The Colossian Vision in Theology and Philosophy

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A. Theology

The doctrine of the 'cosmic Christ' has not yet had much effect on common Christian theology and on Christian philosophy. The aim of this paper is to consider what are some of the implications of this doctrine for theology and Christian philosophy.

Instead of analysing the constituent terms of the expression, 'the cosmic Christ', it will be better to take as guide the Colossian passage which is the principal foundation of the doctrine; one may draw from Colossians 1:15–20 certain key assertions which comprise the doctrine of the 'cosmic Christ'. There is first (and this has some relevance to the discussion) a declaration of the supra-cosmic nature of Christ (vv. 15*a* and 19). There follows the great claim that the cosmos is related to him as origin (v. 16), integrating factor (v. 17) and, in some sense, the goal (v. 16, 'for him'). There is finally—along with the assumption that the cosmos is somehow fallen and in need of 'reconciliation'—the assurance that God's universal work of reconciliation goes forward through him, and especially through the concrete event of his death on the cross. These key assertions may be considered separately at greater length, and in relation to the situation and the tasks of modern theology.

(i) *Christ is Supra-cosmic*

Christ bears the unique character of the Father; this is the claim of Colossians 1:15, the marvel palely reflected in the *homoousios* of Nicea and the words of the definition of Chalcedon 'of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead'. This does not mean that the divine 'substance' is available to our gaze; it remains 'supra-cosmic' or a-cosmic. Christ's supra-cosmic nature may be indicated, using a New Testament term, by speaking of him as 'Spirit', having the character of that which penetrates and renews our being but remains transcendent to it. The doctrine of the cosmic Christ must always be presented together with that of the supra-cosmic or a-cosmic

Christ, linked in ineffable union with the incomprehensible Father. Otherwise the doctrine of the cosmic Christ has no meaning, for he becomes merely an event, a very small event, within the cosmos.

The positive effect of this doctrine is a teaching of radical grace (such as is found in the theology of Karl Barth): the cosmos, coming to be in him, is surrounded and enfolded by grace beyond any possibility of its own reckoning, and in spite of the real sin, disorder and opposition within the cosmos. This grace speaks to the familiar known grace of human life (and so Barth speaks of the 'humanity' of God), and yet it cannot be confined to this level, the level of human and cosmic being, nor fully defined from this level either.

A more negative consequence of this doctrine, therefore, is that the Christian shares with the secularist and the Buddhist acute uneasiness over the kind of religious language that speaks of God as a cosmic sub-stratum or (worse) 'another world' allegedly open to our gaze. The doctrine of the supra-cosmic Christ forbids this. He is God's Word 'proceeding from silence'.[1] It follows that to speak of God as 'being-itself' is questionable, since this (more than personal terms like 'Father') renders the supreme A-cosmic in the categories of created being. To speak of Christ as 'the New Being' is possible at the point of the incarnation, and wherever there is an 'extension of the incarnation', but it is questionable also how far this term is adequate to describe the one who not merely 're-structures' the sinner but saves through destruction. This is not to deny that the psychological analyses in the second volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology* are helpful—as far as they go.

(ii) *Christ is Cosmic Origin and Integrating Factor*

Nevertheless the cosmos, in all its constituent parts and in its structure, is rooted in him. It may be that St. Paul, in speaking in this connection of the 'powers', is making use of the languages of the Colossian heresy and employing a 'myth'. But if he does it is none the less true that he uses the language to designate, as far as possible, *something*, the cosmos; in context it is obvious that he is attempting to speak of the actual powers that structure man's life, powers at once 'earthly' and 'spiritual'. These powers come to be in Christ, they cohere in him, and are finally 'for' him.

