Class Notes #2

Preaching and Christology

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Readings: Buttrick, Chs. 1-3; Moltmann, Ch. II (pp. 38-72).

As we learned in Week 1, the RCL is structured around the Christian calendar, and the overall theological orientation is Christological. Lectionary preaching requires of the preacher a Christological perspective from which she may reflect on the following questions: What does the Bible say about Jesus? Who is Jesus for us today? In what sense does Jesus become our Christ, the Messiah? What does salvation (or salvation in/of Christ) mean for us? And, how do the salvific events of Jesus Christ in the New Testament relate to both God’s redemptive acts in the Hebrew Bible and our own experiences of the presence and work of God?

Keeping these questions in mind, we need to know that Christology has been understood in various ways in different historical, cultural, and ecclesiological contexts. These can be summarized in four different views: (1) the orthodox Christology of the ancient Church Fathers, (2) the anthropological Christology of modern Europe, (3) John Hick’s metaphorical Christology; and (4) Jürgen Moltmann’s eschatological Christology. While the first two views are exclusively Christocentric, Hick’s view opens interfaith dialogue, and Moltmann’s eschatological view is grounded in a Trinitarian perspective.

Orthodox Christology

Both Moltmann and Hick criticize orthodox Christology for being metaphysical and speculating about the deification of the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Hick explains that before the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451), Christian terms exalting Jesus as the Lord, Savior, and Son of God were used in devotional, ecstatic, or liturgical ways, rather than as literally and rigid terms of later theological formulations. These terms applied to Jesus were analogous to the language of love, and were not intended to be taken with “strict literality.” However, in a process of indoctrination, the early Church Fathers picked up the term “incarnation” from the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel (1:14, “And the Logos was made flesh”), and interpreted that “not as metaphor but as shorthand for the doctrine that Jesus was God the Son living a human life, being both ‘truly God’ and ‘truly man.’” According to them, Jesus was literally (not metaphorically) God and literally human.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Based on this theory of incarnation, says Moltmann, the Church Fathers understood that the salvation of humanity means entering the eternal, immortal situation of the divine and becomes possible through God’s initiative (“from above”). “God became man so that we human beings should be gods . . . . That is, the eternal Son of God becomes human so that we human beings should receive the divine sonship.” The incarnation is the movement in which the divine and human natures are united in the one person of the God-human being. This “two-nature Christology,” based on the concept of the pre-existent deity of Jesus, is well represented in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, which emphasize the symbols of the virgin birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We often hear sermons based on this two-nature Christology. Such sermons emphasize that as wretched sinners we can be saved by believing only Jesus Christ and that he, as the Son of God or the Messiah, has the power to expiate our treacherous sins. As Moltmann rightly points out, such preaching has some theological weaknesses: First, it does not view Jesus as a historical person, but the human form of divinity, so that Jesus’ humanity, including his capacity for feeling, his prophetic proclamation and earthly ministry, and his suffering and death on the cross, are subordinated to his exaltation and triumph.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The second weakness of orthodox (metaphysical) Christology is that the concept of salvation, which means entering the immortality of the divine, is actually based on the dualism of Hellenistic anthropology (Platonic dualism) between body and mind (or flesh and spirit), which is foreign to Jewish anthropology. The early Church Fathers, who were influenced by Hellenistic philosophy and culture, ignored the Judaic holistic and communal understanding of humanity, in which humans are whole beings without a split between body and soul, and also communal beings whose identities are given by the communities they belong to. Preaching based on orthodox Christology rooted in individualistic dualism ignores the physical, moral, economic, and social sins of humanity in its concept of salvation, and does not challenge listeners to transform the actual human conditions of this world.

The third weakness of orthodox Christology is that it does not take seriously God’s redemptive acts in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the New Testament is considered the unique source for understanding the relationship between God and humanity. As a result, preachers who have an orthodox Christological perspective think that their sermons should always talk about Jesus Christ. Their exclusive view of salvation through Christ Jesus contradicts the Trinitarian concept of God, which is present implicitly and explicitly throughout the entire Bible. Furthermore, their absolute and narrow view of the revelation of God makes it impossible for the Christian Church to engage in interreligious dialogue to broaden and deepen its understanding of Christian theology.

Anthropological Christology

If orthodox Christology is “Christology from above” centering on the divine nature of Christ, anthropological Christology is “Christology from below.” That is, the center of anthropological Christology is the **human nature** of Jesus rather than the exalted or pre-existent divine nature of Christ.

