

The Psychology of Faith

Some, perhaps many, Christians will feel their faith threatened by the suggestion that Jesus may or may not be God's definitive, normative revelation, that there may be other saviors and other incarnations. Such feelings must be respected. The issue is a delicate one. I suggest to these believers that if they examine the psychological processes of how they came to believe in Jesus the Christ, they will find that such anxiety is unwarranted. The feeling of being threatened by "other saviors" arises not from the spontaneous voice of faith but from deep-seated attitudes of classicist consciousness (see chap. 2) or from unquestioned presuppositions of much Western philosophy to the effect that truth is always a matter of either-or, this-or-that. Deep down we still feel that for something to be really true and worthy of our commitment, it must be the only truth. And when this attitude merges with the traditionally North American mentality that only what is biggest and best—from automobiles to hamburgers to saviors—merits our purchase, naturally we shall be threatened by others who might be equally true and valuable.

The psychology of faith, however, does not require this. As has already been suggested in this chapter, especially by the liberation theologians, what brings a person to faith in and commitment to Jesus is a transforming experience; Jesus so empowers the heart and illumines the mind that one can now feel and know and, especially, act differently. The experience of faith necessarily includes the conviction that Jesus *is* God's revelation and grace. It does not necessarily include the conviction that he *alone* is this revelation and grace. Therefore, as John Macquarrie has urged, one can be totally committed to Jesus and at the same time genuinely open to the possibility of other revealers and saviors.¹⁰ Or as the liberation theologians might suggest, one can give all one's heart and mind to the praxis of building the kingdom and at the same time recognize that this praxis is being realized along other paths.

To expand on an analogy used earlier, one can be totally and faithfully committed to one's spouse, even though one well knows that there are other persons in this world equally as good, intelligent, beautiful—yes, even when one makes the acquaintance of and enjoys the friendship of such persons. Absolute exclusivity, in attitude or practice, is neither honest or healthy in any commitment.

I even suggest that the ability to be open to others can serve as a gauge for the depth of one's commitment to Jesus. Sociologists point out that the more a group is secure in its own identity and the more it is committed to its unifying vision, the more it will be able to tolerate, even accept, other visions—what sociologists call "cognitive dissonance."¹¹ Perhaps this is why the early Christian communities could bear and actually thrive on so many different, seemingly contradictory, christologies; they were basically secure in their central commitment to following Jesus. Again, the analogy with marriage applies: the deeper the commitment to one's spouse and the more secure the marriage relationship, the more one will be able to appreciate the truth and

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No Other Name

CONCLUSION: UNIQUENESS AND PERSONAL COMMITMENT

This chapter has tried to show that in light of New Testament christology, of New Testament exclusivist language, of contemporary transcendental, process, and liberation christologies, and of the nature of resurrection faith, it is possible for Christians to follow the lead of the *kairos* of today; they can endorse a theocentric theology of religions, based on a theocentric, nonnormative reinterpretation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

In this concluding section, I should like to propose how, on the basis of my own and others' faith experience, such a move need in no way diminish one's personal and full commitment to Jesus as incarnation of God's saving purpose and presence.¹⁰⁹ On the contrary, a theocentric understanding of Jesus can confirm and intensify one's commitment to him by rendering it more intellectually coherent (better theory) and more practically demanding (better praxis).

beauty of others. Therefore, not only does commitment to Jesus not exclude openness to others, but the greater the commitment to him, the greater will be one's openness to others.

This proportionality also works in reverse: Might Christians' anxiety about the possibility of "other Christs" be a symptom of an underlying insecurity concerning their own identity and praxis?

Tension between Universality and Particularity

The challenge and the difficulty of maintaining total commitment to one revealer together with genuine openness to others can be better understood and embraced when seen as part of the intrinsic, creative tension between the particular and the universal. It is a tension inherent in all authentic religious experience. As was argued against the "common essence" approach to religious pluralism, there is no such thing as an essence that can be purely distilled from any one religion or from all of them together. This is because, for the great majority of humankind (Zen Buddhists claim exception), the divine mystery is not experienced directly, without some form of mediation. God is generally encountered through a mediator—a symbol, a sacrament, an incarnation. In other words, human beings need *particular* revealers or saviors.

