

CHRISTOLOGY AND PLURALISM OF RELIGIONS AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstrak. *The task of the laity is to "direct the world to Christ." This does not mean forming a Christian society, but creating the possibility of believing in Christ, allowing the attitude of faith from the human side. Faith is not a spontaneous natural reaction, it is not an instinct that occurs automatically and is forced, nor is it an action taken because it is forced, but is free and autonomous. In this situation, in all the reviews described here, the service and role of lay people are placed.*

Katakunci. *salvation ♦ pluralism ♦*

Outline: *historical Jesus ♦ the titles of Jesus ♦ salvation from perspectives of asian pluralism ♦*

INTRODUCTION



Christology is the methodological study of Jesus Christ. It is a theological discipline undertaken by Christians. Christology is grounded on the Scriptures in which Jesus Christ is presented as the center of our faith. From the point of view of Christians Scripture is the main source of their principle doctrine: Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world. Dupuis says that the first Christological statement of Jesus as the Son of God was revealed by Peter's confession of faith, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). The titles of Jesus: Christ, Lord, and Son of God became the center of Christological faith for the Church. In addition, there is another title recognized by our Church: Jesus is the Savior of our world. "We know

that this is truly the savior of the world” (John 42:42b). And finally, Jesus is understood to be the source of all things: though Him and in Him all are created in this world

Pluralism of religion is a daunting challenge for those of us who seek to live out our Christian faith among Asian people. One of the greatest difficulties is that most fundamentalist Christians believe that “outside the church there is no salvation”. In order to be saved one has to confess Jesus and receive baptism in the Catholic Church. This is a coercive approach to evangelization from the Church Triumphant of the past. Fundamentalist doctrine is an aggressive and disrespectful evangelizing approach that is unacceptable to other religions. I have a long and varied experience of living among people who hold non-Christian beliefs and I have experienced many challenges. For instance, some other religions asked me if it was true that I believed that Jesus is the Savior of the world. They argued that if this is so, then Christians claim that the world is under the power of Jesus and that Christianity must be the only valid religion. They take offense that their own beliefs are written off.

This problem has impacted Christians economically, socially, politically and theologically. Asia is a vast region where its countries are characterized by cultural diversity and religious pluralism: Muslim, Buddhist, Hindi and Confucian beliefs. Christianity is a small minority in most Asian countries. After the collapse of colonial control by Western nations, the Christian minorities now often live under the domination of other religions, which in many countries make up the majority. In some Asian countries, there is no public recognition given to Christians. Governments do not provide for nor even allow religion to be taught as a subject in public schools. As a result we, Christians, are often not well educated in our faith. For this reason, Christians often struggle to integrate their faith with their own identity culturally as Asians. Moreover, interreligious conflict has been a never ending tragedy throughout our history. Because of interreligious conflicts, dialogue between religions has been almost non-existent. The conflict

that is present in many of these societies has even made it difficult to live together in peace and harmony

In the face of the above dilemma we, Asian people, need to discover some solutions that will allow us to embrace the believers of other religions as we live in the midst of diversity. Before we search for approaches to this problem, as Christians we first have to acknowledge who is the center of our faith. The absolute center of our faith is Jesus, the Son of God.

HISTORICAL JESUS IS CENTRAL ROLE

The historical Jesus has a central role in Christology. Psychologically, culture contributes to and shapes us as human persons. This is the context within which persons adopt their values. We must recognize the impact upon Jesus of the historical period and culture in which He lived. Only in this context may we understand more clearly the humanity of Jesus and the way in which he expressed himself. The period and culture in which He lived influenced how his life, his social interactions, and his society are portrayed in the New Testament. They are important background for how we interpret Jesus' words and actions. A nuanced approach gives us a more sophisticated picture of Jesus in action and it helps us to understand the response of his audience to his teachings.

