On Not Doing "Western" Theology

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In the quest for an authentically "Indian" theology, an obvious starting point is to reject what is understood to be alien and imported "western" theology, which is as foreign to India as Gothic churches, organs and nineteenth century hymns. As an example of what might be meant by "western" theology, the Chalcedonian Definition is often instanced, especially by Chenchiah. According to him, the thought of Nicaea and Chalcedon, couched in the language of Greek philosophy, is "not in accordance with Indian or Asiatic genius."[1] I believe the hostility to Chalcedon based on the notion that it uses Greek as opposed to other kinds of philosophical ideas to be mistaken, but interestingly mistaken. It is this contention I want to elaborate in this paper.

1. When Chalcedon is spoken of as "western," what is presumably in view, as above, is usage of Greek philosophy. Thus the Definition includes three technical philosophical terms to speak of Christ, *ousia*, *phusis* and *hupostasis* ; and one everyday term (*prosopon*) which had become a technical term in the seventy years preceding the Council. However, this use of technical terms, if taken to illustrate a dependence on Greek philosophy, is highly misleading. An examination of the use of these four terms in the seventy years mentioned reveals that at some time or other all were used as synonyms for one

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1. Chenchiah, *The Guardian*, 13.2.47; quoted in Boyd, *Indian Christian theology*, p. 162.

another. A prerequisite of any philosophy is a concern for precision, but these terms are used with a lack of precision which would drive any self-respecting philosopher to distraction. By the time Chalcedon is reached, both the etymology and the meaning any of the words might have had in the great Greek systems is entirely lost to view. *Ousia* and *phusis* are used simply to mean "really", "truly", "partaking of the reality of", whilst *huposatsis*, which by rights belongs here, is used as a synonym for *prosopon* to please Leo in the West and to line up with his "two persons in one substance." Thus "*homoousios* with the Father" says nothing more (or less) than that "God was in Christ," and "*homoousis* with us" simply means that the figure in the Gospels was truly a man.

The Definition is not trying to state the faith in a manner suitable to a Greek-educated audience at all. Rather, as Grillmeier[2] insists over and over again, it is simply an attempt to be faithful to the kerygma, to the Marcan and the Johannine picture of Christ. We may say that the latter needs to be demythologised in the light of contemporary understanding. But that is not the point. The point is that Chalcedon is not trying to interpret Christ in any particular philosophical terms. By implication it does say, which is a different matter, that metaphysics cannot be avoided in doing Christology, but it does not specify any metaphysic, Greek or otherwise. If we want that, we must go to Apollinaris earlier or Leontius of Byzantium, later.

There are always simple souls who want a Christology free of metaphysics. They are reminiscent of the positivist philosophers of this century who wanted a philosophy free from metaphysics : in denying it, they did it. Metaphysics is the attempt to speak of what ultimately constitutes reality. If God is one of those constituents, and if we can use the word "and" in theology ("God and man"), then theology and metaphysics

2. Aloys Grillmeier, S. J. : *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2nd edition, 1975.

are inextricable. We may want to adopt a very low metaphysical profile, to say that God is present everywhere, in all men, and not present in Christ in any fundamentally different way. This I take to be the point of view of G. W. H. Lampe in *God as Spirit*. We may prefer a much higher profile, using Leontius' language of *enhupostasia* as Barth does. It makes no difference, "metaphysics" is involved : we cannot avoid it by trying to use only "moral" categories instead, as if morality does not presuppose being !

But with regard to Chalcedon the important point is that no particular metaphysics is implied, especially not an Aristotelian metaphysics, as Boyd astonishingly implies.[3] The way is open for any serious attempt to categorise the reality of God and is inter-locking with the reality of man. That the reality of God is found in a special way in Jesus is a particular reading of the New Testament. It was the reading of all the controversialsits assembled at Chalcedon ; it has been the reading of the mainstream Church to the present century. If we cannot continue to affirm it and make some sense of it, it is hard to see what the distinctive affirmation of *Christ*-ianity would be (which is to pass an unfavourable verdict on the religion of the "moral majority" in certain western countries).

The history of controversy between Arius and Chalcedon confirms, I believe, what I have been saying. It used to be said that the history of heresy was the history of partial and one-sided solutions. It we take Apollinaris rather than Arius as our arch-heretic, however, as the most subtle and intelligent of all the great heretics, then another reading of that history suggests itself. The great heretics, we may say, were men who got Firsts in Philosophy and simply could not be untrue to what they had learned, and in consequence moulded the kerygma to the shape of their philosophy. The men who have come down to us as orthodox, however, whilst they may not have been in the least deficient in intelligence, were in the last

[3] R. Boyd, *op. cit.* p. 4.

event prepared to let their philosophy go to blazes in order to be faithful to the kerygma.

At this point a sharp word needs to be said about the persistent notion of the Hellenisation of Christianity in the first four centuries, and consequently the Hellenistic deposit we are left with today. Those who have truly loved and understood Greek philosophy from Marcus Aurelius to Swinburne and Nietschze have always known that this was a lie. All three attacked Chrisitianity viciously because they saw that it destroyed the foundations of that whole lovely world, as Swinburne called it. The noble artifice of Aristotelian and Stoic ethics was blown sky high by the notions of sin and grace, faith and justification. The essential Greek divine attributes of impassibility and unity withered before the God who got involved in time and, worse, took flesh, and who died streaming blood on Calvary. It was to avoid this blasphemy to the Greek spirit that Arius made the Son a creature. Apollinaris drew the line at a complete incarnation, and the Antiochenes insisted on distinguishing the natures. Finally, Swinburne's complaint, that the Christain doctrine of creation de-divinized the world and at the same time destroyed the notion of degrees of reality which was essential to the Greek metaphysical picture by putting in its place just two entities : God and creation.