Furthermore, as was pointed out in the chapter on historical relativism (chap. 2), when such particular experiences of divinity truly occur, they move the individual or community to feel not only that this particular revelation or symbol is "decisive for me"—that is, offering a new mode of acting in the world and therefore requiring a total response—it also includes the conviction that this revelation has something to say to all peoples; it is universally relevant. When truth, especially God's, is encountered, it can never be truth "only for me."¹²

As all this happens, however, as the experience of God through a particular savior or mediator deepens, a tension sets into the psychology of faith. There is a direct proportionality between the appropriation by a community of the power of its *particular* mediator and the confrontation of the community with the *universal* reality or mystery mediated through that savior. The more the community realizes that its savior *really* does make God known, the more it realizes that this God is a mystery ever more than what has been made known—the *Deus semper major*, the God ever beyond. In other words, the more the particular mediator's efficacy is realized, the more its relativity is recognized. Such a tension is creative because it constantly beckons the community to hold to and remain faithful to its mediator, without, however, allowing this mediator to become an idol. More concretely, this means that the community must never slip into the false security of thinking it knows what its mediator has revealed; for Christianity this implies that the task of christology, of interpreting the Christ event, is never finished.

In our present age of religious pluralism, the creative tension between the

particular and the universal also requires that each religious community recognize that there can be, and most likely are, other particular mediators of this divine mystery, a mystery that can be captured, definitively, by no one mediator.

Open-ended Confession

Some practical advice as to how Christians can maintain their commitment and fidelity to Jesus the Christ and at the same time preserve the creative tension between the particular and the universal comes from a suggestion made by H. Richard Niebuhr in 1941. Niebuhr urged that Christians adopt a *confessional* approach to others—that is, that they confess and make known what they have experienced God to have done for them and the world in Jesus, *without* making any claims about Jesus' superiority or normativity over other religious figures.

According to Niebuhr, to take the apologetic tack, to make denigrating comparisons, works incalculable harm not only on other religions but on Christianity itself. He describes what he often finds among his fellow Christians:

We not only desire to live in Christian faith but we endeavor to recommend ourselves by means of it and to justify it as superior to all other faiths. Such defense may be innocuous when it is strictly subordinated to the main task of living towards our ends, but put into the first place it becomes more destructive of religion, Christianity, and the soul than any foe's attack can possibly be.¹³

Instead, Niebuhr proposed that Christians reach out to others "by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."¹⁴ And leave the rest to God!

With such a confessional christology and approach to other faiths, Christians can hold to their personal, total commitment to the universal relevance of Jesus. In fact, it seems that only such a confessional stance will enable them to persuade others that what God has done in Jesus is meaningful for all human beings. We are persuaded by those who speak with deep conviction of what their savior has done for them. We are not persuaded by those who tell us, with deep conviction, that "my savior is bigger than yours."

A confessional approach, then, will be both certain and open-ended. It will enable Christians to take a firm position; but it will also require them to be open to and possibly learn from other positions. It will allow them to affirm the *uniqueness* and the universal significance of what God has done in Jesus; but at the same time it will require them to recognize and be challenged by the *uniqueness* and universal significance of what the divine mystery may have

revealed through others. In boldly proclaiming that God has indeed been defined in Jesus, Christians will also humbly admit that God has not been confined to Jesus.¹¹⁵

How such a confessional approach, which is the practical application of a theocentric, nonnormative christology, can actually be carried out in dialogue with adherents of other faiths will be the concern of the final chapter.

WHAT WILL COME? IS JESUS UNIQUE?

What has been described in this chapter has only begun to be assimilated into the body of Christian consciousness and life: interreligious dialogue in which all partners genuinely share and grow, a model of relational truth and its implications for mission, a global theology. One cannot say where it will all lead. It is too early. The vision and hope of the coming "world church," however, does offer some forecast of what seems to be around the corner for Christianity.

If Christians, trusting God and respecting the faith of others, engage in a new encounter with other traditions, they can expect to witness a growth or evolution such as the church has not experienced since its first centuries. This growth will paradoxically both preserve the identity of Christianity and at the same time transform it. Such paradox is no mystery; we are acquainted with it in our own personal lives as well as in nature:

Growth means continuity and development, but also implies transformation and revolution. Growth does not exclude mutation; on the contrary, there are moments, in the biological realm also, where only a real mutation can account for further life. . . . Growth does not exclude break and internal or external revolution. We know what the growth of an adolescent means only once the evolution is complete.⁶⁶

Christianity, together with the other world religions, is on the edge of such mutation, transformation, even revolution. The changes to come in church practice and doctrine will follow the process of growth that has always characterized Christian life (all religious life) in the world—a process powerfully symbolized in "the paschal mystery" or in the "law of the cross": a process of life coming forth from death, of fuller life from the pain of letting go of the present to trust and move into the mysterious future.

Part of this transformative growth will be, I have suggested, a clarification of the theoretical question that has occupied us throughout this book: the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In chapters 8 and 9, I tried to show that it is not necessary for Christians, in their own faith and in their conversation with other believers, to claim the "finality" or "normativity" of Jesus. But I also added that, though such a claim, at the present stage of interreligious encounter, need not and cannot be made, it may still be true. Perhaps something has happened in the historical event of Jesus Christ that surprisingly surpasses all other events. Perhaps God's historical revelation in Jesus—limited and relative like all history—contains and explains all other relative historical revelations. Perhaps what took place in the history of Jesus goes beyond anything found in the collective unconscious and myths of humankind.