In the beginning there was Jesus, the child. He played, studied and matured. He was made to be fully human for us. This has special significance for us. We can see the very human side of Jesus. How do we stay in touch with his humanity as we elaborate our Theologies? Liberation Theology focuses on the saving activity of Jesus' ministry. When we read the Gospels what we single out as most important is shaped as much by questions from our own time and perspective as it is by what it meant when the Gospels were written. There is another aspect of this that we must consider. We must question the significance of our own images of Jesus in comparison with the one the gospels

give us of Jesus. The question is not simply to recognize the images that we hold but also their impact upon our Christology. Behind all the above, lies a fundamental question: What values did the authors of the Scriptures choose to pass on to us in their writings? Our memories are not a fixed reality but are in relationship to the past and they are recreated as our present situation changes. As time goes on, what began as just facts eventually becomes a narrative of Jesus' life. Yet our concern does not simply focus on the construction of the narrative but on what are the questions that we bring to the narrative as given to us. In a sense we must move beyond history. What started as just facts is now far richer. Our own lives and the narration that we give to our lives not only guide us in our interpretation of the Christ Story but we continually bring new questions to the story. What does the Scriptures mean for us today? Why did this account happen this way and what are its impacts? History shapes our faith but so does our own experience. We start with the facts we know about Jesus' life that come from Scripture.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth while Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee. Mary and Joseph were his parents. They were faithful to the Jewish Law; they followed the tradition and culture of their society. As was the Jewish custom, Jesus was presented as an infant at the temple in Jerusalem for purification (Luke 2:22-23). He knew how to read the scriptures and could interpret them. Jesus was called upon to read and preach in the synagogue and the temple even as a youth. His parents found him in the temple, interacting and having discussions with the teachers (reminds us of the Bar Mitzvah of today) (Lk2:46). Jesus spoke Aramaic, and he probably knew some Greek since it was an official language for business and politics in the Roman Empire. Today, Galilee is an agriculturally productive region and archaeological evidence supports that it was so in the time of Jesus as well. Therefore, economically, at that time Jesus' family was likely not destitute as work would have been available. The Gospels depicts the population of Galilee as engaged in farming, shepherding, and fishing and in crafts such as carpentry. Jesus might have been a carpenter; building

houses, windows and furniture. He also taught scripture in various synagogues.

In the Gospel, Jesus was known as a teacher. His urgent message was to proclaim the Kingdom of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). Jesus established a communal relationship with his disciples. He called his disciples to follow his way; sending them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-13). The main purpose of Jesus' ministry was to bring new life to the people of his time. He sent his disciples to empower and embrace the marginalized in spite of challenges by the religious authorities of that time.

Jesus came to the Jordan River where John baptized him. The reason for his baptism was to begin his ministry to share the Kingdom of God with his followers. He traveled around Galilee preaching. He preached a message that was universal and favorable. The heart of his teaching as presented in the gospels was to describe the Reign of God and to announce its presence. Jesus called for repentance that would lead to forgiveness. He communicated a sense of urgency in his message; the hearer must respond right now. He also emphasized an eschatological dimension in his preaching. Jesus emphasized that he was bringing glad tidings to the people through his performance of miracles, healings, and exorcisms. The disciples were charged to drive out demons (Mark 1:21-28) and to cure the sick (Mark 1:29-2:12). We see Jesus proclaiming an inclusive mission through his ministry to both Jew and Gentile. He crossed boundaries to bring glad tidings to the Gentiles (Mark 4:35-8:21). He built up the Kingdom of God among Jews and Gentiles alike.

He often taught with parables. He fit the role of a prophet; one who urges people to turn their minds and actions in a new direction and who brings a new teaching. Through his actions and his proclamation of the Gospel he sought to return human dignity to its prior elevated position; as it was when God created human beings. The excluded are meant

to have a place in society. Jesus embraced the human dignity of the people of his time. His manner and his proclamation of the Gospel in Galilee differed from that of other religious teachers such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The focus of those others was to maintain God's law and to guarantee the purity of the temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees devoted themselves to rituals of purification such as, keeping the Sabbath and the washing of hands so as to remain faithful to the God of Israel.

