

5. The Word of God Controversy

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the ministry and letters of Paul provided a turning point in Christian thought from the deeply Hebraic, rural, Galilean culture to the Hellenistic Judaism of Eastern Mediterranean urban settings. Toward the end of the first century a second big turning point began with the writings of the Gospel of John and its accompanying letters. In the Johannine writings we see the Hebraic love of history making an impact upon the more spacial and metaphysical motifs of Greek thought. This important quality of the Johannine writings has been hidden from view by the notion that these writings were written by John, the disciple of Jesus. This view would put these writings in a much earlier setting, and thus cloud the true meaning and profound significance of them. What we have in the Gospel of John is a sort of stage play in which John, the disciple, is a character, and Jesus is also a character. The entire composition is a piece of historical fiction designed to communicate with a different cultural audience in a different historical setting than the one addressed by Paul, Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

The religious genius who composed the Johannine writings was speaking to people who were not conversant with Hebraic customs and history. They needed to hear the Good News of the Christian breakthrough in their own language and metaphors. One proof of this is that the text includes explanations of obvious Judean practices that would have been well known to the earlier audiences. For Example in John 4:9 A Samaritan woman says to Jesus, *“What you, a Judean, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman.”* And then the Johannine author adds, *“(Judeans and Samaritans, it should be noted, do not use vessels in common.)”* The people being addressed by the earlier New Testament writings would not have needed that parenthetical explanation.

The opening verses of John’s Gospel join together the ancient Hebraic image of the Word of God as speech from the Universal-Creator with the Greek concept of “logos.” Our English translations typically translate “logos” as “Word,” so we tend to miss the full genius of this innovation. The Greek meaning of “logos” did not carry an association with the image of *speech* that we find in the Hebraic phrase “the Word of Yahweh.” “Logos” was a secular and “mystical” term for “the inclusive meaning of the fullness of Reality.” So the Johannine Gospel is joining together the Greek notion of “the meaning of it all” with “the Speech of Yahweh who created all things.” For the Johannine author the Hebrew “God” still speaks through historical events of every kind.

Let us listen to the opening words of the Gospel of John inserting this strange word “Logos” in place of the usual “Word.”

When all things began the Logos already was. The Logos dwelt with the Creator and what the Creator was, the Logos was. The Logos, then, was with the Creator at the beginning and through the Logos all things came to be; no single thing was created without the Logos. All that came to be was alive with the life of the Logos, and that life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the dark, and the darkness has never overcome it.

So far those verses might grab the mind of the Greek listener, but down the page a short ways we find a sentence that would be absolutely paradoxical within that Greek mindset.

So, the Logos became flesh (that is, physical, biological, down-to-Earth history); the Logos came to dwell among us, and we saw the glory of the Logos, the Creator’s only Offspring, full of healing for us and truth to live by.

Today we are still asking the same “64 billion dollar question” that the original hearers of this Gospel surely asked: *“How can the Eternal Meaning of everything take*

on historical flesh? And this was probably asked in an even more offended manner, “How could such a magnificent event occur in an obscure man of peasant stock in some out of the way providence of little civilizational significance.”

The following sentence is even more shocking both to early hearers and to contemporary hearers as well (I have added a few words for clarification):

To all who received this Logos-manifestation-in-history and yielded their allegiance to this humanly walking, talking Logos gave them the path to become, like the Logos himself, offspring of the Creator, not born of any human stock or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the offspring of the Creator of all that does or will exist.

This sentence might be called “a Gospel-of-John version of the Virgin Birth topic.” In the above sentence, it is not Jesus alone, but also other ordinary humans who are being Virgin Born. In other words, we who see the healing power of this Absolute Truth confronting us in this fleshly, down-to-Earth history of Jesus (understood as the Christ) find ourselves born (or we might say reborn) with an Eternal quality of life, clearly distinguishable from the quality of life that originates from our parents. This does not imply a contempt for our biological life or our parents. Indeed, this profound life takes place in our biological life, and in the space-time coordinate in which we are born and live and die. It is pure flesh and pure Eternity present together in the same historical time and place and person. The event of Jesus as the Christ becomes reduplicated in the lives of other humans.

This fresh set of Johannine images set off a flurry of theological controversies that erupted into quarrel after quarrel for the next three and half centuries. Indeed, these controversies are still going on in the life of the Church today. Today, however, they go on differently. In those early centuries of that Greek-thought-based culture, Christians and prospective Christians found the fleshly historical pole of this paradox the hardest part to accept. Today we are more secular-minded, and therefore we find it more difficult to accept the Eternal pole of this paradox. Indeed, I must ask myself, “Do I experience anything Eternal that I can identify as true in my life?” If so what is it? It can seem to most people today that we are only “once born.” Being among the “twice born” is so cryptic to us, that we either dismiss this idea altogether or we twist it into a superstition about “purchasing” a positive otherworldly destiny through submitting to forced belief in some set of unbelievable doctrines.

So if you, like me, are a typical, Earth-bound, 21st-century human who wants to trust in what you can know with your own consciousness through your own experience, *what on Earth are we talking about with this second birth?* A new poetry is needed to access the Eternal as a real daily experience for any of us living in the 21st century. Here are two of my efforts to share my experience of the Eternal through what I have called “teaching poems.”

The Infinite Silence Speaks

The Infinite Silence Speaks
through every rustle of tree leaves,
through every singing bird,
through every sound of any kind,
and through the silent spaces between the sounds.

