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Jesus: Christ of The Atonement or Christ The New Man?

(A Paper Written From The Theological Side)

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Introduction

In a recent theological consultation held under the auspices of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, near Geneva, the participants studied and discussed at length the theme 'Giving account of the hope that is in us'¹. Representatives from all the continents had an occasion to air their views about the theme in the general gathering. Dr Sung from China spoke for Asia. Delving deep into the experiences of the Chinese people he declared, to the embarrassment of some, astonishment of many, and satisfaction of a few, that Christianity may be able to give hope to the teeming millions of Asia only if she herself was converted, only if Christ became a 'New Man' in Asia.

The word 'new' is a fascinating term indeed. We have heard of new ideals, new deals, new societies and new projects, etc. which enkindle fresh hope in man. However, the word new may be understood at least in two different ways. The word can be used when a unit of something which was not there before has appeared now. The appearance of this additional unit seems not to have affected the quality of the unit, but there is an additional unit which was once non-existent, and which is existent now. New machines of the same type, new dress of the same fashion, etc. fall into this category. This may be called a static concept of the word 'new'. There is a different meaning for the word 'new'. This would not only include something which was previously non-existent, in quantity, but also in quality; for example, a new machine which is an improved or advanced variety. This may be called a dynamic concept of the word 'new'. It is not the word with its static meaning that is fascinating, but the word with its dynamic meaning. And that is because it represents a state of progress, creativity, a look into the future, a ray of hope.

Contemporary Culture: The New Hope in Man

One of the most interesting and promising features of the contemporary society is this new dimension of hope, of expectant faith, that is bubbling in contemporary man; and this, in spite of the unmitigated indifferentism towards organised religions and prophets of

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¹ The consultation was held from the 5th to the 12th of September, 1974.

the *status quo*. It begins to dawn upon today's man that man can be man only if he is aware of humanity. 'Men, wherever they may be, can no longer ignore other men. Everywhere, regardless of social class, nation, and race, men are growing. . . They are reaching up to and demanding total development'². And this seems to be a point of no-return, so far as the society at large is concerned.

The man who lives and will live, in this new world, will have a life very different from that of his predecessors, even his immediate predecessors. And the Christian of today, who belongs to this mutating race of humans and who, with humanity, explores new paths, will not be able to live his Christianity except within the framework of these new developments. Today's Christian will not live as did his brother yesterday. He cannot, and he does not wish to. We might even say that he must not.

A New Orientation for Christian Reflection

With this background of a changing pattern of thought and culture, Christians today begin to reflect systematically on the foundations and fundamentals of their faith and its implications for the new world. The effervescence noted in contemporary theological literature bears eloquent witness to this fact. In this connection the one question which shall not escape the attention of any serious student of theology is the one that we ask ourselves today: Jesus, Christ of the atonement or Christ the New Man?

Atonement or New Man? The Problem

Charles Davis was constrained to write in the early sixties that most students of theology were disappointed with the theories on the redemption. They did not find there the rich matter and profound thought that they expected. 'Appended to the long development on the hypostatic union, the pages on the redemptive work of Christ seemed thin and shallow. . . The epic of a victory was reduced to the payment of a debt', he complained³. It is perhaps significant that Davis, then a Roman Catholic theologian from England, was dissatisfied with the 'only one word of Anglo-saxon origin that signifies a theological doctrine',⁴ namely the atonement.

(1) Atonement: An etymological analysis

A brief analysis and the history of the word shows that the verb 'atone' existed in middle English even prior to the substantive 'atonement'. 'Atone' was coined from 'at' and 'one', and signified 'to set at one', to reconcile. It found expression in the phrase 'to be at one', a translation of the Anglo-French phrase 'être à un', to agree. Wyclif seems to have already made use of the noun 'onement' for reconciliation. From frequent use of the phrases 'set at one', or 'at onement', the combined word 'atonement' began to take the place

² Michel Quoist, *Christ is Alive!* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 17.

³ Charles Davis, *Theology for Today* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962) p. 207.

⁴ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

of 'onement' early in the 16th century, and St Thomas More is the earliest known author to use the word 'atonement' in his work *The History of King Richard III*. The Anglican Bibles of the 16th and 17th centuries made frequent use of the word atonement in the sense of reconciliation and expiation⁵.

(2) **Atonement: A Scriptural Analysis. (a) O.T.**

Since reconciliation is generally between one who has been offended and one who has offended, atonement received, in the ordinary usage, the meaning of satisfactory expiation for an offence. In the O.T. atonement is the re-establishment of Yahweh's communion with his people, who had offended him by sin. It is a work of mercy on the part of God, and, on the part of man, the fulfilling of certain things prescribed by God. The highest spiritual sense of atonement in the O.T. is found in Is. 52:13-53:12, where the ideas of reconciliation and vicarious expiation permeate the passages.

