



Believing in Jesus Christ in This Postmodern World¹

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Over the last twenty-three years of teaching systematic theology in a Lutheran framework, I have become increasingly drawn to the use of theological autobiography as a legitimate and illuminating genre in theological articulation in our postmodern world.² Christian theology over the centuries has always had an autobiographical character, which contradicts the notion that theological articulation must strive for detached objectivity. One of the ironic benefits of postmodernity is the inescapable reminder of the historical conditionedness of all views about reality, reminding us that the meaning of our lives, indeed how our lives are constituted, is bound up with stories, narratives that both include and exclude; narratives that need to be centered, open, and fluid. For Christians, that essential, generative center is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Thus, every sermon and articulation of the Christian faith is to be an exposition on this generative center in which the hearer and reader are confronted with a christological exposition of the essential confession: God alone is the source of life, healing, and forgiveness.

¹The contents of this article were shared at the theological conference entitled "Jesus Christ: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow!" at Holden Village, Washington, September 2005.

²See my articles, "Theological Autobiography: Theologizing in Context," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 20/3 (1993) 187–196, and "Where Is God? Engaging a Religiously Charged, Post-Secular World," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30/3 (2003) 197–204.

There is an intrinsic intra-Christian and interreligious character to our conversation about Christian faith. The genre of story is one viable, fruitful, and necessary means of entering this conversation.

many, others has been and is: How might God speak to us not only through Christian sisters and brothers, but also through Hindus and Muslims, that such speaking might expand and further illumine our understanding of Jesus' identity and saving work? In the nexus of race, class, caste, patriarchy, and other defining differences, religious commitment was respected and lauded, indeed evoked awe, when such commitment avoided the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of closed-mindedness about God's inclusive graciousness to all for Jesus' sake. In this regard, my own theological horizon was challenged and widened in an unexpected way on the occasion of my ordination and installation in 1980 at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Georgetown, Guyana. I became the second member of Redeemer Lutheran Church (founded in about 1947 and served almost exclusively by U.S. American Lutheran missionary pastors) to be ordained in it, and I was the first Guyanese-born pastor to be called by Redeemer to an extended ministry.

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Being sensitive about not making my ordination an occasion for drawing attention to myself, I did not make any special effort to invite people beyond the congregation to the worship service at which I would be ordained. However, my mother, a devout Hindu and a widow, had a different understanding of what it meant to invite family and friends in the community—most of whom were Hindu. One family was Muslim. For her, if there was a major public event in the family, it would be rude, to say the least, and a show of poor hospitality not to tell relatives and friends about it and invite them to come. In a curious way, she was motivated by both her Hindu sense of religious celebration that must be communal and also her understanding that Jesus would want others beyond the Redeemer congregation to be invited as an expression of authentic hospitality in Jesus' name. Thus, through word of mouth rather than by printed invitations, my mother sent out word to family and neighbors in the community, saying that I would be ordained on Tuesday, September 30, 1980, at Redeemer Lutheran Church, and she was inviting them to attend and celebrate the event. As expected, my Christian relatives, many on my father's side and a few on my mother's, were present. But my maternal grandmother, maternal uncle, great-uncle and great-aunt, and many aunts and other relatives, all Hindu, were also present at the service. They were there, proud to be present out of a Hindu sense of religious propriety and family support. At the end of the service, as I greeted those who had attended, my maternal great-aunt, who was a spokeswoman in the family, with a big smile and joy all over her face, hugged me and said, “Son, we are proud of you tonight. Remember that you are only fulfilling in the Christian way what your caste means.” She was referring to the

examination in the basic course in systematic theology. The aim is to get the students to think about what the Christian message—the gospel—is. In Christian proclamation, to speak about God one must necessarily speak about Jesus of Nazareth, who came to be confessed as the Christ. Language about God is necessarily language in relation to Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God as divine and human participates in and interacts with created reality. God is not repulsed by created reality. God enters into the world God created and God is not thereby diminished. God is not less than fully God in entering human reality. What Jesus does reveals who he is. His identity is bound up with what he does. For example, those who opposed him wondered out loud concerning the basis of his authority. He was accused of casting out demons by Beelzebul (Mark 3:22). He forgives sins, but only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:5–12). Is Jesus blaspheming, breaking the first commandment, or does he have a unique relationship with God? That he can and does forgive sins, which only God can do, means that he is fully associated with God, who alone is the source of life, healing, and forgiveness.

