

Throughout its history revisionary Christian theology has been divided between those for whom normative Christianity is "the religion *of* Jesus" and those for whom, on the contrary, it is "the religion *about* Jesus." (Schalom Ben-Chorin distinguishes similarly between "the faith *of* Jesus" that unites Jews and Christians and "the faith *in* Jesus" that divides them.) At the moment, the first option is once again being represented by the so-called renewed quest of the historical Jesus, especially through the efforts of the Jesus Seminar and its members. Thus Robert Funk, for one, argues that Jesus is "the real founder of the Christian movement" and that what we should choose as "the canon of faith" is neither the New Testament writings nor the kerygma/creed of the church but "the vision of Jesus" (*Honest to Jesus*: 301, 306; "The Incredible Creed": 8).

The question this argument raises for someone like myself, who has long represented the second option, is how to contribute to this ongoing discussion. What, if anything, can be said toward resolving the stubborn issue between these two ways of understanding normative Christian faith?

It seems to me that there are at least two things that can and should be said.

The first depends on observing that, for all of the important differences between their understandings both of the origins of Christianity and of the role of Jesus in normative Christian faith, the self-understandings, or understandings of existence, that the two ways take normative Christian faith to represent are astonishingly similar. Thus what Funk takes "the vision of Jesus" to mean for our understanding of ourselves and of the ultimate reality of which we are a part is clearly convergent with what I take to be meant existentially by the kerygma/creed of the church. Therefore, I could easily say of the more constructive parts of his interpretation of Jesus the same sort of thing I said earlier about Mackey's—that, at its best, it is a clear and forceful interpretation of the meaning of Christian faith in existentialist terms.

Funk, for his part, however, typically proceeds as though to share his constructive understanding of Christian existence requires one to share his historical position on Christian origins and his theological position on the

role of Jesus in normative Christian faith. This is clear from the way he typically reasons, conversely, as though the Rudolf Bultmann who did not share his positions on these questions could only have been engaged in the "rearguard action" of trying to salvage an incredible kerygma/creed. (At this point, Funk's argument reminds me of nothing so much as the way Bill Farmer sometimes used to argue for his solution to the synoptic problem, by trying to show that to accept a progressive understanding of Christianity with respect to urgent issues of racism and social justice requires one to accept his solution to this problem—and, conversely, that anyone not accepting his solution could only be an apologist, witting or unwitting, for a regressive form of Christian faith and witness!)

The utter implausibility of any such reasoning, however, points up one thing about current arguments for the first option that ought to give any reasonable person pause—namely, that they do nothing to preclude holding, on the contrary, that many, if not most, of their own theological intentions can be realized even by someone, like myself, who would argue against them for the second option for understanding normative Christianity. The first thing to be said, then, against anyone taking the first option is that arguments for it that are no more resourceful than Funk's fail to exhaust the real alternatives between which one may reasonably choose. For all such arguments show to the contrary, one may very well argue for the second option without in any way having to ignore or deny what is theologically, because existentially, significant in the position represented by those who argue for the first.

The second thing to be said is related to the claim essential to arguments for the first option, to the effect that the Christianity expressed by the (Christ-)kerygma/creed rests on a profound misunderstanding of the Christianity of which Jesus himself is the founder. Thus Funk asserts, for example, that "[t]he Jesus movement very early on exchanged the vision for the visionary." Since the "first enthusiastic followers" of Jesus "were unable to hold on to the vision embodied in these verbal vehicles [*sc.* Jesus' parables and aphorisms], they turned from the story to the storyteller. . . . They turned the iconoclast into an icon" (*HJ*: 10 f.).

But what is the evidence for this claim? It is striking, I find, that Funk nowhere provides any. He does say at one point that "[m]ost scholars [agree] that Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, not about himself, contrary to the Fourth Gospel." "It is thus possible," he infers, "that the first followers of Jesus trusted what Jesus trusted: the rule of God" ("IC": 6). But having established at most a historical possibility, Funk proceeds to think and speak as though he has established a historical actuality, *without providing even the least evidence for doing so*. Thus he says in the very next paragraph, "Jesus pointed steadily at the kingdom of God in evidence all around him; his disciples first caught a glimpse of the kingdom but soon began to stare exclusively at the pointing finger" (7).

The deeper difficulty for those taking the first option, however, is that neither Funk nor anyone else making this claim can possibly provide the kind of evidence that is required to support it. Given the nature of our sources, there can be at most a theoretical—and thus never an *operational*—distinction between Jesus as he is represented in the earliest stratum of Christian tradition and Jesus as he was in himself. Consequently, however possible it may have been that Jesus' followers soon shifted attention from his own concern with God's domain to him himself as God's messiah, one could never establish that this was actually the case.

To be sure, the absence from the earliest stratum of Christian witness of the kind of explicit christology found in the Fourth Gospel provides good reason to doubt whether either Jesus himself or his earliest followers made any explicit christological claims. But since what Jesus himself taught and proclaimed can never be distinguished operationally from what our earliest sources represent him as teaching and proclaiming, the possibility that Funk rightly points to can never be established as anything more than that. For equally possible is that, between explicitly talking about himself as he is represented as doing in the Fourth Gospel and neither making or implying any christological claim at all, Jesus at least implied a christology in pointing to the decisive significance of his own word and ministry and that his earliest disciples who made the decision to "follow" him thereby implied the same christological claim, even if they, too, still did not teach the kind of explicit christology that the Fourth Gospel represents. But, in that case, the eventual emergence of such

explicit christology may be taken, not, as Funk takes it, as evidence of an "idolatrous shifting of attention" away from what was decisive for Jesus' own teaching and proclamation as well as for that of his earliest followers, but simply as more fully explicating what had, in fact, been implied all along—by Jesus himself as well as by the earliest Christian community.

Of course, there is also no way of establishing that this other possibility, equally allowed for by all the relevant evidence, was in fact the case. But for anyone taking the second option for understanding normative Christianity, there is no need to establish it. Since what is normatively Christian on this option is not "the religion *of* Jesus," but rather "the religion *about* Jesus," it is sufficient to show that even the earliest forms of Christian witness that we are in a position to reconstruct from our sources were christological—if not explicitly, in the way of the later Christ-kerygma reconstructible from the authentic letters of Paul, then implicitly, in the way of the Jesus-kerygma that can be reconstructed from the synoptic gospels. For Funk and all who make the same kind of claim, however, it is necessary to go beyond all this to distinguish the kerygma of Jesus himself from the kerygma of the early church, whether Jesus-kerygma or Christ-kerygma. But it is just this move that cannot be responsibly made—for the simple reason that, lacking as we do any primary sources for what Jesus himself taught and proclaimed, we are unable to isolate his own kerygma from the earliest stratum of the church's kerygma about him.

In short, Funk fails to provide any evidence for the claim essential to his argument for the very good reason that neither he nor anyone else can ever possibly provide it—unless and until we acquire at least some primary sources for what Jesus himself said and did. But, then, the second and, to my mind, decisive thing to be said against anyone taking the first option is that, for all she or he can ever possibly show to the contrary, the historical claim essential to taking it is groundless.

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