(b) **N.T. (i) In general**

In order to give a satisfactory answer to the proposed question, 'Jesus: Christ of the atonement or Christ the New Man?' one has to make a thorough analysis of the relevant passages in the New Testament. It may be said in general, however, that in the NT atonement is presented as an act of divine love that effects a new stage of things, the peaceful relationship between God and man. For example, according to St Paul, atonement is the effect of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. However, the death of Christ is not to be looked upon as an isolated event by which redemption is brought about. The death of Christ is intimately connected with his life on earth and also his resurrection from the dead, and hence with the living Christ, the glorified Christ. In other words, atonement is not confined merely to the sacrificial death of Christ, but it necessarily includes the resurrection of Christ also.

It is true that in the development of the doctrine of redemption, resurrection did not receive the fair share it should have received. The Fathers of the Church, especially the Greek Fathers, had insisted on the importance of the role of resurrection. But after St Anselm and his book *Cur Deus Homo*, redemption was overwhelmingly attributed to the death of Christ on the Cross. Although St. Thomas made a come-back in his treatment of the question, the Reformation apparently put the emphasis, once again, on the expiatory aspect of redemption. But a careful study of the letters of St Paul and St Peter demonstrates that their understanding of redemption is complete only with the resurrection, the new life of Christ.

(ii) **In St Paul**

To Paul, the resurrection of Christ is the central mystery. He saw the resurrection as a beginning both for Christ and for our salvation: it holds a position in his thought similar to the one held by the

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 1024.

Incarnation in St John⁶. Paul agrees that sin is expiated by the death of Christ, but justice is conferred only following on the resurrection. Thus the death and resurrection of Christ are both working towards our salvation. If Christ is dead, we who are united to Christ are also dead. This death signifies the end of 'our life according to the flesh'⁷. From now onwards, we shall live a new life; we shall live only for him who died and rose again for us. In other words, our death stands alongside his death. As he starts a new life with the resurrection, we too begin a new life in and through his resurrection. 'And if one is raised up for all to a new life, we are all raised to that life'.⁸ Our contact with his death, as well as our contact with his resurrection, is effected by our union with Christ-in-glory, and only through this union do we receive the benefit of his death, the remission of sins.

Thus it is appropriate to say that according to Paul, Christ-in-glory is the living principle through which redemptive action existing outside us is applied to us. We have no other access to the justice of God. Our Saviour-in-glory forms the 'life-world' in which our justification is worked out⁹.

(iii) St Peter

For his part, St Peter sees the resurrection as the work of the Father who in raising Christ, also regenerates us, and endows us with a new life, a life of the sonship of God. It is God's lifegiving action in Christ that we receive. Thus Peter sees a twofold activity in our redemption, namely, the death of Jesus expiating our sins and the life-giving action of the resurrection which is also the principle of our new life.

This short analysis makes it clear that in the divine plan for our salvation, the resurrection of Christ is an essential part of the act of our redemption. Our salvation, our new life in and for Christ, cannot be conceived of without at the same time taking into consideration the central role played by Christ's resurrection in it. To put it differently, Christ's death and resurrection are to be considered as two moments of the same movement, each being inclusive of the other. It would be hardly possible to think of Christ's atoning death as the principle of our new life in Christ, without including his resurrection in the same act. Hence any theory of redemption which does not give equal importance to both these aspects of the one and the same act cannot claim to be true, let alone complete.

Seen in this light, the justification of the believer is understood to be a single reality with two complementary aspects, namely, death to sinful flesh and entry into new life. Justification is effected in sharing in and conforming with the death and resurrection of Our

⁶ Cf. *Romans*, 1:4; 1:3; 2:6.

⁷ Cf. *II Corinthians*, 5:14-15.

⁸ Here one is reminded of the whole plan of Paul's understanding of the history of salvation, starting from the creation of man and his fall. cf. *Romans*, 5:12-19.

⁹ For further details, cf. F. X. Dürwell, *The Resurrection*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966), pp. 26-31.

Lord, the two aspects of the one and the same mystery. This view is not different from the one offered by St John. For him, Christ found his glory at the end of his passion: he found life in death itself. The *kenosis* was therefore a movement towards glory, a movement which came to its glorious conclusion at the moment when the *kenosis* reached its ultimate consequence, death¹⁰.