This chapter has urged that to explore this list of possibilities, to try to answer the open question concerning the uniqueness of Jesus, the praxis of

interreligious dialogue is necessary. Yet this is more easily said than done. To use dialogue as a means of trying to grasp the uniqueness of Jesus will involve some form of comparative evaluation. As Troeltsch warned (chap. 2, above), cross-cultural and interreligious judgments are difficult and fraught with possibilities of illusions and ideological impositions. Perhaps it is better not to intend such judgments but simply to let them happen as they will.

In any case, if authentic dialogue takes place between Christians and other believers, if genuine passing over to other religious experiences is carried out, the partners in dialogue can apply the general guidelines or criteria for determining the truth-value of any religion or religious figure. We touched on such criteria in our discussion of Jung in chapter 4.⁶⁷ They might be summarized as follows: 1) *Personally*, does the revelation of the religion or religious figure—the story, the myth, the message—move the human heart? Does it stir one's feelings, the depths of one's unconscious? 2) *Intellectually*, does the revelation also satisfy and expand the mind? Is it intellectually coherent? Does it broaden one's horizons of understanding? 3) *Practically*, does the message promote the psychological health of individuals, their sense of value, purpose, freedom? Especially, does it promote the welfare, the liberation, of all peoples, integrating individual persons and nations into a larger community?

In the actual praxis of dialogue, the application of these guidelines, by which the truth of any myth or religion can be evaluated, will perhaps help Christians, as well as Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, to come to see (and not be forced to see) what Christianity in the past has affirmed and what Christians today may deeply suspect. Perhaps Jesus the Nazarene will stand forth (without being imposed) as the unifying symbol, the universally fulfilling and normative expression, of what God intends for all history.

In carrying on the dialogue among religions, however, Christians must bear in mind that if such a recognition of Jesus does eventually result from the praxis of dialogue, it will be a "side effect" of the dialogue. Whether the question of Jesus' uniqueness is answered, whether Jesus does or does not prove to be final and normative, is not, really, the central issue or the primary purpose of dialogue. The task at hand, demanded of Christianity and all religions by both the religious and the socio-political world in which they live, is that the religions speak and listen to each other, that they grow with and from each other, that they combine efforts for the welfare, the salvation, of all humanity.

If this be done, then the central hopes and goals of all religions will come closer to being realized. Allah will be known and praised; Lord Krishna will act in the world; enlightenment will be furthered and deepened; God's kingdom will be understood and promoted.

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This new interpretation of Jesus' uniqueness seeks to promote the transformation both of other religions *and* of Christianity. Just what this transformation will imply and how much it will affect other faiths and Christianity can be known only through dialogue.

A RELATIONAL UNIQUENESS

Those who relate to Jesus the Christ as truly but not solely unique—truly but not solely God's saving Word and Presence—will find themselves moving toward an image of Jesus' uniqueness quite different from traditional views, an image, I believe, more in harmony with the biblical picture of Jesus. For much of the history of the churches and for many Christians today, to picture Jesus as unique is to see him standing by himself. In the view of Jesus' uniqueness we have been discussing, he has to stand *with others*. We've been talking about a *relational uniqueness*, not a solitary uniqueness that pushes others out of the picture. To affirm Jesus as *truly* God's Word is to award him a distinctiveness that is his alone; to add that he is not *solely* God's Word is also to see that distinctiveness as one that has to be brought into relationship with other possible Words. Jesus is a Word that can be understood only in conversations with other Words.

I think this makes sound theological sense. The Christian trinitarian model of Deity understands God as self-communicating; God's nature requires that God be Word, which means that God speak or become Word. Applied to the finite, historical order, this means that the Divine Word must express itself in words; the Logos, in becoming enfleshed in history, will have to be the *logoi spermatikoi*—the multiple word-seeds cast upon the field of history. As Anthony Kelly puts it, the Christian affirmation of God as Word in history lays the foundations for a "global conversation" (Kelly 1989, 233-34). He expands the poetry of John's Prologue:

Christian faith in the Word made flesh leads us progressively to the realization that the "flesh" is essentially a "conversation." Continuing revelation in history demands its times of listening as well as speaking, in the expanding world of mutual presence. The Word is not incarnate in an imperialistic shout drowning out other voices, but as an ever-original and healing address in the conditions of human speech. If the Word is God, the whole truth has not been heard. It is the whole truth that is the healing truth (ibid., 241).

