

For some time now, I've been bothered by the way I expressed myself in a passage from pp. 97 f. of *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many? Were I to rewrite it, I would write something like this (indicating changes of words, phrases, or sentences by caps, and omissions by square brackets):*

This means, however, that one not only cannot, but also need not, think and speak of Jesus merely as prophet, sage, or saint. One *can* not so think and speak of him because prophets, sages, and saints can never be constitutive of a faith or religion in the UNIQUE way in which Jesus is constitutive of Christianity. In the nature of the case, they are always only one among others—EVEN IF THE FIRST AND FOREMOST—AND ARE dependent for their authority upon the explicit SELF-UNDERSTANDING/understanding of existence that alone is thus constitutive of the faith they RE-PRESENT. In the specific case of Christianity, however, this [] SELF-UNDERSTANDING/understanding OF EXISTENCE IS NOT MADE EXPLICIT, IN THE PRIMAL INSTANCE, IN some law or teaching or word of wisdom, but IN Jesus himself, through whom the meaning of ultimate reality for us is decisively re-presented. Consequently, the only way in which Jesus can be thought and spoken of consistently with his UNIQUE constitutive significance for the Christian religion is not as one more authority among others, even the first and foremost thereof, but as the EXPLICIT primal authorizing source by which all Christian authorities, be they prophets, sages, or saints, are [] authorized as such.

But Jesus also *need* not be understood otherwise, since there is the obvious alternative of thinking and speaking of him with Rahner and others as the primal Christian sacrament. By 'sacrament' here, of course, I mean what is better referred to more generally as 'means of salvation' (IF NOT, MORE FORMALLY, AS 'MEANS OF ULTIMATE TRANSFORMATION'). In my view, [] sacraments in the ordinary sense are rightly thought of together with word as equivalent SUCH MEANS in that they are equally valid ways of RE-PRESENTING Jesus Christ as the explicit gift and demand of God's love. Thus it would be equally appropriate to develop an analogy between the word of preaching and Jesus and to think and speak of him, accordingly, as the primal Christian word, rather than as the primal Christian sacrament. In either case, the point of the analogy would be to assert both the similarity and the difference between ALL ordinary means of salvation and Jesus Christ. Like both word and sacraments, he does not constitute God's love, but RE-PRESENTS it. But whereas they RE-PRESENT God's love by also RE-PRESENTING him, he RE-PRESENTS God's love by also constituting them. Because this analogy is undoubtedly available, however, there is no need to think and speak of Jesus merely as prophet, sage, or saint. On the contrary, one can very well think and speak of him as savior, in the precise sense that, being the primal Christian word and sacrament, HE HAS THE UNIQUE SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND ECONOMY OF SALVATION THAT HE IS NOT MERELY REPRESENTATIVE BUT CONSTITUTIVE OF IT.

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In *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*, I argue that religion is to be understood as "the primary form of culture, or . . . the 'cultural system,' in terms of which human beings are given to understand themselves in an explicit way." Thus "religion essentially involves not only an understanding of our existence, but also, and just as essentially, the particular concepts and symbols through which the question of our existence can alone be asked and answered in an explicit way" (10).

But I also argue there that "the term 'religion' by its very meaning always has an objective as well as a subjective reference—analogously to the way in which, on a traditional theological analysis, the term 'faith' refers to the 'faith which is believed' (*fides quae creditur*) as well as to the 'faith through which (it) is believed' (*fides qua creditur*)" (10). In fact, the way I argue this second point betrays my assumption that it somehow follows from the first. (Note the "Thus" connecting what I say about the two points.) Perhaps it does. But, as I now think about it, it seems rather to note yet a further characteristic of religion, that, in addition to essentially involving particular concepts and symbols as well as the explicit understanding of our existence that they serve to mediate, religion is constituted, in its objective sense, by just such an explicit understanding, and, in its subjective sense, by understanding oneself accordingly.

In any event, in my later argument in the same book, that Jesus, although representative and not constitutive of the possibility of salvation, *is* constitutive of everything specifically Christian, I maintain that "prophets, sages, and saints can never be constitutive of a faith or religion, in the way in which Jesus is constitutive of Christianity," because "[i]n the nature of the case, they are always only one among others, dependent for their authority upon the explicit understanding of existence that alone is thus constitutive of the faith they represent" (97). The clear implication, then, is that "[i]n the specific case of Christianity, . . . this explicit understanding [*sc.* that alone constitutes it as a religion in the objective sense of the word] is not, in the first instance, some law or teaching or word of wisdom, but Jesus himself, through whom the meaning of ultimate reality for us is decisively re-presented" (97).

But what, exactly, does it mean to say that Jesus himself is the explicit understanding of existence that alone is constitutive of Christianity as a religion in the objective sense? First of all, it does not mean that Jesus is simply identified with a certain understanding of human existence. One must say, instead, that Jesus is the *bearer*, or vehicle, of such an understanding, and therefore what alone makes it an *explicit* understanding, analogously to the way in which the element of a sacrament alone makes it a *means* of salvation. But to say that Jesus himself is the explicit understanding of existence that constitutes Christianity is to say that he himself is the primal concept and symbol through which the Christian understanding is mediated, and thus, by analogy, the primal Christian word or sacrament, i.e., means of salvation.

In this sense, one may say that, "in its essence, in the presence in our human history of Jesus Christ, [Christianity] is simply the representation to man and the world of their ultimate significance within the encompassing mystery of God's love" (*The Reality of God*: 69).

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