

World Religions and Christian Theology¹

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It seems to me only fair to begin this paper by inquiring whether the topic indicated by the title actually exists in any serious sense, or whether it has simply been conjured up by a trick of language within the general and familiar process of academic over-production and waste-making. The fact that a considerable literature more or less concerned with the topic does undoubtedly exist provides no guarantee of the existence of a genuine problem; for some at least of this literature tends to heighten one's suspicions rather than to assuage them.

The title is, at any rate, 'World Religions and Christian Theology', not 'World Religions and Christianity'. By 'world religions' I understand those religions which have not been confined to a particular ethnic or political unit but are found in more or less diversified forms remote from their place of origin. It is clear enough that Christianity is one of these world religions, in so far as we allow ourselves to use the word 'religion' with an appropriate looseness; we need do no more than declare 'religion' a family-word, where the different items all to be called *religions* need not share a single definition but form an irregular network. Now this paper does not attempt to consider the place of Christianity among world religions. This is not only because my own equipment for such a task would be wholly inadequate, but also because I suspect that no one's equipment would be.

For consider what this task would involve, if it could be envisaged at all. It would mean analysing the whole irregular network of religions in terms of features shared by only some of them and accounting for the lack of shared features when they are not present. Christianity and religion A might have feature α in common, Christianity and religion B have feature β in common, religions A and B have feature γ in common. The hermeneutic standpoint of an investigator who terminated his analysis at this point, after merely establishing these common features, would be a queer one. For he would need to have been guided in his analysis by some indistinct sense of comparable features, at the very least by some hypothesis of structural frames or of human possibilities; and whatever his analysis has established will have to be expressed as a confirmation or a qualification of his hypothesis, and this again in some

¹The text of a Spalding lecture given at the University of Sussex in February 1969.

language of ordinary human concern. I do not see how ordinary human concern could come to an end with the establishment of the features constituting an irregular network, though I admit that there is a strong trend in current studies of all kinds to claim that this sort of investigation is desirable and therefore possible.

The claim seems even less plausible when we cease to consider the formal model and turn to the actual business of investigation. What in our case of Christianity among world religions would actually constitute shared or comparable features is a good deal more complex than the model would suggest. There would always be the possibility that such a shared feature, once extracted from the two ways of life thought of as having the feature in common, would become a feature merely in a third context which was a way of life for no one. At best this third context might serve as a dialectical stage in a progressive attempt to achieve a unified and differentiated consciousness of two ways of life. Certainly it is difficult to see how a really serious attempt to achieve such a consciousness could hope in any significant way to embrace the whole field of world religions. For the sake of example, I need merely mention that 'feature' in Christianity which is ordinarily called GOD. A serious attempt to achieve a communicating consciousness of GOD in Christianity and some feature in another religion thought to be comparable would seem to be a lifelong task, not easily combined with an attempt to achieve this communicating consciousness of GOD in respect of a third religion or of, say, SALVATION in respect of this third religion. It would have to be an attempt which did not confine itself to a comparison of Scriptures or of written traditions but included an effort to enter into a lived tradition. It would have to recognize that such an effort to share the lived tradition must have as its consequence a shift of consciousness in which the Christian God-feature itself underwent modification.

This last point seems to me of special importance; at any rate it suggests interesting ambiguities. I wonder if it would be unfair to describe a good deal of the literature of comparative religion, whether from Christian or non-Christian practitioners, as a sort of genteel theosophy. What such a description implies positively is that the comparative study of religions can be serious enough to go beyond the systematic analysis of a referential network but in such a way that, negatively, it proposes in the disguise of an academic exercise some enlargement and stimulus of religious experience. There is a tendency for the study of religions itself to become an independent religious mode, not simply a religion, because this study rarely allows itself to accept that wider discipline which would regulate a whole way of life; perhaps it could be called 'religion in the head', the study of religions as a surrogate for religion.

The boundary between this sort of vicarious religiosity and the sort of evolving communion in religious life envisaged earlier is not

easy to draw, partly because it is a shifting one; after all, theosophy can be a serious affair, and theology can be intellectually and humanly trivial. But the possibility of a distinction, if it is admitted, allows me to indicate what I take this paper to be about, namely, world religions and Christian *theology*. By 'theology', in this context, at any rate, I mean the activity of *self-understanding*, *Selbstverständnis*, the exploratory, continually renewed effort within the Christian tradition to examine the implications of that tradition where it is continually being interrogated by the conjunctures of historical change, the diversification of human experience by factors which are not themselves at the very least explicitly given in that tradition. The entrance of world religions into the course of European history forms one series of such factors of diversification. The thesis proposed in this paper is simply that the genesis of Christianity itself out of its contemporary Jewish-Hellenistic environment is the paradigm case for the self-understanding of Christian theology as the response of Christianity to its interrogation by world religions.