Jesus' teaching was also in contradiction to that of the Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection after death. It is very clear that Jesus was also facing pluralism in his time. Though true to his own position, He respected others in their beliefs (the woman at the well and the Syro-Phonecian woman) and He dialogued respectfully with them. He respected them as individuals and without judgment. He enhanced the lives of all those about Him by bringing new life through his total commitment to love others inclusively.

Jesus' mission was to make evident his authority and to establish his rule over all. Central to his rule is salvation, bringing life in its fullness, especially by forgiving and including those who are most excluded from society. The contrast between Jesus' authority and that of the religious authorities was clearly shown in the parallel contexts of these accounts: beginning with the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12); contrasted by Jesus' call to Levi, who is associated with "sinners." (2:13-17); moving on to a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees over fasting (2:18-22); contrasted once again by the Pharisees' confrontation with Jesus about the disciples picking grain to eat on the Sabbath (2:23-27)

Jesus impacted the people in the society where he lived. First, this can be seen in the positive response of his disciples, who followed him throughout Galilee (Mk1:16-17). Second, it can be seen in the effects of his prophetic acts and his attitude as conveyed through his teachings, healings and exorcisms. He communicated a spirit of freedom and justice to the people of his society; to the poor, suffering

and excluded. He brought restoration of the relationship between humans and God. He revealed to his listeners his identity and the reason for his coming; he spoke with authority as the Son of Man who has power to forgive sins; he embraced those who were excluded and labeled as sinners (Mark 2:11; 17).

Jesus' claim to authority was seen as something to be condemned and as evil by the religious authorities of that day. However, Jesus did not reject morality and the law as his opponents claimed. He appealed to a deeper morality. Love was at the heart of Jesus' authority which brought liberation for women, for the poor and for all those who were enslaved by evil or oppressive structures. However, his prophetic role was not embraced by his own family or his neighbors in Nazareth. They continued to see him simply as the son of a carpenter despite the fact that Jesus did many miracles.

The New Testament understands and portrays Jesus' death as a salvific act. Dupuis points out that the culmination and the final expression of his life was in giving to others. Jesus' life giving paradigm is summed up: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). There are three explanations that clarify how the death of Jesus was accomplished for a salvific purpose. First, Jesus was a prophet. Collin emphasizes the relation of Jesus' baptism to his role as a prophet. His willingness to suffer and die in Jerusalem is the consequence of a prophetic role. Because of the infidelity of Israel, Jesus, the prophet, was rejected. Jesus' prophecy inaugurates a new way but people reject Him. In its broadest meaning, Jesus' death is a sacrifice which brings reconciliation for the world. In our understanding of the nature of sacrifice today we tend to think of physical violence such as in the case of a suicide bomber who sacrifices his life for a cause. On the other hand, Jesus offered himself in sacrifice as a reconnection between two worlds: the human and the divine. A key image here is of Jesus as the Suffering Servant who opens the kingdom of God to all people in all times. .

This understanding of Jesus' death in order to bring about the kingdom of God is also a relevant concept in the context of Asia. What is appealing about this image is that our God desires to liberate the people who are suffering in Asia. In fact, many are suffering from persecution be it from the dominant religion, or from interreligious conflict, or simply from poverty. In order to emphasize this meaning of Jesus' death in Asia one can best state that Jesus came to establish God's kingdom in order to bring justice and reconciliation to the people in Asia.

An understanding of the concept of resurrection "as being raised from the dead" only became a belief in Judaism after the Exile. It was envisioned as a collective phenomenon. It would be God's vindication for Israel because of the traumatic event that Israel suffered by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This belief was not universal among the Jews but was held by some. This sense of the resurrection as a restorative event for Israel was incorporated into Jesus' teaching of the Reign of God. However, in the Reign of God the resurrection is seen both as a cosmic as well as a communal event. Yet again Jesus' resurrection provokes a new understanding of the concept.