A relational understanding of Jesus' uniqueness also makes good philosophical sense. As we said earlier, there is no such thing as a bare fact. That means that there is also no such thing as a naked

word. All words, like all facts, come dressed in particular forms and cultures; they have to be *interpreted*. The meaning of a word is not simply a piece of fruit to be picked off the tree; it must, rather, be processed before it can be consumed and appreciated. Thus, as Frans Jozef van Beeck admits, if Christians believe that in God's Word in Jesus "God has definitively welcomed humanity and the world into the divine life," they must also remember that "the fulfillment of this divine commitment remains a matter of hope, that is, of a *profession of faith that remains true only to the extent that it is interpreted perspectively.*" Such a claim for a definitive revelation "rests entirely on discernment, that is, it operates on *interpretation*" (van Beeck 1991, 559).

God's "definitive" Word in Jesus must be interpreted—and interpreted *perspectively*. That means: amid the multiple and changing perspectives of history; and that means: in conversation with many other Words within history. Without a conversation with other Words, Christians can't really understand what the "definitive" Word in Jesus means! That certainly makes "definitive" claims much less imperialistic and much more relational.²²

What I am calling "relational uniqueness" has also been termed "complementary uniqueness" or "inclusive uniqueness" (Thompson 1985, 388-93; Moran 1992). For William Thompson, if we believe in a kenotic or self-emptying God, that is, that "the Divine has kenotically self-limited itself and disclosed itself within the necessarily limited, cultural forms of the varied religions and their founders," then we also have to recognize not only the uniqueness and "the possible decisiveness" of many religions but also their need to complement each other (Thompson 1987, 22-24). John Cobb points to the same complementary understanding of uniqueness when he answers his own question: "So am I affirming Christian uniqueness? Certainly and emphatically so! But I am affirming the uniqueness also of Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism" (Cobb 1990, 91-92). Each unique religion, however, cannot stand alone:

My exclusive [read: unique] claims for Christ need not conflict with the exclusive Buddhist claims for the realization of Buddhahood of which Gautama is the paradigm instance . . . We [Christians] should strive to share what has been exclusive to Christianity as we appropriate what has been exclusive to other traditions. This is what a Christianized Buddhism and a Buddhized Christianity are all about (Cobb 1984, 177).

Cobb states that Christ "need not conflict" with other unique claims. But Christ *can* conflict, and sometimes *must*. This is why I prefer the

term "relational" rather than "complementary" or "inclusive" uniqueness. "Complementary" or "inclusive" suggests peaches and cream; "relational" allows for thorns and thickets. Insofar as Christians proclaim the "pure, unbounded love of God" at work in the world and therefore do not insist that Jesus is God's full, final, or unsurpassable Word, they expect that for the most part their relationships with sincere believers of other paths will indeed be complementary. But insofar as Christians also experience God's presence in Jesus to include universal, decisive, and indispensable claims, they will also be ready to take strong stands, sometimes in opposition, to the claims of others. If we always grow through relationships, the growth can often be painful.

So, with John Cobb, we can describe Christian faith and discipleship succinctly and challengingly: Jesus is the way that is open to other ways (Cobb 1990, 91). The kind of truth that Jesus enables us to affirm and feel is a truth that tells us that there is, happily and excitingly, more truth to come. To say yes to the God made known in Jesus is to say yes to what that God has still to make known to us. The truth that we know provides us with a confidence, even an eagerness, to face whatever truth may still come, as surprising and disturbing as it may be. So in a paradoxical sense, to experience that Jesus makes known the "fullness" of truth is to be aware, at the same time, that we don't know what that fullness contains. But we now have a place, a confidence, to find out; here we stand, and that "standing" is a stepping stone from which we can move and stand somewhere else. The "fullness" of God in Jesus, in other words, is one which opens us to the "fullness" of God in others. Therefore, the text from Colossians, "in him dwells the fullness of Divinity" (Col 2:9) "is not speaking of a fullness of Christ the individual, but of a fullness that includes others" (Sobrino 1988, 42).

To express this paradox differently, to be christocentric—centered on Christ—requires one to be centered on others, to be open to and in relation with others. If one is not looking out toward and in conversation with others, then one is not centered on Christ. "What you do to the least of your brothers and sisters, you do to me" (Mt 25:40). Such openness to others, such ability to dialogue, is an essential part of what "being faithful" to Christ means. This requires having to balance the oft-heard admonition that following Jesus means turning one's back on others; at the same time, one has to remember that to follow Christ, one also has to follow—that is, be open to, in dialogue with—others. Christ equips his followers with the firmness to resist, but also with the humility to learn.

and breaking our tendency to think that our own opinions are final and adequate. It is easy to think of that work as calling us to listen to the truth and wisdom of others . . . To learn from others whatever truth they have to offer and to integrate that with the insights and wisdom we have learned from our Christian heritage appears to be faithful to Christ (Cobb 1990, 91).²³

The question is then what Christ is doing in the world today. It is not hard to think of that work as reminding us of our finitude