But before going on to argue this thesis it would be as well to say a little more about the notion of theology just indicated. Firstly and more generally, by self-understanding, *Selbstverständnis*, is understood that process by which from some preliminary, more or less implicit, understanding, *Vorverständnis*, some creative and constructive advance is made, in the course of which the one who understands is himself reconstituted as an identity, if only provisionally. The process, that is, is intrinsically open to further development, not only in the sense of being open to an unforeseeable future but also in the sense of actually reinterpreting the whole sense of past, present and future; on this view time is not merely endured but also constituted as history. Christian theology as self-understanding in this sense involves the acceptance of responsibility for a particular sequence of constructive historical moments, identified by a series of monuments of self-understanding. It involves then the acceptance by the individual theologian of membership of an identifiable society considered not only synchronically but also diachronically. If any thinker must at least indistinctly accept responsibility for the whole of humanity, in its prior history as well as its unforeseeable future, the theologian must accept as a defining condition of that responsibility the interpretative value of an identifiable sequence of human history, the figure in the carpet.

Secondly and more particularly, any self-understanding of Christian theology in response to the interrogation of Christianity by world religions would tend to be trivial if it were not also responding at the same time to the interrogation of Christianity by other movements of ideas and sentiments which come to light historically. It cannot for instance be irrelevant to the Christian theologian that an important stage in the interrogation of Christianity by world religions began at the end of the eighteenth century.

Henceforth the Romantic relativization of eighteenth-century rationalism and *Aufklärung* would provide the medium through which Oriental religions would be presented to the European reader. The recognition that a peculiarly narrow view of the human mind as rational or empiricist has become a recurrent stance of European consciousness since the eighteenth century has generated a complementary receptiveness to other styles of consciousness which in certain modes offer themselves as a saving gnosis. It is not an accident that Robert Graves should write a preface to Mr Idriess Shah's book on *The Sufis*, that Professor Zaehner should associate Proust, Rimbaud and Richard Jeffries with the Upanishads, and that the Oxford University Press should be reprinting Evans-Wentz's Tibetan translations in paperback for the readers of R. D. Laing and the *International Times*. The theological response to world religions must take into account the historical forms through which they have been mediated, and this requires some sense of the other historical factors which have helped to shape the mediating forms. Certainly in our own time political disillusionment, the discrediting of established Christianity (as sentiment and idea as well as institution), in England the obscurantist professionalism of philosophy, the recurrence of mechanistic accounts of man in sophisticated cybernetic versions, all these have helped to create a mode in which world religions other than Christianity find among some a ready acceptance. A Christian theology which responded to world religions without remaining critically alert to other calls upon its self-understanding would (and in fact sometimes does) float in a faint haze of absorbed self-intoxication.

If I formulate the requirements for a theological response to world religions in such demanding terms, it must be obvious that I see myself falling short of them too, and of others which I have not formulated or have failed to see the necessity for formulating. On the other hand, my own inability to fulfil the requirements will have to serve as an excuse for restricting this paper to a fairly narrowly-conceived exercise in Christian self-understanding. For I shall not attempt what is quite beyond my powers, the Christian interpretation of world-religions (supposing that this were possible at all and were not an impertinence). All I shall propose is a version of Christian self-understanding which seems to me to respond to some part of the interrogation of Christianity by world religions and to be in that sense open to them, leaving it to those who have a deeper insight into one or other of those religions to take up the offered dialogue by evaluating what is offered.

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In a recent book on *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, Vernon H. Neufeld proposes, more or less as a matter of course, that the two most 'primitive' forms of Christian confession were *Iêsous Christos*, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and *Kurios Iêsous*, Jesus is Lord. We

shall return to this notion of a 'primitive' confession in a moment. First we may note that these two formulae do in fact embody the central tension in any Christian theology: the identification of a particular historical individual, Jesus, as someone who transcends the historical process. Or to put it differently, the two questions relevant to establishing identity, 'Who is he?' and 'What is he?', receive answers the compatibility of which it is the permanent business of Christian theology to vindicate.

The term *Christos*, Messiah, clearly makes sense only within the special history of Israel; the term *Kurios*, Lord, whatever the precise scholarly standpoint adopted in its controversial interpretation, would at least have made sense in a Hellenistic context. If some fairly recent discussion among Christian theologians, under the rubric of 'the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith', has served any positive purpose at all, it has been to show that the identification of Jesus as Christ and Lord is the central affirmation of Christian faith; and we may also see that this identification implies an interpretation of the historical traditions which supplied the terminology in which such an affirmation could be made. For it is clear on the one hand that the affirmation would have been meaningless unless the terminology already had a life of its own in some tradition of language, and on the other that the use of this terminology in identifying Jesus involves that kind of amplification of linguistic use which shifts the whole range of use of the terms decisively. If Jesus is *Christos*, is *Kurios*, then Judaism is wound up and Hellenism surpassed and judged, the central reference of the terms is decisively located.