The event of Jesus' resurrection was a turning point for his disciples; it signified a spiritual transformation. This was the unfathomable experience between Jesus and his disciples; a culmination of their time spent together on the journey through Galilee to Jerusalem. His resurrection turned their lives around when they finally came to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. They are the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection as recounted in the Gospels. Before the resurrection, the disciples saw the death of Jesus a tragic moment in their lives. Their expectation that Jesus would be the long sought after "Messiah" who would establish the earthly kingdom of Israel had not been realized. They were yet struggling to recognize who Jesus was. Jesus' resurrection made clear that His life was not taken away but instead it was changed. Their own spiritual transformation was shown by their burst of courage to go forth and to publically preach Jesus' message.

The consequence of Jesus' mission to forgive sin resulted in a dramatic turnaround in the behavior of his disciples.

The theology of liberation emphasizes the struggle for justice. Jesus' proposal was not to make war to establish peace like the Roman peace based on coercion. But He did come to establish God's justice. Jesus' followers today continue to struggle for justice in the world. We are called to begin a new life that starts with a conversion of our hearts and from the new understanding that we have received. The Reign of God continues to unfold in our world. Its promise brings hope to the marginalized of the world. We are moved to carry the message of hope to others who are oppressed by injustice. God is at work in the world and continues to renew his creation.

THE TITLE OF JESUS

Different titles were given to Jesus in the New Testament. The titles we find in the Scriptures are Son of God, Son of Man, teacher, etc. All of these titles reveal different attributes of Jesus as a person. All of the titles have cultural and historical roots. Their meaning today is not always clear to us. Jesus is not completely known through any of these titles. An even greater challenge for us is to find an adequate language to describe the Spirit of God. We are limited to our own experience. How do we describe what is beyond our experience? The Spirit reflects the relationship between the Father and the Son. How can we understand the depth of this relationship? As affirmed by Vatican II the Spirit is active throughout the whole world and is not limited to those who identify themselves as Christians. Christ promised to send the Spirit. He is at work through the Spirit. Therefore, wherever the Spirit is present, so too, Christ is present.

The Councils of Nicaea has acknowledged that Jesus is God because He is the Son of God. It gives us the understanding of God as One in three distinct persons. On the other hand, the Council of Chalcedon acknowledged that Jesus was not only God but that he was also fully

human. The two natures: human and divine come together. In theological language, what does this mean concretely? There is no consistent picture presented to us in the New Testament. We find many different images. The divinity of Jesus is revealed when he is called by the title, Lord. It is Jesus, the Lord.

The experience of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to Jesus' disciples and the outpouring of the spirit, and the disciples' preaching affirms their faith in the risen Lord. They accept the identity of Jesus as the son of God. They experienced and saw the Spirit of Jesus at work. This experience of the Spirit continues in his disciples and the early communities. The Spirit is still active and it is powerfully demonstrated in the new converts.

How do we understand the claim that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ in a way that is not exclusive of believers of other faiths? What is salvation? The act of salvation accomplished by Jesus is fundamental in Christology. In the ancient times the understanding was that salvation came from a powerful God who rescued us from the force of evil. Through many acts God rescued the Israelites from their slavery. When they crossed the Red Sea, God rescued them from the hands of Egypt. For the Israelites it was important to be faithful to God who had rescued them. This was a theme that continued throughout biblical history. In the Old Testament God also worked through human mediation by using prophets and kings. God used human beings to mediate between humans and God. Prophets and Kings acted on behalf of God through their words and their actions. After exile the understanding of salvation was broadened to embrace a more universal meaning; Salvation was not only for Israel, but also for all the nations.

In the New Testament era the early Christian community continued to hold on to all of the elements of the Jewish understanding of salvation but the focus was totally on Jesus of Nazareth. The death of Jesus wasn't simply the death of a prophet; Jesus was the final messenger of God who established the Reign of God. The salvation brought by

Jesus is definitive. We do not expect another messenger to come. In Act 4:12, Peter' speech makes the point that by no other name are we saved. However, salvation in Jesus' name is more than simply identifying oneself as Christian. Biblically the name of someone reveals something about their very essence. Being Christian requires a change of ones very essence. What is being talked about here is an intimate knowledge of Jesus. And knowing Jesus intimately is knowing the Father intimately as well. What is important as Christians is not what we have been taught about Jesus or even the embodiment of some of the principles that Jesus lived out. The heart of our faith is a personal encounter and engagement with Christ.

