation, because the one way God has revealed in Jesus Christ is sufficient for all.