This means that any absolutism that says in effect “Today, I feel so good—on top of the world—therefore, I tell you, your sins are forgiven” would be idolatrous. It is God alone who is the source of forgiveness, and for Christians God forgives in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus is not ancillary. Jesus announces the reign of God, which has come in his person. Jesus’ coming makes God’s reign real and concrete because it is happening in and through him. God’s reign is already here, and God’s reign is yet to come in its fullness. Doing what he does, Jesus does not thereby become who he never was. That would be adoptionistic. His act of forgiving sins, for example, does not make him divine. He can forgive sins because he is fully God.

When people come to worship, or we visit them in their homes and other settings where we practice the mutual conversation and consolation of believers, our parishioners and others should be able to assume and/or should hear clearly that their sins are forgiven by God alone on account of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, if we offer ourselves or some other created reality as a source of forgiveness, we have left people with more burdens to bear than when we first began the conversation. Idolatry has decisive negative consequences.

SPEAKING WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

I would like to return to the point I made earlier that theology has both an intra-Christian and an interreligious character. Another very personal example illustrates this thesis. A few years ago, when I arrived in Guyana for my annual one-month summer visit, a relative, who was a medical doctor and a devout Hindu, called me up and said, “Winston, welcome back to Guyana. You know we have a prayer group in our house.⁴ Thursday night we will have our meeting and we want you to come and give a talk on what Christians believe about Jesus.” He had invited

⁴They had built a kind of praying place located in the downstairs, which, in Guyana, where houses are built on stilts or posts, is not a basement.

In my lecture, I emphasized the following:⁶

- Christians, like people of other faiths, confess that God alone is the source of life.
- God alone creates and gives life.⁷
- Christians believe that God did not create and stand back; but God came into the world.
- Human beings were created to trust God.
- To trust in other things that were created is idolatry.
- All human beings, instead of trusting in God, have trusted in other things. All have distrusted God. If human beings were created for trust, it means that human beings are to trust God.
- Promises are made, and God is the faithful, trustworthy Promiser.
- God did not give up on human beings and the creation.
- God determined to come and be with us where we are.

Without saying it, I was implicitly using the Nicene Creed (a reference that would not mean anything to the audience). I pointed out that God as God came into the world and that not less than God came:

- The Word always was (as the writer of the Gospel of John declares).
- In Jesus Christ, the Word came down and lived with us (I could see sparks, as people's eyes lit up).
- In Jesus' coming—the Word-become-a-human being—God did not give up on human beings and the world.
- Because of his faithfulness to the One he called Father, Jesus' life ended in death on a cross.
- The story of Jesus did not end with his death.
- God raised him from death and through his death God gives life to all.
- Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

That was how I talked about what Christians believe about Jesus Christ.

At the end of the lecture, a professor from India, who was teaching at the University of Guyana, sitting right in front of me, got up and very politely said, "Professor, it was so nice to hear you; it was so wonderful to hear you tell us what Christians believe. Now, you know, we Hindus believe that Jesus is one incarnation of God. In Hinduism, the belief is that there are many avatars, incarnations. So Jesus is one." He had pointed out a fundamental difference. With respect we acknowledged the fundamental difference in our views on Jesus' identity. I said, "Thank you very much. Yes, you do indeed believe that. For Christians, Jesus is not one among many; he is the unique one." I said that and they asked a few more

⁶This story, including the essentials of what I said, appears in a SELECT course in systematic theology released in spring 2007.

⁷Here the accent was on "creation out of/from nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*).

parents to read the letter(s) to him when he is able to understand and, when he is older, to give the letter(s) to him. I suggested to him that they share with their grandson what their baptism means to them, how they love him greatly, that they would pray for him, and what they understand his baptism to mean.

The challenge to Christians to know the fundamentals of what we believe—both our personal, subjective appropriation of what is believed (this is certainly crucial) and the fundamentals of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith—is an ongoing process. I thank God for the dilemma we are faced with now. To learn something about others, what they believe, and to have conversation and dialogue in a manner that is respectful are essential to Christian witness to Jesus Christ today. Christians do not know the complete meaning of God's coming to the world in Jesus Christ. Through sharing and declaring our faith in *mixed* company, we come to learn in new and surprising ways the saving meaning and power of the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for the sake of the whole world. ⊕

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