***Theological Principles***

*Incarnation*

Jesus is thought to have saved us by his death on the cross. Is his death really atonement to the Father for the sins of the world, as Anselm taught? If that’s the case, doesn’t that diminish the loving mercy of the Father? Why shouldn’t his taking on human form and his whole life be thought of a salvific? The Word becoming flesh, or the Jesus event, is somehow built into the creation of the world. Our entire world is different because of the Incarnation. It imprints on all of creation the seal of God. The prologue to John’s gospel is a reminder of the Christic effect of the Incarnation–that is, that what happens in time affects all humanity from the very beginning.

The Incarnation gives all human beings a desire for God, a thirst for the divine. It gives us a spirit that can not be satisfied with anything less than God–“a heart restless until it rests in Thee,” as Augustine wrote. Can’t we say that all humans are born with the Spirit–or at least with traces of the Spirit? This would mean that the Spirit is the gift of God *ab aeterno*, not just from Pentecost (although that feast is a celebration of the gift).

All humans, then, are blessed with the effects of the Incarnation, not just those who know of Jesus and accept his teachings. After all, we have all been touched by the Word Made Flesh, whether born before or after Jesus’s life. So Jesus “saves” through the impact of his birth and death on all of creation. This belief is the underpinning of Karl Rahner’s “Anonymous Christian” optimism.

This does not mean that the details of Jesus’ life–his preaching and miracles to testify to the power of God and the immanence of the Kingdom–are without salvific importance. Jesus’ life and death are the visible stamp on the Christic nature of the world. Moreover, they are real life events that be absorbed and imitated by later generations, even as they deepen our understanding and love of the Christ event.

Human beings, then, have a natural disposition for good. Yet, we also have that other tendency that Paul calls “the flesh.” The latter is more than just carnal desire. It is, at bottom, the desire to satisfy ourselves (or at least to think I am doing so) at the expense of others. All sin is essentially selfishness–the willful blindness to the harmful effects of what we are doing on others. This is how John presents sin in his gospel.

Where does evil (or *flesh* as opposed to *spirit*) come from? Our age-old tradition tells us that sin stems from the flesh, the world and the devil. Devil: the mythical story of the fallen angels is an early attempt to explain human sin, but raises the further question of how these pure spirits caught the disease. World: this seems to simply that evil is a contagion that passes on from person to person, and from society at large to individuals. In other words, sin is pollution that fills the atmosphere and affects the health of us all. Flesh: this is an inbuilt natural tendency that challenges the Spirit along with the love that this Spirit signifies. But how do we explain the origin of such a tendency that is so contrary to our real “nature?” That remains a mystery, despite the mythic story from Genesis to explain the origin of evil.

Genuine human self-satisfaction comes from following the Spirit. True happiness stems from listening to the inclination to do good. So, when people do “bad” things, they are undermining their own best interests. If they really knew what would make them happy, they would follow the urging of the Spirit. Thus, can’t we say that they are, to some extent, blinded or unfree? If that is the case, how are they culpable for what they do? Is their choice of sin entirely free?

*Tensions in Our Faith*

My own experience, presumably shared by others, is that as we age and mature in our faith, we know less and believe more. We gain a deepened appreciation of the mystery of God in our lives and in the world. The certainty of those dogmas we have clung to throughout our life seems more fragile than ever did before. In fact, the world itself seems less rationally fathomable than it once did. We depend much less on “reason” than we did in our younger days.

We look increasingly to God’s personal relationship with us as “proof” of his existence and loving care for us. We can only wonder at the way in which he always stands at our side no matter how much a mess we have made of our lives. Our personal experience of God moves us in ways that the formal teachings of the church can not. Dogma is necessary, but it is just the beginning, not the end of our search.

We begin to see that God has introduced us to a whole different way of seeing the world. “The last shall be first” is not just a biblical verse to be tossed off. But it stands for the reorientation of the world that we are beginning to experience for the first time. Our instincts drive us on, just as our mind did in earlier years. We develop a “feel” that we come to rely on more and more.

We worry much less about personal salvation (heaven or hell) and are driven by the misery and injustice that we see others undergoing. We can weep with others, perhaps for the first time ever, and we feel the bonds that tie us to God’s other creatures. “If only I had the power to save them from all their suffering,” we think. We are tormented by our own inability to relieve them. But we are moved by the hope that the Lord will somehow bring all his creatures to the Kingdom. We are drawn to a new sense of universalism, our relationship with all God’s children–black, yellow, brown, or green. This is something that is not just believed; it is deeply felt.

Faith is much more “trust” (in a person) than it is “belief” (in what we were taught). It’s trust in a mysterious God who is constant in his love for us, as we have repeatedly experienced him by this time. This means much more than the dogmas we have recited ever since we were young.

The distinction between soul and body, that served us so well in younger days, seems far less important now. For one thing, they can not be easily divided from one another. The spiritual interpenetrates the material, just as the soul permeates the body. We hope that both will be saved in the end. At the End Times, all creation will be reclaimed by the Lord. When we speak of the resurrection of the body, we dare to believe that this might mean that our earthly identity, along with our cherished relationships, will somehow survive and be reclaimed.

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