This view represents the late 18th- and 19th-century liberalism that flourished in Europe. Since the Enlightenment, human dignity and human rights became the foundation of modern political constitutions. The development of science and technology made people think that the fate of the human world was determined neither by the forces of nature nor the divine power, but by the will of human beings. The primary concern for modern people was how human beings could find the way to their humanity and its authenticity. Here, “the idea of humankind in its morally complete perfection” became the goal of the individual human being. When people began to approach the Bible with this modern mindset, they discovered the earthly human Jesus. In Jesus’ life and personality, they found the primal image of humanity, sinlessness or moral perfection, well-pleasing to God.

In this manner, Jesus was viewed by modern people as “the prototype of humanity” (Kant). The divine nature of Christ and the eternal Logos in orthodox Christology were now replaced by the pattern of moral perfection of Jesus of Nazareth. In this view, salvation means moral “sinlessness” and is achieved by the individual’s complete commitment to God, that is, the imitation of Jesus.[[4]](#footnote-4)

An anthropological Christology prevailed in the Puritan sermons in New England, as well as in the sermons of the 19th- and early 20th-century liberals in Europe and the U.S. (e.g., Philips Brooks and John Broadus). Sermons emphasizing moral perfection as the way to salvation are also heard in contemporary preaching. In the worst cases, preachers overstress the doctrine of original sin and direct their listeners’ minds into regarding themselves as perishing and hopeless sinners. These preachers then force their listeners to repent, not only in words, but also by their changed behavior, such as their strong commitment to the church.

Anthropological Christology has the following weaknesses: First, it privatizes the Christian faith by emphasizing individual moral perfection at the personal and psychological level. It ignores the interconnectedness of individual life with the larger society those individuals belong to.

The second weakness of anthropological Christology is that the concept of salvation which is limited to individual moral perfection reduces the Christian gospel to individual morality. In the Christian gospel, salvation is much broader concept, affecting not only the individual person but also the social and cosmic dimensions, including all of creation, which is to be restored by God’s sovereign power (cf. Romans 8:19).

The third weakness of anthropological Christology is that it overlooks the central theme of the Bible. More precisely, the Bible is the history of God’s redemptive acts in many different times. Biblical narratives from the creation stories and patriarchal history, through the prophetic pronouncements, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the witnesses of various communities of faith to the presence and work of God in human history. Moreover, God’s redemptive acts are still ongoing for the fulfillment of God’s promise in Christ’s Second Coming. An anthropological Christology does not take full account of the theological implications of such biblical narratives.

Now, the critical question is whether the traditional views of orthodox and anthropological Christology are sufficient for preaching the gospel to listeners situated in our contemporary, postmodern, and pluralistic culture. How might we preachers respond to the theological and existential questions emerging from listeners’ particular historical and cultural contexts? In answer to these questions, contemporary theologians Hick and Moltmann offer alternative Christologies.

Metaphorical Christology

Hick’s basic approach to Christology is to recover the original intention of the Christological language that was applied to Jesus in the New Testament. While biblical writers used Christological language metaphorically, such as Jesus the Messiah, the Savior, and the Son of God, the early Church Fathers and later theologians absolutized those terms by interpreting them literally in order to institutionalize the Christian Church and indoctrinate the Christian faith.

According to Hick’s thesis, Jesus is Christ in a metaphorical sense. Considering that “metaphor is a form of non-literal or figurative speech along with metonymy, irony, synecdoche, hyperbole, simile, idiom, and meiosis,” a metaphorical Christology holds that Jesus is Christ because Jesus was a human being, exceptionally open and responsive to the divine presence. In so far as Jesus was “the ideal of human life” by doing God’s will, that is, “living a life of self-giving love, or agape,” God incarnated life in Jesus. In other words, Jesus “incarnated a love that is a finite reflection of the infinite divine love. . . . In Jesus, we see a man living in a startling degree of awareness of God and of response to God’s presence.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Hick’s metaphorical understanding of Christology thus rejects the two-nature Christology. He does not see Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity, but as a man responding fully to divine grace and doing the will of God. Hick’s emphasis on the humanity of Jesus seems to reflect the anthropological Christology of modern liberal minds. Yet, there is a difference between them. While the anthropological view still presupposes the deity of Christ by idealizing Jesus’ humanity (i.e., Jesus is divine because he is morally perfect just as God is perfect, and hence our goal is to be perfect also by imitating Jesus), the metaphorical view regards Jesus as an enlightened person inspired by the divine Spirit. Hick raises the following questions against anthropological Christology: “How could we establish on historical grounds that Jesus was perfectly sinless . . . or that he was in all respects morally and spiritually superior to every other human being who has ever lived?”[[6]](#footnote-6) For Hick, Jesus does not hold a unique status as the supreme point of contact between God and humankind. Rather, he is one of the saints in human history who discovered the truth or the way of humanity.