It is of course true that even the orthodox Fathers did not see it like this : they wanted to be both good Christians and good Greeks. The antinomies that resulted could be entertainingly caricatured by a Schleiermacher or a Harnack, but in fact they represent a tremendous struggle, in the face of one of the most powerful philosophical milieus known by man, to be faithful to the tradition they inherited. So far from being Hellenization, Chalcedon is an extraordinary triumph of the Gospel in the face of concerted attempts by the likes of Apollinaris to subdue it to philosophy. Thus Chalcedon and the history which led to it illustrate rather clearly the truth Barth never tired of reiterating that theology must indeed use philosophy but it must do so eclectically and not by adopting a

system. In the Indian context, this means that we cannot do "Indian" theology simply by using categories taken from Sankara or Ramanuja as opposed to Plato or Aristotle. Vedanta is also one of the most powerful philosophical milieus known by man and an attempt to build an "Indian" theology would involve the same no-holds-barred struggle with that as led to Chalcedon.

2. At this point a second, more fundamental,question occurs, which arises from the universal nature of philosophical ideas. If we look at the philosophy of England, Germany and France since, say 1700, we may be tempted to speak of a certain national flavour to the philosophy of each country. Hume would be the paradigm philosopher of the first, Hegel of the second, and Bergson or Sartre of the third. Any attempt to speak of "English" or "German" philosophy as designating one particular type would, however, be a mistake. Idealism remained enormously important in Britain, and empiricism was not without its witness in Germany. Monism and materialism, empiricism and idealism, may vary in their working out, but the essential meaning remains culturally invariant. If we follow Lonergan, this fact has enormously deep roots in the human cognitional structure of perceiving, reflecting, understanding, judging and coming to conclusions, a pattern of operations he would claim is valid for all human cultures of whatever level of development.

To the extent that theology draws on philosophical categories, therefore, we should expect it to be not more regional but more universal. The attempt to think through the Gospel in terms of Advaita, for instance, is one of the many attempts from a monistic point of view in the past two thousand years. India has no monopoly on thoroughgoing monism, and a theology developed in such terms is not thereby "Indian" as opposed to "Western." But in any case, when it comes to theology, the cultural invariance of the pattern of human knowing and the patterns of ideas this produces is strongly underlined by the catholicity of the Church and its

nature, across all regional boundaries, as one people. It becomes increasingly clear, in the face of the manifold regional disputes of today's world, that what constitutes a people is not racial identity (say "Aryan" or "Dravidian") but a common story. Christians are a people with a common story. This common story is the most powerful moulder of Christian thought, challenging the impact of any culture or any philosophy. Thus the culturally invariant elements which go to make up theology are enormously powerful, a view which is contemporary heresy but might be true for all that.

3. The notion of the common story raises the most fundamental point of all, namely that the idea that "indigenous" theology may be done by interpreting the kerygma in terms of any given indigenous philosophy preserves a falsely intellectualist account of what theology might be. To be indigenous means to have existed in a place, in a climate, in a situation, for generations, to have adapted to that situation and also to have adapted the situation. This slow process is surely instructive for theology : the attempt to construct an "indigenous" theology overnight is by definition doomed to failure. The rule *lex orandi lex credndi* is dangerous but it is also a way of saying that doctrine moves at the pace of the people and that with the people it will evolve and thereby be indigenous. It has proved far easier to abandon Western hymns and architecture and to replace them by Indian forms than to create an "Indian theology" ; but, properly understood, this work on the liturgy has laid the foundations which will, all in good time, produce the desired theology. For something to be indigenous surely means to grow up from below. We must begin with the bulb rather than the bloom.

To the objection that in fact the Indian Chruch shows every sign of wishing to cling to colonial forms in worship we have to reply that, however unfortunate this may be, we also have to recognise that all cultures are necessarily syncretistic. The only cultures where the forms exist as a fixed deposit which cannot be tampered with are dead cultures. To put it paradoxi-

cally, the permanent state of all living cultures is one of change and flux, though the pace of change varies enormously. Thus what is truly indigenous in India in the year 2000 will not be what was truly indigenous in the year 1800 and in the interval many "Western" elements will have ceased to be purely western and become indigenous. The reality of cultural change especially under the impact of the "global village" atmosphere created by modern communications means that the labelling of a certain stock of ideas and patterns as "Western", "Indian" and so forth has a very limited usefulness. At the same time, we should perhaps ask whether the most truly indigenous is not the most universal, and whether what is universal is not the most truly indigenous. It was a pagan who said, "*Homo sum : humani nil a me alienum puto.*" The contemporary Church, which ought to be one of the torch-bearers of "one world," seems often to fall far short of this insight in a preference for all kinds of regional and other chauvinisms. Our concern for an indigenous theology must be at the same time and in the same breath a concern for what thereby (i.e., through recognising the necessary individuality and particularity of human beings and their diverse cultures) is a theology, an explication of the human condition and what God has done, is doing and will do to help it, for all humanity. If we look for an illustration of such a theology then, to be provocative, perhaps Chalcedon is the outstanding example.