Grace abolishes any final dualism between nature and grace. Therefore Christian theology should be characterized by a wholeness of outlook in which all things and all powers (though not themselves Christ) are seen in relation to Christ. Sittler's well-known paper at the New Delhi meeting of the World Council of Churches pointed out how this wholeness of outlook could be

[1] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians*, VIII, 2.

found in some early theologians—Irenaeus for one—but was increasingly lost in the medieval Church in the West, and even more in European Protestantism after the Reformation:

> Rationalism . . . restricted redemption by grace to the moral soul, and pietism . . . turned down the blaze of the Colossian vision so radically that its *ta panta* was effective only as a moral and mystical incandescence. Enlightenment man could move in on the realm of nature and virtually take it over because grace had either ignored or repudiated it. A bit of God died with each new natural conquest; the realm of grace retreated as more of the structure and process of nature was claimed by now autonomous man.[2]

Some modern theological radicalism expresses the continuation of this development to its bitter end. Van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*[3] has no room for grace as communion except between man and man. 'Grace' has in fact died away completely, in his view, and 'nature' is man's bare home where he may cultivate love and freedom within an agreed (Biblical) historical perspective. Harvey Cox[4] is closer to the 'Colossian vision': writing from within the same outlook and *milieu* (the 'secular vision') he attempts to see the development of a secular society in relation to the operation of God's grace in the *saeculum*. Only he insists that language about grace must henceforth be *action* in the secular city which God makes his own in creation and redemption.

The implication of the doctrine of the cosmic Christ, then, is that theology must strive for a total vision of the cosmos, the world and the universe, in its relation to Christ. This means that many finally misleading distinctions must go—not only the distinction between 'nature' and 'grace', but also between 'material' and 'spiritual' and 'personal' and 'social'. Theology must aspire to the frank gaze of the prophet, holding all these together in relation to God's purpose revealed in Christ. Such an integration is found, at least in part, in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, though these do not constitute a systematic theology. It goes without saying that a theology of this sort would have to be closely in touch with scientific work. We can no longer be content to describe 'the powers' in St. Paul's language, but must follow through, in our language about nature and society, on the 'demythologizing' begun at least in principle in the New Testament itself.

Another dichotomy that the doctrine of the cosmic Christ must help to overcome is that between 'Christian' and 'non-Christian', Church and world. We rightly distinguish between

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[2] Joseph E. Sittler, 'Called to Unity'. *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, January, 1962.

[3] S.C.M. Press, p. 196.

[4] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1965).

the Church and the world because of the Church's distinctive action—when it is the Church; but this distinction has often involved a constricted idea of the scope of redemption. The doctrine of Cyprian is, in this respect, an unfortunate example. With regard to the doctrine of the Church, the doctrine of the cosmic Christ would lead to something much more open, more outward-looking, more happily missionary, than the inward-looking and defensive Cyprianic attitude ('a walled garden', a 'sealed fountain'). 'God and the world are . . . at one in Christ in a way that means that although the Church and the world are different from each other, yet there cannot be a static, spatial borderline between them.'

'In him all things hold together (or subsist, or cohere)', says the Colossian passage and goes on to add in a parallel statement, 'He is the head of the body, the Church.' The coherence in Christ known by the Church is not limited to the Church. Thus the Church must seek out the 'points of contact' that are there between Church and world by virtue of a common subsistence in Christ. Living 'in the world', and not in self-regarding isolation, the Church will be the first to discover the pattern in and through which the Lord in whom all things cohere founds and saves the world.

(iii) *God is Reconciling All Things in Christ*

The Pauline eschatology, as is well known, allows for different emphases when speaking about redemption or salvation. St. Paul can look to God's justifying 'decision', or to his one act in Christ, now accomplished—but he can think also in terms of the working out of what is implied and in part accomplished in this one act: 'we shall be saved', 'the creation itself will be set free', 'now is salvation nearer than when we believed'. In the infinitive used in this Colossian passage, 'to reconcile', must be seen the apostle's perspective of an unfolding salvation, an outworking salvation history embracing finally *all things*.

The implication of this for theology is that theology must constitute itself a theology of history—meaning here by 'history' what the word is now popularly supposed to mean: the onward movement, indeed 'progress', of all things. Not that we must fall in with the idea of 'inevitable progress' or with one or other of the Utopian visions favoured in the West in recent years. But history *is* now a unified field; the unification of the world by technology has been accomplished in our generation. Theology must come to grips with this development—and in doing so will begin to realize the Colossian vision of a unification of all things, at the heart of which is the earthy prosaic fact of the cross.