Thus our analysis leads us to the conclusion that the implied opposition between the two expressions, 'Christ of the atonement' and 'Christ the New Man' and the consequent choice between the two is misleading. As we have already seen the former is not complete without the latter and the latter presupposes the former. But at the same time it must be remembered that every epoch in the history of the Church preferred to emphasise one or the other aspect of the ineffable mystery. And if we are to make such a choice today, we may have to look for reasons, to some extent, outside the scriptural meaning and doctrinal content of the expression.

Contemporary trends in Christology

To return to the contemporary scene again, there is a growing necessity to understand the mystery of redemption, of justification, in a different way than we are hitherto used to. With profound respect to the deep insights of the privileged witnesses of the redemptive mysteries of Christ and the illustrious doctors and teachers of the following centuries, today one must be prepared to have a second look at the basic assumptions of the early apostolic and Christian expressions of the mystery. We are in a world which questions everything, most of all the fundamental beliefs of organised religions and faiths. As J. A. T. Robinson says, the question is not so much, how do we speak today of 'the humanity and divinity of Christ' or his historicity, his sinlessness, his uniqueness, his finality, or his 'full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the world', as why¹¹? We are beginning to understand the biblical account of the creation and fall of man in a different light now from what we used to a few decades ago. Since the whole theology of redemption revolves around the early history and God-experience of the Jewish people, their belief in the creation and fall of man and their constant expectation of the redeemer, a new understanding of these experiences

¹⁰ It is interesting to note the similarity of this line of thought of John, with that of Paul as expressed in *Philippians* 2:5-11.

¹¹ Cf. John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. ix. Cf. also Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, (London: SCM Press, 1974), especially the chapter on The Work of Christ, pp. 61-82. 'Four pictures were of particular importance to the early church in its thought about the atonement, and all of them have continued to figure prominently in later theorizing. These are the understanding of it as victory over Satan, as meeting the just demands of divine law, as offering of a sacrifice and as a reversal of the sin of Adam. I want to begin with a brief consideration of the significance of each of these, asking whether their inner meaning requires the concept of "an objective act of God . . . in the history of this world in virtue of which things are not as they were".' *Ibid.*, p. 64.

demands also a new look at the redemptive mysteries of Christ¹². And yet, for the 'Christ-today', the 'Christ-yesterday' cannot be written off. Even the critics of traditional Christologies agree that 'the starting point is the translation of human relationships'¹³, and hence a new experience, a new life, a fresh relationship.

Secondly, theology seems to have definitely taken a new turn in its development, namely, theology is becoming more anthropocentric rather than theocentric¹⁴. Some of the new developments in theology and the development of new theologies are pointers to this fact. Still, all these new movements in theology do hail Christ as their idol and ideal: Christ, not of the *status quo*, not the one who puts us back to the same state as we had been in before, but Christ the total liberator, Christ the new life, the new Man in whom men everywhere will find freedom, liberation and peace. But this Christ is made totally free, totally new, only when the whole of mankind, all the members of Christ are renovated, not only spiritually, but wholly, completely. It is this Christ the new Man who is our future and in whom we find perfection and fulfilment; this Christ the new Man who is the principle of our new life, a life in a new relationship with God the Father and with our fellowmen.

Conclusion

In the early part of this paper we found that the implied opposition between Christ of the atonement and Christ the New Man was rather artificial and misleading, when both concepts are understood in the fuller sense. It is about such a fuller concept of the atonement that Dag Hammarskjöld said that, before it, 'all men stand revealed as beloved of God, precious in God's sight...which enables them (Christians) to stretch out their hands to people of other creeds in the feeling of universal brotherhood, which we hope one day to see reflected in a world totally united'¹⁵. In the latter part of the paper we noticed that the place of this atonement in the fuller sense is to be seen not only in the Cross and resurrection of Christ some two thousand years ago, but here and now where atonement is actually taking place, when men and women, races, classes and nations are in fact made one, when reconciliation, renewal and reunion of life with life are experienced. All these lead us to conclude, finally, that, although the two concepts are not mutually exclusive, it seems to be better, more suitable and opportune to understand and proclaim Jesus as Christ the New Man rather than Christ of the atonement. 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'¹⁶. The risen Christ, who is also the fulness of the Spirit, is the principle and source of our life in the Spirit. He is the New Man in whom we become new men.

¹² Cf. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁵ Dag Hammarskjöld in a speech at the Evanston Assembly of the W.C.C., 1954, as quoted in *The Ecumenical Review*, 1973, p. 408.

¹⁶ John 7:37-38.