

Christ in a Universe of Faith

by

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Theologians have usually been very good at taking account of all sorts of abstruse or obscure data, but sometimes failed to notice quite obvious facts which are obvious to ordinary people. And one of the things which are obvious to ordinary people, and yet sometimes not noticed by the theologians, is this: that in the majority of cases – say, 98 or 99 percent of cases – the religion in which a person believes and to which he adheres depends upon where he was born. That is to say, if someone is born to Muslim parents in Egypt or Pakistan, he is very likely to be a Muslim: if to Buddhist parents in Sri Lanka or Burma, he is very likely to be a Buddhist: if to Hindu parents in India, he is likely to be a Hindu: if to Christian parents in Europe, North America or Australasia, he is very likely to be a Christian. Of course, in each case he may be wither an authentic or merely nominal adherent of his religion. But if one is born in this country, for example, the religion which one either accepts or rejects will normally be Christianity. If you undergo a religious conversion at the age of 17 or 18, it will in this country normally be a conversion to the Christian faith. And even if you are a humanist or an atheist, you will be a recognisably Christian one – quite different from, say a Chinese or an Indian humanist. In short, whether you are a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, or Sikh, a Hindu, a Buddhist – or for that matter a Marxist or Maoist – depends nearly always on the part of the world in which you happen to be born.

Now this is something which is evident, and undeniable once you notice it. And any credible religious faith must be able to make some sense of this obvious fact. A credible Christian faith must make sense of it by relating it to the faith in the universal sovereignty and fatherhood of God. We believe that God is the creator of all mankind, that he has limitless love towards all men and women, and that he is seeking to save all men and women, and not only Christians and their Old Testament spiritual ancestors.

I have introduced the idea of salvation already because I take it that this, whatever it is, is the central business of religion. Salvation surely is what religion is all about. What, then, do we mean by salvation? It used to be thought of in Christian theology as a juridical and metaphysical idea: Christ had died for us on the cross, and so now God could justly forgive and accept us. But it is very hard today to make sense of such a morally alien idea. Surely salvation must be thought of more concretely, in terms of the actual quality of human existence. Let us say that God's saving activity is his gradual creating of *children of God* out of human animals. Salvation consists in human beings becoming fully human, by fulfilling the God-given potentialities of their nature. And this is not an all-or-nothing affair but a long and gradual change which indeed takes much longer than the span of our life on this earth. Salvation, then, is a slow and many-sided process. Instead of asking someone, *Is he saved?* It would be more appropriate to ask, *Is he on the way of salvation?* Is he becoming more authentically human?

Let us now connect this understanding of salvation with the problem of other religions. Giving a faith in the universal saving activity of God, it is impossible to hold that salvation is only for those living within one particular strand of human history, namely the Judaic-Christian strand. It is impossible to hold that only those born only in certain periods of history have open to them the possibility of salvation. Such an idea would be neither religiously nor morally acceptable and since Vatican II, it has only been taught by extreme Protestant fundamentalists. For it is now widely acknowledged within the churches that the other world religions also nourish spiritual life, and also produce saints and prophets, and that within the religious life of those faiths men and women are both growing and failing to grow towards their full humanity just as within the borders of our own Christian faith. Nor is it possible to claim on any responsible basis that Christianity has produced more saints (in relation presumably to the size of the populations concerned), or better saints, than this or that other great world religion. We have to recognise that, so far as we can tell, the long, slow business of fashioning human animals into children of God is going on, and has long been going on, not only within Christianity but also outside Christianity and within the wide religious life of mankind.

Now theologians have been hard at work, particularly during the last decade or two, trying to square this new awareness of God's activity throughout the world and throughout history with traditional Christian beliefs. And at the point they have mostly reached – insofar as there can be said to be any kind of consensus at all – it is a set of variations on the theme that while there is salvation within other religions, it is all to be seen as the work of Christ. The official Roman Catholic way of putting it is in terms of implicit faith: it is not the fault of the deeply religious Muslim, for example, that he has never properly encountered the gospel – but his spiritual state may be even such that he would respond to it if he encountered it – and in this case he has an implicit Christian faith. Karl Rahner has introduced the notion of the *anonymous Christian*. Devout men and women of other religions are to be regarded as anonymous Christians, and are to be acceptable to God and in the way of salvation. And there are other variations on this same basic theme. What they all amount to, in one form or another, is this – that God is saving men and women within other religions as well as within Christianity, and this possible because there are men and women within those other religions who are Christians at heart, even if they have never heard the name of Christ. They are anonymous Christians, saved by implicit faith.