In our pluralistic world, the metaphorical view contributes to interreligious dialogue. It opens a door for Christian preachers to have dialogue with other religions on equal terms. It has at least two theological problems, however. First, by emphasizing only the life and ministry of Jesus and ignoring his suffering, death, and resurrection, Hick’s understanding of the Christological events is partial. In fact, the resurrection and *parousia* (Second Coming) of Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith, according to the New Testament. If the concept of the incarnation is understood metaphorically, Hick should also help us understand the resurrection and *parousia* of Christ metaphorically.

The second problem with metaphorical Christology is that it fails to connect the history of God’s promise in the Hebrew Bible with the Christological events in the New Testament. Christology should be understood in the larger framework of God’s redemptive works, both in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, rather than simply in terms of the life of Jesus. At this point, Hick’s metaphorical Christology needs to develop the coherent theological theme of God’s redemptive works.

Eschatological Christology

Moltmann describes our contemporary world from a socio-political perspective in three ways, and raises several critical questions: (1) In our world-wide economic system, inequality and injustice are increasing. Who is Christ for the poor in developing countries? Who is Christ for us, when we make use of their poverty for our own purposes? Who is Christ for “the new poor” in developed countries? (2) Our world is under threat of nuclear weapons. Who is Christ for us today, threatened as we are by a nuclear inferno? (3) We live with increasing destruction of the natural environment, increasing annihilation of vegetables and animal species, increasing exploitation of the earth’s irreplaceable energy resources and pollution of the earth, water and air through poisonous waste and fumes. Who is Christ for a dying natural world and for us today?[[7]](#footnote-7)

In order to answer these contextual questions, Moltmann approaches Christology from the eschatological point of view. He considers the core of Christology as the Easter message that “Jesus has risen from the dead and became the first-fruit of our resurrection.” The resurrection of Christ is an eschatological symbol, which reveals God’s eternal moment, i.e., the presence of God in the Spirit. The experience of the risen Christ is the experience of the Spirit, and that makes it possible to relate the humanity of Jesus to the divinity of Christ dialectically. On the one hand, the confession of faith in the risen Christ exalts Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God, and this exaltation becomes the cognitive ground for the incarnation and history of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the incarnation and history of Jesus Christ is the “true”’ ground for his exaltation and presence. The interpretation of the Easter event as eschatological revelation signifies that, in the crucified Christ, the future of human history—the annihilation of death and the new creation—has already begun. God is now present among us in the Spirit and is working in and through the Spirit for the fulfillment of God’s future promise of the Kingdom of God.[[8]](#footnote-8)

From this eschatological view, Christology is understood within the Trinitarian framework. God’s work of creation and redemption in the Hebrew Bible continues in the New Testament through the work of the Holy Spirit in, with, and through Jesus. Moreover, God continues to participate in the present time through the Spirit in order to fulfill God’s promise. In the Trinitarian concept of God, ultimate salvation means the consummation of God’s promise, i.e., the fulfillment of the kingdom of God on earth. In this eschatological concept of salvation, the cosmological (or metaphysical), the personal (or anthropological), and the ecological (or cosmic) dimensions are interdependent, because salvation does not simply mean entering paradise after death or individual freedom from personal sin. Rather, it means the new creation of the whole world by the restoration of the sovereignty of God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Moltmann’s eschatological view implies that preaching should help listeners remember what God has promised through the Christological events and evoke a vision for the future of the human community. This kind of preaching can be prepared through three steps: First, the preacher must recognize the reality of our world, including the vicious evil power in human history, and analyze it critically. Second, Christological texts should be interpreted from an eschatological perspective as a source of Christian hope. Third, the preacher should be able to envision the future of human community, concretely and practically, through pastoral sensibility and theological knowledge, and invite the listeners to participate in fulfilling that vision.

1. John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 47-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hick, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Moltmann, 65-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 75-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)