SALVATION FROM PERSPECTIVE OF ASIAN PLURALISM

Salvation from the perspective of Asian pluralism can be understood as Jesus who comes to rescue us from being discriminated against as a Christian minority. The hope of Asian people for salvation in Jesus is His promise of new life; life that is abundant. As a Savior, His coming to this world brought glad tidings to those who were excluded, marginalized, or persecuted from society. He taught his disciples and the people of his time through his words and example. The example of Jesus' life helps me to see Him as Savior. His saving power was present in his ministry with people who were sick mentally and spiritually, and in His fraternal dealings with His disciples. He cured many people who were in need through His healing power and He restored them to their dignity as children of God through His loving acceptance of the marginalized.

Christ is the affirmation that God offers His salvation to us. Christ is a gateway to a deeper knowledge of God. It is important that we look at God through the lens of the Trinity. Asian people are particularly affected by this image of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A deep seated value for Asian peoples is to live harmonious and peaceful

lives and this is the very essence of the Trinity! Christ, as the dutiful son, calls Asians to come and see the deepest values of Christianity. The uniqueness of Jesus' invitation to come and experience the peace and harmony of the Trinity can be appealing to members of other religions despite their differences from us in their perspectives and ideologies. It may at the very least lead them to respect us for our beliefs.

The Images of Jesus in the New Testament which point to His divinity are those of Savior, Teacher and Healer. There are also images of Jesus that remind me more of his humanity such as the figures of: a mother with her child; a friend; a homeless person; and, a doctor. I find that the images of Jesus as human are more dominant in my spirituality than the divine ones. The divinity and humanity are united in one, as Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament. How Jesus related to his Father and to the people of his time guides me in my own relationship with others. The stories of His life also provide many images that help me to understand who Jesus is in my own spiritual journey. The basic theme underlying these images characterizes Jesus as one who is an authentic person who offers physical and spiritual wholeness, justice and peace, and reconciliation for all people. The images of relationships and of incidents in Jesus' life always reveal Him respecting and restoring people's dignity.

He commands, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 12:33b). Our moral life is not just about doing good by our actions, but how to be good in our relationships with God and others. As one who comes from an Asian country, our Christology has shaped us to be a witness of Jesus' salvation among those who belong to different religions from us.

Sharing our gifts is an essential requirement for building communal life in the Church. Each member has unique gifts that should be used for the Reign of God. An appreciation of diversity and pluralism in the Church is important for the universal mission of God. Respecting diversity makes the proclamation of the message of Christ more inclusive and effective for all the People of God. In recognition of the

tragic reality of our world today the Church must promote the liberation of all peoples; those who are oppressed, persecuted or excluded from society because of race, culture or personal background.

The Church has the task of promoting life to its fullest. A pastoral approach that widens the circle of the people of God without distinction would witness to the inclusive nature of the mission that has been given to us as Jesus' disciples. The church must give priority to the marginalized by recognizing their dignity as persons and defending their freedom; a freedom that is grounded in God's love. Opening our door to the poor as Jesus has commanded us must be an essential component in the mission of the church. This becomes an ever more challenging task for the Church, as the realities of globalization create greater disparities between and among cultures and societies.

CONCLUSION

Dialogue is the bridge to promote pluralism and unity and the key to bringing people in the church into greater communion. Through dialogue, we open ourselves to diversity and see others through the eyes of our God who loves each one unconditionally. Dialogue enables the people of God to see God's face in diversity. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration is needed to open the church's horizon and make space for others. Through the process of dialogue, the People of God are encouraged to express their unique experiences. Allowing for the enculturation of the church is a way to express in a more intimate manner diverse people's communion with God and within their communities. It is possible to do this without imputing stereotypes and generalizations about a particular church or the universal church. The global Church becomes the community of Catholic Christians who embrace people from all cultures, ways of life, and religions. This newly envisioned church exists in the world and is willing to respond to people's needs without creating obstacles because of boundaries of identification.

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