Theories of this kind are attempts to combine two insights which however do not in the end sit comfortably together. Our aim is to retain at the theological level the traditional Christian exclusiveness, the conviction that there is salvation only in Christ, and that *there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved*. And the other aim is to acknowledge, at the historic and practical level, that salvation is in fact taking place outside of Christianity, and even among people who know little or nothing of Jesus Christ. It is natural and indeed inevitable, that this first phase of the Christian attempt to come to terms with the wider religious life of mankind should be an attempt to say both that there is salvation only in discipleship to Christ and also that there is salvation outside that discipleship; and the notion of the anonymous Christian tries to do just this. And such attempts represent a big step forward from the older assumption that those who are born and die outside

Christendom are doomed to forfeit salvation. But nevertheless I do not think that these well-intentioned theories can stand as more than interim measures.

One awkward thing to notice about these ways of granting a secondary kind of validity to the religious life of the non-Christian is that the same move can be made by others as well as by ourselves. And there are in fact Hindu philosophers who say that devout Christians are Advaita Vedantists at heart, because they have a real desire for the truth although they do not yet know what the truth is. They are *anonymous* Hindus. And likewise there are Muslim theologians who say that the devout Christian has Islam in his heart and is an *anonymous* Muslim. But I would suggest that these devices – whether used by Christian, Hindu or Muslim – serve the same function as the epicycles with which the old Ptolemaic astronomy was maintained in existence for a little longer before it finally collapsed. The old astronomy, as you know, was based on the dogma that our earth is the centre of the solar system and that the sun and all our planets revolve around it. This dogma became more and more at variance with new observations of the paths of the planets. It was only saved by postulating epicycles – imaginary circles centring on the circumference of other circles – so forming new and more complex paths which were closer to the actually observed orbits of the planets. In theory, but postulating ever more complicated systems of epicycles, it might have been possible to maintain the Ptolemaic dogma indefinitely. But sooner or later the human mind calls a halt to such a method and prefers realism to *a priori* dogma. And so eventually the astronomers were ready for the Copernican revolution from an earth-centred to a sun-centred model of the universe [should “universe” be “solar system”? – Ed.], seeing all planets, including our own earth, as moving around the sun. This was a breakthrough to a greater realism, in which the increasingly artificial epicycles were no longer required.

But it seems to many of us today that we need a Copernican revolution in our understanding of the religions. The traditional dogma has been that Christianity is the centre of the universe of faiths, with all the other religions seen as revolving at various removes around the revelation in Christ and being graded according to their nearness or distance from it. But during the last hundred years or so we have been making new observations and have realised that there is deep devotion to God, true sainthood, and deep spiritual life within these other religions. So we have created our epicycles of theories such as the notions of Anonymous Christianity and of implicit faith. But would it not be more realistic now to make the shift from Christianity at the centre to God at the centre and to see both our own and the other great world religions as revolving around the same divine reality?

What would this mean? It would mean that that which we call God has always been present, the divine Spirit ever pressing in upon the human spirit. During what Jaspers has called the axial period, beginning around 800 B.C., great revolutionary experiences occurring in different parts of the world gave rise to different streams of spiritual life which have congealed into what we now call the great world religions. And within all of these, men and women are on the way of salvation by responding to a Transcendent Being. But each religion, as an historical entity, is a mixture of the influence of the divine Spirit and of culture – specific human traditions. Within this human element there has, alas, been much evil in the forms of violence and hatred, privilege and oppression and the authoritarian cramping of the human spirit. So

religions, as historical phenomena, are by no means unambiguously good: each is its own unique mixture of good and evil. Yet each also provides a home for the human spirit, within which it can grow in grace.

But now let me turn to what for most of us must be the crunch issue in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions, namely, the place of Jesus Christ in all of this. For the traditional view of Jesus is of course that he was God Incarnate – or more precisely that he was God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, living a human life. And if he was in this sense God Incarnate, and if this is the only point within human history at which God has ever come to earth and revealed himself directly to mankind, then clearly Christianity is unique and cannot be categorized as one among the world religions. If as Jesus says in the Fourth Gospel, “No Man cometh to the Father but by me”, or if as St. Paul says, “There is no other name given under heaven whereby men must be saved,” then it seems clear that all men and women, or all nations and cultures, must sooner or later become disciples of Christ in order to come to God.

Again if, as the Church has traditionally taught, it is by Jesus’ death, and by this alone, that there is salvation, that by a conscious commitment to Jesus as Saviour, and by this alone, man may appropriate that salvation, it follows that all men must be converted to Christian discipleship as the only way to God. If God has come to meet man in Christ, and nowhere else, then men must come to Christ, and nowhere else, to meet God. This is the unavoidable logic of the traditional view of Christ as uniquely God the Son Incarnate. And this takes us straight back to the older view of the other world religions as streams of alienated life from which men must be rescued by transference into the Body of Christ, within which alone they are fully acceptable to God.

