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NOTE

ROGER HAIGHT'S SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY

The June 1992 issue of *Theological Studies* carried an article by Roger Haight, S.J. entitled "The Case for Spirit Christology." In spite of many very fine features, this article seems to me to be essentially flawed and, as stated, not an acceptable way of understanding the Christian faith.

Since "Spirit Christology" can have many meanings, it seems important to state at the beginning the meaning that emerges in this article. Haight correctly described Christologies as "formulations that express, or explain, or identify who Jesus is on the basis of the experience of faith that Jesus bears God's salvation."¹ Haight's Spirit Christology identifies Jesus as a human being, who from the first moment of his existence was filled with God as Spirit so as to become the bearer of God's salvation. It is this indwelling of the Spirit from the very first that is said to separate this Christology from adoptionism (277). He understands this indwelling Spirit to be the divinity of Jesus:

Jesus was empowered by God's Spirit; the Spirit of God is God as present, and thus a presence, a power, a force, an energy, so that Jesus is an embodiment of God as Spirit. But this is not an impersonal power that takes over and controls, but precisely God who works within human freedom, not from outside and dominating nor from inside and taking over, but actualizing freedom to its full capacity (276).

Two aspects should be noted in this Spirit Christology: Jesus' own religious experience, and the religious experience of those who follow him. Jesus' own experience was experience of God as Spirit present in him, enabling him to call God "Abba!" By sharing the Spirit with us, he enables us likewise to call God "Abba!"

When we penetrate to the inner person or subject in Jesus, we find only a created, human personality, although supremely graced and empowered by the Spirit. Haight denies that Jesus is a divine person: "Historical consciousness prevents one from saying that Jesus' being a human being refers to an integral but abstracted human nature that has as its principle of existence, not a human existence, but a divine person or hypostasis" (275, n. 34). This description of divine personality in Jesus may be somewhat tendentious ("integral but abstracted human nature"), but the meaning seems clear. Because he rejects the

¹ Roger Haight, S.J., "The Case for Spirit Christology," *TS* 53 (1992) 257-87, at 276. Hereafter, numbers in parentheses refer to pages in this article.

divine subject and, consequently, the communication of properties (275), he will not speak of the preexistence of Jesus (276).

In brief: Haight sees Jesus simply as a human person filled from the first moment of his existence with God as Spirit. There is in him no preexistent divine subject who has become an actor in human history through the human nature he has made his own. There is no eternal Son of God who has become a human being, but simply a man preeminently filled with God as Spirit.

Toward the beginning of his article Haight has provided us with six methodological criteria for judging the adequacy of a Christology. These criteria are well chosen. But using them to evaluate his Christology as described above, I find it to be defective, precisely in his denial that the ultimate personal subject in Jesus, the one who is Jesus, is truly and personally divine. For him, there is no one "born of the Father before all ages," who has, however, become truly one of us, truly and fully a human being. I would like to take these criteria up one at a time:

1. The first criterion is apologetic style: Christology should justify Christian experience of Jesus. It should explain why Christians find their salvation in him (260). And "salvation consists in a revelation of God" (266), which makes God present and empowers us as disciples.

Christian experience is undoubtedly where Christology must begin: the experience of the original disciples of Jesus and the experience of believers throughout the history of the Church up to and including our own day. Christians in their experience do relate to Jesus as Savior, but they also relate to him as Lord. Christian experience of Jesus is expressed in the doxologies given to him in the New Testament (e.g. Heb 13:21; 2 Pet 3:18; Rev 5:13) and found in Christian worship ever since. An experience of Jesus is expressed in Thomas's profession of faith, repeated by countless believers after him: "My Lord! and my God!" (John 20:28). These expressions are not directed simply to God as Spirit dwelling in him, but to Jesus himself. Haight's Spirit Christology does not justify this aspect of Christian experience.

2. Christology must be faithful to biblical language about Jesus. Here it seems to me that *all* the New Testament is normative, that an acceptable Christology cannot neglect significant portions of the New Testament witness. The prevailing New Testament Christology seems, strictly speaking, to be neither Logos Christology nor Spirit Christology, but a Christology of divine sonship. That Jesus is Son of God is declared or implied throughout the New Testament. Jesus is not just a son of God like every other believer, but God's "beloved Son" (Matt 3:17), "his own Son" (Rom 8:3), to whose image we are predestined to be conformed (Rom 8:29), "his only begotten Son" (John 1:14; 3:16).

Paul's preaching of the gospel "concerns his Son" (Rom 1:3). This Son is involved in the creation of the world: e.g. 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–17; Heb 1:2; John 1:3.