But, has not the Church a theology of history? Have we not inherited one from St. Augustine? From him we inherit a doctrine of the gathering of the Church in history and from history, but not a doctrine of history, as reconciliation. In a much

more radical way history must be seen—in spite of evil powers and the misuse of human freedom—as in the hands of the God who has come among us in the lowly Christ. History so understood will be history in which radical change will be expected; such an expectation is the Christian contribution to the understanding of reality as historical, according to Collingwood. In Christian thought, he says, 'The process of historical change was no longer conceived as flowing, so to speak, over the surface of things, and affecting their accidents only, but as involving their very substance and thus entailing a real creation and destruction.'[5] The transformation in which we are involved is one that must go deep—involving creation or destruction. Theology must interpret this transformation, and seek in the new forms of life the summons of the Lord. Such transformation is at the heart of the Church's life, and is set forth in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion: in both a historical change is envisaged involving destruction and recreation toward the New Creation. The centre of these acts is the cross of Christ, and in them the Church goes forward to share in the transformation there inaugurated.

The Colossian passage under discussion demands a theology which will first, in unfolding the mystery of Christ in the Spirit, speak of a freedom beyond the cosmos and everything in it. But the same passage speaks of an integration of the cosmos and its powers with the one in whom such freedom is found. A theology created under the stimulus of the Colossian vision, by a Church that lives in the modern world, would find new possibilities for integration and fellowship in a wide spectrum of social and political concern.

B. Philosophy

Philosophy is reflection that seeks an integrated rational account of the whole of reality. It begins, as Aristotle says, in wonder—which is itself an intuition of 'the whole'. But the wonder of the philosopher is different from the wonder of the artist: the philosopher, unlike the artist, is not content to see something in isolation, standing out from its own background and speaking its own separate 'word'. The philosopher must seek out the relations of the known to the unknown, advancing toward a rational unification of his vision.

St. Paul is a philosopher as well as a theologian in the passage under discussion. It must be said at once that he is not a very good philosopher. Nevertheless, impelled by the questions raised by the heresy at Colossae, he makes a statement that has one thing, at least, in common with the philosophic vision. It encompasses—though indeed merely by vague assertion—*all things*. St. Paul's language will not commend itself to

[5] R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 48-49.

modern philosophers—even should they be in a position to understand some of the range of his allusions as he speaks about the 'powers' that give structure to reality. But the modern philosopher may be little better off. The unification of vision sought by philosophy still delays, and the attempt has been widely given up. Some philosophers brood over the universe within and attempt to describe the 'powers' that operate there. Others attempt to keep up with the constructions of scientific thought—to the neglect of the personal and the historical. Some occupy themselves with the 'grammar' of philosophy. What does the doctrine of the 'cosmic Christ' suggest in this situation? What are the implications of the Colossian passage for philosophy? Four points may be made, again, in relation to the main assertions of Colossians 1:15–20.

(i) *The Impossibility of Ontology as the Supreme Unifying Vision*

Philosophy must always seek a rational unification, a complete and concrete understanding of reality. St. Paul's inclusive 'all things', together with the fact that all things are declared to have unity of origin and end, might suggest that such a unification might be sought by the Christian philosopher in ontology. The strictly philosophical objections to such an enterprise would be formidable. The entire history of Western philosophy might be regarded as an (unsuccessful) attempt to provide foundations for such an enterprise. The linguistic difficulties alone might be a sufficient deterrent: is the link between beings and Being any more than a rough inference from grammar? Whatever weight might be given to strictly philosophical difficulties it would have to be admitted also that the passage under study is unfavourable to such an enterprise. Christ is 'the image of the invisible God'; he is one among us, and yet in and through him appears the one who cannot be included within the cosmos. The indications are that the philosopher may indeed run up against the 'eternal power and deity' of God but he may not use this as the keystone of his philosophy. God is a spirit—as Berdyaev loves to point out.[6] He is not 'Being-itself'. Indeed, if he is, he is indistinguishable from the Absolute of idealistic philosophy—and we have come round again to pantheism, if one wishes to convert this into a religious position.

The impossibility of ontology may be seen not as regrettable, but as the presupposition of human freedom. On the one side—and indeed mostly on this side—Christians have taught a freedom that is independent of the cosmos and all that is within it. The presupposition of it is the 'life' that is *me-ontic*, beyond ontological structures, that of the Spirit.

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[6] e.g. in *The Beginning and the End* (Harper Torchbooks, 1957), pp. 91 f.