But we have already seen how impossible that older view is. You cannot simply affirm the logical conclusion of the full traditional view of Christ, namely, that there is salvation only for those who believe in him. And so it is not surprising that the gradual abandonment of this latter view has been accompanied by the development of serious strains and stresses in the traditional understanding of Christ. It used to be assumed – and of course in some Christian circles it still is assumed – that Jesus himself, the man who actually lived in Palestine in the first third of the first century A.D., was conscious of being God incarnate. The assumption was also that he was God incarnate, so that you have to either believe him or reject him as a deceiver or a megalomaniac. *Bad, mad or God* goes the argument. And of course if Jesus did indeed claim to be God incarnate, then this dilemma, or trilemma, does arise. But did he claim this? The assumption that he did is largely based on the Fourth Gospel, for it is here that Jesus does make precisely such claims. He says, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” and “I and my Father are one” and “No man cometh to the Father but by me.” But I presume that it is no secret to you in this year of grace 1977, after more than a hundred years of the scholarly study of the Scriptures, that few if any New Testament scholars today that the Jesus who actually lived ever spoke those words or their Aramaic equivalents. They are much more probably words put into his mouth by a Christian writer who is expressing the view of Christ which had been arrived at in his part of the Church, probably about two generations after Jesus’ death. The broad consensus of most New Testament scholars today is that the historical

Jesus did not in fact claim to be in any sense God incarnate. This precritical assumption that Jesus walked the earth as a consciously divine being, teaching the view of himself as attributed to him in the fourth Gospel, has been abandoned. Those – and they are still the majority – who hold to the traditional interpretation of Jesus may say instead that the claims that were later made about him were implicit, rather than explicit, in his earthly words and deeds. Others may say – and this is the most recent epicycle of theory – that Jesus' divine Sonship was enacted and revealed, not in his earthly life, but in his resurrection, so that it is the raised and glorified Christ who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

But the implications of these new epicycles of doctrine are very damaging to the traditional position. The idea of incarnation, becoming flesh, must refer to the earthly Jesus, the Jesus of flesh and blood who walked the hills and villages of Galilee, for otherwise we are no longer talking about incarnation at all. If this earthly Jesus, who is part of our human history, did not think of himself as God incarnate, then what a strange doctrine we now have – a Jesus who was called God but who did not know that he was God! Far greater than the traditional paradox of God incarnate is the new paradox of God incarnate who does not know that he is God Incarnate! So the situation has become this: although Jesus did not think of himself as God, the Church nevertheless knows that he was God. This development must surely have reached the end of the road in the implied claim that the Church knows who Jesus was better than he knew himself. Yet that this same Jesus, who did not know what the Church knows about him, was none other than God incarnate!

No wonder many of us are finding it necessary to look back through this accumulation of human paradoxes to Jesus himself. What sort of man do we then see? Here it must be admitted that what we see, across the span of so many centuries, depends partly upon ourselves. The New Testament evidences are complex, fragmentary, and ambiguous. Those of us who are Christians are Christians because of the powerful and indeed converting impact upon us of some aspects of Jesus' personality and teaching. But it may be a partly different aspect for different people. For the Jesus whom we call Lord is the Jesus who meets our spiritual needs. He is thus many things to many people, and indeed precisely this is the secret of his continuing appeal to miscellaneous millions of people of different temperaments, classes and cultures nineteen centuries later.

I see Jesus, then as a young man who, when he appeared on the stage of history, was living in a full of consciousness of God and a complete self-giving to God's purposes. In this consciousness of existing in God's presence and within the sphere of God's ongoing creative purpose, he was able to make God real to others, to challenge them with God's claim upon their own lives, to declare to them God's forgiveness and his offer of a new and better life., and to bring bodily and spiritual healing to them by the divine power of life flowing through his hands. His awareness of God was so powerful that in his presence people became conscious of being in God's presence – not in the sense that the man Jesus literally was God, but in the sense that God was so real to Jesus that he became real to others through Jesus and their lives were changed as they responded to the divine presence.

Your life and mine can also be changed and can go on being changed as we respond to God's healing and challenging presence made real to us through the Jesus reflected in the Gospel records. But – and here I return to our theme of Christ and the world religions – we can rejoice in God's revelation to us through Jesus, without having to assert that God has not revealed himself and drawn people into a new and better life anywhere else than in Jesus. We can affirm what we know and have experienced without having to deny what other people know and have experienced. For perhaps God – the infinite divine reality – is larger even than our Christian understanding of him.

Finally, let us be conscious of the new situation in which we are today. In the past the world religions grew up in isolation from one another, but we are now in the *one world* of instantaneous global communication. And in this global village the religions are in active interaction with one another and all are in varying degrees influencing each other's development. For remember that a religious tradition is not a static entity but a living and growing organism, a history of change, sometimes moving very slowly and sometimes very rapidly. Today the various world religions have either moved or are moving out of their periods of medieval stability into a period of rapid change under the impact of modern science and technology and the resulting secularization of society. And in this turmoil of change each religion is increasingly, through interfaith dialogue and in other less formal ways, contributing its experience, its insights, its ideas, its criticisms, to the development of the others. That is why this is the most exciting period of the interaction of religions, whose outcome no one can at present foresee.