A Logos Christology did indeed lead some, like Apollinaris, to a monophysite view of Jesus that is incompatible with the New Testament. But this view is also incompatible with the Logos Christology of John. He calls those "antichrist" who do not agree that the Christ has come "in the flesh" (1 John 4:2, 3). A Logos Christology need not lead to positions incompatible with New Testament data. It is not unusual that a rich and fertile insight (like Logos Christology) bring forth some weeds which need to be trimmed back and corrected.

I recognize a pluralism of New Testament Christologies, but I am not willing to accept the view that the New Testament expresses mutually exclusive, because contradictory, Christologies. Accepting some formulations does not require us to reject others. It may not always be clear how they are to be reconciled, but this is an invitation to search for what Lonergan called "the higher viewpoint,"² the perspective which will put seemingly opposed expressions in some kind of genuine intelligible agreement with each other.

It seems to me, in particular, that Haight does not take serious account of the Christology of John. It is not only that he neglects John's teaching on the Logos with God in creation (John 1:1–3) and the affirmation of the incarnation of the Logos (John 1:14), but he also takes no account of the "I am" assertions of the Johannine Jesus. When he argues against the "preexistence of Jesus," he seems to render the matter tautological: the man Jesus did not exist as a human being before he was born (276). No one ever understood preexistence in this way, so why trouble to refute it? But the Johannine Jesus says: "Before Abraham came to be I am" (John 8:58). He also prayed, "Now Father glorify me in your own presence with the glory I had with you before the world was made" (John 17:5). Are these declarations to be discarded?

3. I agree, too, that Christology must be faithful to the Christological councils, especially Nicea and Chalcedon.

It is true that the Council of Nicea did not directly define the incarnation of the Word because Arius and Athanasius agreed on this. Still one must recognize that they agreed because it was the teaching of John 1:14. Nicea and the whole Christian tradition since has accepted this passage as important and significant. Haight does not appear to do so.

The main source of Arius's heresy does not seem to have been a

² Cf. *Insight* (London: Longmans, 1958) 13–19.

subordinationism implied in "Word," but one implied in "Son." A son cannot be of the same age as his father. The Father must exist before he begets the Son, hence there was [a time] when the Son was not.

It does not do justice to what Nicea was about, to say that it just wished to affirm that what was present and active in Jesus was not less than God. This is true of every good person: no less than God is present and active in them. The Holy Spirit dwells in each of us, in the community of the Church, and God is active in all the good that we do: *Quoties bona agimus, Deus in nobis atque nobiscum, ut operemur, operatur*, as the Second Council of Orange declared (DS 379).

The point of Nicea, given the agreement on the incarnation of the Word, was that the one acting in the actions of Jesus, the preexistent Son, was no less than God.

The Council of Chalcedon was indeed concerned to teach the full humanity of Jesus, that he is *homoousios* with us. But it was concerned directly and primarily to bring peace to the Church by finding a formula that brought together the legitimate affirmations of both Word-Flesh Christology and Word-Man Christology, and by avoiding the extremes of both the Monophysites and the Nestorians. The Chalcedonian formula makes affirmations (emphasized below) that seem clearly incompatible with Haight's Spirit Christology:

Following the holy Fathers, therefore, we all with one accord teach the profession of faith in the one identical Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We declare that he is perfect both in his divinity and in his humanity, truly God and truly man composed of body and rational soul; that he is consubstantial with the Father in his divinity, consubstantial with us in his humanity, like us in every respect except for sin (see Heb 4:15). *We declare that in his divinity he was begotten of the Father before time*, and in his humanity he was begotten in this last age of Mary the Virgin, the Mother of God, for us and for our salvation. We declare that *the one selfsame Christ, only-begotten Son and Lord, must be acknowledged in two natures* without any commingling or change [against extreme Word-Flesh tendencies] or *division or separation* [against extreme Word-Man tendencies]; that the distinction between the natures is in no way removed by their union but rather that the specific character of each nature is preserved and *they are united in one person and one hypostasis*. We declare that he is not split or divided into two persons, but that there is *one selfsame only-begotten Son, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ*. This the prophets have taught about him from the beginning; this Jesus Christ himself taught us; this the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.³

³ "Declaration of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon," in *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation*, trans. John F. Clarkson et al. (St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder, 1960) 172.

Chalcedon did not think it was differing from Ephesus, but clarifying it because of the monophysite interpretations that had arisen. Chalcedon, too, called Mary *theotokos*, which is possible only through the communication of properties—a device of language which is also found in the New Testament. No doubt the teaching of Chalcedon is historically conditioned and the “two natures, one person” formula can be improved on. But it seems to me that the improvement is not to be found by failing to grasp and acknowledge what the Council formally intended to teach in and through that formula.