(ii) *Philosophy as Intellectual Integration*

But, on the other hand, it remains true that the Colossian passage does give a rudimentary vision of a unification of the cosmos, since *all things* are from Christ and for him and cohere in him (though with the possibility of rebellion against him). This indicates the possibility not of an ontology as such, but rather of a unification of our understanding of *the world* around the man Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection. Just such a (more limited) rational unification has been attempted by Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*. As a philosophy, his thought has much in common with earlier idealistic philosophies. The important difference is that Teilhard's thought 'has legs'—foundations in scientific work. Unifications of this sort offer a way forward for contemporary philosophy, always provided that such visions take sufficient account of the 'powers', the social and geophysical 'surd elements' in human experience that await their fuller reconciliation.

Such limited aims may seem poor by comparison with the grand sweep of the older speculative metaphysics. But they are enough. For philosophy—as Collingwood pointed out—is an *activity*: it is reflection for the clarification and integration of what is already in some measure known. As an activity of this sort it has healing tasks—by intellect and imagination to bridge gaps that threaten human existence and that threaten truth. Thus it will mediate between sciences such as sociology and psychology. It will mediate between the studies of the 'two cultures'—for the two, as Teilhard has shown, cannot be separated (in pointing to the crucial importance of the *energy* of thought). It will try to come to grips with the fact of suffering, in man's life and in nature, and the challenge implied in it.

(iii) *Philosophy as Historical and Political*

R. G. Collingwood has pointed out that philosophy 'overlaps' with history. The philosopher's task begins in history and in a consciousness of his historical situation. Marx endeavoured to show in a quite radical way how the philosopher's task depends on his historical situation. Philosophy has often attempted to describe experience as if it revealed the changeless structure of being; but reality *moves;* even matter 'is what it does'. Marx diagnosed the situation of the philosopher in his own day as one of incipient revolution. A true philosophy must not only describe aright this situation, it must also participate in it if it is to avoid providing a scaffolding of 'ideology' disguising events. Thus he said, 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.'

St Paul also sees man—and therefore the philosopher—to be involved in a revolutionary situation. Nothing less is involved in the subjugation of the 'powers' (1 Cor. 15:24-25), the freeing of 'the creation' (Rom. 8:21) and the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:20). Christian philosophy must look to show the progress of this revolution. Marxism is the only philosophy so far that has centred itself on history, on the recognition of the powers that make for disintegration and the search for a new social integration. But this is the character that Christian philosophy must have if it is to obey the design of God set forth in Christ and if it is to serve the one who—beyond our concept of him—brings reconciliation through the self-offering once for all exhibited in his cross.

A Christian philosophy will be a rational account of the world in which the forces making for disintegration are named, and new possibilities for integration are disclosed. Such a philosophy must needs be a political philosophy; the science of politics is surely in its infancy, and there is much to be learned, in all parts of the world, about activity to build up the *polis* as God wills it to be built up.

(iv) *A Personal Philosophy*

There is a powerful American reaction against existentialism, according to Harvey Cox. He speaks of the 'pathos and narcissism' of existentialism and claims that it is on the whole 'deeply suspicious of cities and science' and, as such, is unsuitable for the new age of the city.[7]

But there would seem to be more rather than less need for personalist and existentialist philosophy as the world moves into the technological era. Granted that today's 'style of life' shuts off questions that this philosophy would open up, it has not provided the answers nor even really removed the questions. Could the absence of an 'existential quest' in America be the result of enslavement to TV and general hedonism rather than the sheer irrelevance of existentialist and personalist philosophy? The issues of personal life increasingly demand to be faced, more so in a time when new social structures and powers are growing. Will not this be the case in India, and is there not already a sign of it in, say, the 'humanism' of Dr. Radhakrishnan's exposition of *advaita vedanta*?

At the centre of St. Paul's vision is the person of Christ—and through him the Father. It is no accident that, writing in this faith, St. Paul focuses on personal relationships. Some of his letters would be embarrassing to read in public had we not become habituated to his language: and there is rather more of this personal concern than of 'cosmic' doctrine as such. The Gospel is communion, not indeed in isolation from that

[7] Harvey Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

life dominated by 'the powers' but in it. Christian philosophy must remain existential and personalist philosophy, a philosophy of communion, exploring on behalf of Christian and non-Christian the meaning and the issues of personal existence.

The kind of philosophy here described nowhere exists—except in parts and patches. But it will develop to the extent that the Church begins to live in the midst of the world under the guidance of the 'Colossian vision'.

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