The Infinite Silence is Void and Darkness
but also Fullness, a dazzling backlight that shines through
every gleaming tree, every shimmering squirrel
and surrounds every human being
with a halo.

This poem indicates a massively important direction for 21st century religious thought. We can no longer think about the Eternal in terms of a transcendent space – that is, of a Divine Being existing in a transcendent “place.” Instead we have only one “place” – Here and Now in our ordinary bird and squirrel, life and death existence. The Eternal can only be spoken about as shining through our Earthly historical encounters. Our second birth only happens when our historical place/time moment turns transparent to the Eternal. Here is a more elaborate poem about this cultural shift from transcendence to transparency.

The Reappearance of God

Sometime last century, or was it the century before,
all Supreme Beings died.

The whole realm of super-ordinary goings-on died.
Only the ordinary lived on.

But human beings,
uncomfortable with changes of this magnitude,
reinvented Supreme Beings,
knowing that they did so,
knowing that Supreme Beings
were a human invention.

Unconsciously, as unconsciously as possible,
human beings knew they were worshipping
their own inventions,
but they did not care.
Human beings wanted to worship themselves anyhow.

Meanwhile, GOD, who is not a Supreme Being,
who is not a human invention,
who is not human in any way whatsoever,
who is not even known or knowable by human beings,
became known again by human beings,
known as the unknown,
the real unknown,
the UNKNOWN, UNKNOWN.

GOD, not standing above, but shining through
every natural being,
every space-time event,
every cosmological transformation,
every personal transformation,
every social transformation,
GOD became visible once again.

Visible but not known.
Seen but not understood.
Present but not controlled.
Unavoidable but not named.

Humanity, those who faced this fully,
found themselves affirmed by this,
ennobled by this,
healed by this,
refreshed by this,
enabled to be themselves by this.

Humanity was
Oh Yes,
brought down
 but brought down from an uncomfortable
 high horse
brought down
to be a completely ordinary organism--
vulnerable, dependent, passing--
and yet,
nevertheless,
conscious
of the SHINING THROUGH
of GOD.

For the future of Christian theology, "God" must be clarified as a very special word that both points to our ongoing experience of the Eternal that shines through every event. "God" is also a word that includes these meanings: "devotion" "loyalty" "worship" "calling" "center of value." The word "God" is a devotional word that means loyalty to, obedience to an inclusive center of value in terms of which all other centers of value are evaluated.

Only when this theological clarification is in place, can we understand rightly the Word-of-God controversy that characterized that period of Church history between the Gospel of John (90 CE) and the Chalcedonian Creed (451 CE)

I will deal with that Chalcedonian Creed in a later chapter, but first we need a rough picture of the history that led up to it. Origen (184-154 CE) was a truly great philosopher and Christian theologian who set in motion many directions of clarity for his time; nevertheless, he created an adaptation of Christianity to Greek thought that became intensely controversial. He followed the philosopher Plotinus' view that Reality had rings of manifestation that move outward from a core of Full Eternity to an outer ring of material manifestation. In Origen's scheme of theological thought, the Father Almighty, the Mysterious Void and Source of all things was the core of Full Eternity. In the next ring out was the Logos, which was also divine but subordinate to God's full "substance" of illuminating Light. Still further out was the material world, which included the flesh of Jesus, an ordinary human in which the Logos fully dwelled.

The emerging "orthodox" "Church" ultimately found this way of explaining these primal verities heretical. Jesus they claimed was to be understood as the full presence of God in all God's fullness, not rings away that fullness. They said that the Logos was also God himself not a creation of God. The Logos which was also God was what walked among us in Jesus in order that we might participate, like Jesus, in the fullness of Eternity. However cryptic this furious argument may sound to modern ears, we can begin to understand it in this manner. Origen was making adaptations to the Greek world of spacial thinking that did not square with the temporal historical metaphors of the Hebraic view of God (Creator of the entire cosmos) and with the ongoing communications of this Creator with humanity throughout each and every event of history. In the Hebraic mode of theological thought, God, Yahweh, the Ultimate Reality, was met in the ongoing events of history and no where else (Even the deepest interior being of our lives is part of history). Therefore what had been met in the history of Jesus and the resurrection of his historical Body (the Church) was Yahweh himself, not some creature of Yahweh. The We-Thou relation set up by the Exodus event had been transformed into a new We-Thou relation through the historical event of Jesus' birth, life, teachings, actions, death, and his fleshly reappearance in his Church. The orthodox Church was then seen as a historical organization that had emerged and

was still emerging in history to protect and witness to this fresh We-Thou revelation in that homely, historical event of a remarkable peasant sage and his resurrection in the body of his Church. According to the slowly emerging consensus of that body of people, Origen and a number of other “quasi-Christian” thinkers were “wrong,” because they encouraged a departure from the core revelation that defined Christianity. In this down-to-Earth, controversial manner an orthodoxy about Christianity was being invented.

What does all this mean? How do we translate the meaning of this for people today? Before engaging in further clarification of these “God, Logos, and human” issues, I will dwell on the meaning of the concept “Church,” and how it came about. I especially want to explore the tension between the Church as a “Spirit” peoplehood (a communion of saints) and the Church as a historical religious institution. The end toward which I am moving is to envision how all this informs us today who wish to belong to a Next Christianity that deeply loves the history of this holy communion of saints within an ever changing and renewing set of Christian-religion-practicing institutions here on Earth.