It is clear that the affirmation that Jesus is Christ, is Lord, could only in a special sense be described as 'primitive'. Although Neufeld refers to Kelly's *Early Christian Creeds*, he does not seem to have noticed Kelly's brilliant dismissal of the whole quest for a 'primitive Christian creed' as based on a misunderstanding. The variety of terms used to refer to the Christian 'teaching' or 'gospel'—*didaskalia* or *euaggelion* themselves, as well as *kérugma*, *pistis*, *paradosis*, *logos*, *parathêkê*, *didachê*, *martyrion*—indicate a variety of settings in the life of the early Christian communities in which diverse formulae of a credal sort would have been appropriate. There could have been no single 'primitive Christian creed'. To say, as I have just done myself, that the affirmation of Jesus as Christ and Lord is 'central' is not to suggest that it is historically primitive, but rather that it serves to re-focus two entire historical perspectives upon the historical individual whose personal name was 'Jesus'.

This re-focussing of perspectives was not of course confined to the shift in meaning of *Christos* and *Kurios*. I should wish to argue, in accordance with the views of Fuchs and Ebeling, that New Testament Christianity is profitably investigated as a 'language-event', *Sprachereignis*. What then emerges is that (as might have been

expected) the historical event of the genesis of Christianity involves not, in general, a new language in the sense of a new vocabulary, but the transformation and recreation of languages already in valid use. With very few exceptions (*agapé* and *Petros* are two oddly associated examples of these), New Testament vocabulary does not enlarge in any significant way the vocabulary of extra-biblical Greek. What of course does happen is that this vocabulary is used in new combinations and new applications, involving that kind of amplification of meaning detectably at work in a poem or any other creative use of language. We might take as example the Pauline use of the Hellenistic *sôma* to speak of the eucharistic body and the body of the Church in association with the body of the risen Christ.

For the purposes of the present paper, it is of special interest to observe the transformation in the New Testament of terms of general 'religious' application, such as 'sacrifice', 'priest' and 'cult'. In the history of exegesis this transformation has been called a 'spiritualization', in a sense nearly equivalent to 'moralization', and more recently a 'secularization' or 'de-sacralization'. The New Testament clearly prolongs a prophetic interpretation of Old Testament cult, but it is now fairly widely recognized that this prophetic reinterpretation was not simply a rejection of the cult. What is central to the New Testament reinterpretation of cultic terminology is the identification of an exemplar or paradigm case of worship of God the Father: this is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the worship of whose personal sacrifice Christians share by participation in his Spirit, *pneuma*, in such a way that the whole movement of their personal lives is itself a worship. This is a 'spiritualization' of cult primarily in the sense of an animation by the Holy Spirit, the *pneuma* of Christ; it is a 'secularization' or 'de-sacralization' in the sense that the whole range of personal life is capable of being assumed into the new dimension of pneumatic life communicated through baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

There can be no question of attempting here a more detailed examination of this transformation; it is sufficient for our present purposes to draw attention to the way in which a whole cultic language is given new life by being deployed with reference to a prime or paradigm case, the event of Jesus Christ, an event, it is discovered by Christians, which can be appropriated and renewed in personal and communal experience. It is just this discovery, what has been called a *Neuheitserlebnis*, an experience of radical novelty, to which I wish to draw attention in reviewing the linguistic transformation of Jewish and Hellenistic traditions of language in the New Testament. Not that the *Neuheitserlebnis* can be divorced from the recorded linguistic shift, any more than the experience become articulate in a poem can be dissociated from the words on the page. But the words on the page are dead if they are not allowed to recreate in one's own linguistic experience the genetic moment of

articulate enlargement of insight and experience which they offer and invite. It is to the genetic moment in the *Neuheitserlebnis* of New Testament Christianity that I invite your attention: the spring of water welling up in the community of Christian believers unto eternal life (cf. John 4, 14). That is to say, according to the New Testament testimony itself, the genetic moment in Christian experience is capable of indefinitely extended renewal in space and time in virtue of communication in the Spirit of the risen Christ.

Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living centre from which it reviews and renews the indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things: 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev. 21, 5).

But, it will be said, even supposing your interpretation of Christianity is just, that at its centre is the genetic moment, the holiness of the new, could not the same claim be made for other traditions, for which, say, the experience of enlightenment is the heart? Either Christianity is merely an instance of a universal type of the humane, whether communicated by religious tradition or not, or your version of Christianity is merely parasitic on some generally available truth about human experience, which historical Christianity as a matter of fact has successfully smothered for centuries of institutionalized timidity, boredom and repression.

I want of course to argue that the Christian experience of the genetic moment is the critical instance, the touchstone of the new. But this is not to say that Christian self-understanding in theology does not allow of exploration of its crucial sense of the genetic moment in terms of other insights into genesis, birth from above and anew. There is at least one aspect of the genetic moment which I should like to explore, within the general interpretative categories of Christian originality and preordained multiple echo.

(To be concluded)