An important point here is Spirit *ecclesiology*. What the believing Church proclaims in faith with virtual universality over many centuries is what the Holy Spirit is leading her to profess. This principle needs to be cautiously applied since cultural overlays can appear as profession of faith, although they are not, as in the widespread assumption of male superiority among church Fathers. But the unanimity of the Church in professing the Christology of divine Sonship as taught at Nicea and Chalcedon cannot be dismissed and its main point explained away.

4. I agree, too, that Christology must be intelligible and coherent; but we will always have to distinguish, as Paul did, between the wisdom of the world and the foolishness of God. Once again, this can be a delicate and difficult matter at times.

It seems to me that Haight's position is coherent within itself, but not with the experience of most Christians, with the teaching of the New Testament, nor with the Councils of the Church and the Great Tradition generally.

5. A contemporary Christology must respond to our own situation and problems. While it may not be possible to spell all this out, still I see at least three important requirements for Christology and for theology generally: (1) we must recognize the influence of historical conditioning; (2) we cannot be simply mythological and metaphorical in our efforts to understand the faith; and (3) we must recognize and assess positively the religious pluralism of our times.

As Haight well observes, today's recognition of religious pluralism in the world constitutes a special challenge for Christology. This leads him to say that we must not only admit that God as Spirit is at work in other world religions (281)—a point made, it seems, by Vatican II in the opening section of *Nostra aetate*⁴ and even more explicitly by Pope

⁴ “[God's] providence, His manifestations of goodness, and His saving designs extend to all men (cf. Wis. 8:1, Acts 14:17, Rom. 2:6–7, 1 Tim. 2:40) against the day when the elect will be united in that Holy City ablaze with the splendor of God, where the nations will walk in His light (cf. Apoc. 21:23 f.)” (*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott, S.J. [New York: America, 1966] 661).

John Paul II in *Redemptoris missio*⁵—but also recognize “the possibility of other savior figures of equal status [with Jesus]” (280). This latter point seems to undercut radically the mission of the Church expressed in Matt 28:19–20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

In Christian experience, Jesus is Lord, the mediator of God’s saving action, the incarnation of God’s love, power, and wisdom in the world. God has so taken possession of this one concrete human life that in it and through it he acts effectively and definitively for the eternal welfare of the whole human race.

We should acknowledge, however, that the saving action of God drawing human beings to himself in lives of unselfish love is present throughout the whole human race, and that people everywhere respond to this with greater or lesser fidelity. Furthermore, we should acknowledge that God in his gracious wisdom calls some individuals in special ways to be the vehicles of his light and help for others. These individuals are religious leaders in every time and place. None of this is peculiar to Christians, nor do Christians necessarily respond more faithfully to God than any other people.

God, however, makes a special appeal and issues a special call to the world through the mission of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is not simply a prophet and teacher whose insight into the divine mystery is sharper and deeper. Rather he is truly the revelation of God in person, unsurpassable in fullness, intensity, and saving power. Every other gift of God finds its completion in the person and the work of Jesus. It is this which justifies the missionary activity of the Church, while requiring that it be respectful of all that God has done in other ways.

6. Finally, I agree with Haight’s last requirement: Christology must be able to inspire Christian life. I am not, I confess, persuaded that Spirit Christology by itself is able to do this without a Christology of divine Sonship. At least for myself, as I contemplate a purely human Jesus, though one in whom the Spirit is fully operative, I experience an immense sadness and sense of loss: for this would mean that God after all did not love us enough to become one of us and die for us. But Haight thinks that such a Jesus is one we can follow more readily.

The Scriptures have exhorted us in the Old and New Testaments to imitate God: “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy!” (Lev 19:2). “Be

⁵ “It is the Spirit who sows the ‘seeds of the Word’ present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ” (cited in Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church* [New York: Paulist, 1992] 195).

perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). By becoming one of us the Son of God has shown us what this means, and by sharing with us his Holy Spirit, he has made it possible for us to follow him.

The fundamental norm for Catholic faith for me is *continuity*, not in words or formulas, but in thought and intent. The distinction John XXIII made at the beginning of Vatican II, between the substance of the ancient faith and the formulas in which it is expressed, has become classical. I believe that this continuity in the faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. Another quality of truly Catholic theology is *comprehensiveness*, a both/and stance, rather than an either/or stance. I fully accept Spirit Christology, as stating that the Holy Spirit in divine fullness was operative in Jesus, but I also accept Word Christology. And in the long run the important point for me, one which I regard not as an optional theological position, but as an article of faith, is that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God made human—in whatever terms you express this.

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