

In an earlier attempt to clarify two distinct senses in which someone may be said to be implicitly a Christian (Notebooks, 9 November 1997), I so argue as to hold that one of these ways necessarily implies that the Christian claim to be the true religion is a valid claim. Any such contention now seems to me to be incorrect and misleading. So one reason for this further attempt to clarify the same distinction is to make and explain the necessary correction.

If I allow Jesus to be of decisive significance for my existence by understanding myself as he explicitly calls me to do, then I may be said to be implicitly a Christian even though I do not (yet) make any explicit Christian confession by means of the classic formulation, "Jesus is the Christ," or any other logically equivalent and interchangeable formulation, including "Jesus is of decisive significance for human existence." But I may also be said to be implicitly a Christian (or, alternatively, a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or a . . .) if I so open myself to the meaning of ultimate reality for us as to understand myself and lead my life in the same way in which Jesus (or, alternatively, the Dharma, or the Koran, or the . . .) explicitly calls me to do. So traditional Roman Catholic theology speaks of a *votum implicitum Christi s. ecclesiae*.

In the first sense in which I may be said to be implicitly a Christian, I am so related to Jesus, mediately if not immediately, that he is of decisive significance for my life and for all human life, although I do not (yet) explicitly confess him to be so. In the second sense, I am so related to ultimate reality in its meaning for us that I could only explicitly confess Jesus (or, alternatively, the Dharma, or the Koran, or . . .) to be thus decisive were I to encounter him (or, alternatively, it, or . . .) under the horizon of my existential question and were to respond consistently with my understanding relation to the meaning of ultimate reality.

Thus, even if a Christian who says that another person is implicitly a Christian may very well *assume* in doing so that the Christian claim to be the true religion is a valid claim, the validity of this claim is not necessarily implied by her or his statement itself or

as such. All that it necessarily implies is that the self-understanding of the other person and that to which Jesus explicitly calls us are *substantially the same* self-understanding.

This seems to me to raise the question, however, whether a Christian may not be well advised to avoid saying to others that they are implicitly Christians in this second sense of the words. That someone's self-understanding is *substantially* the same as the self-understanding to which Jesus explicitly calls us does not at all mean that they are also *formally* the same. On the contrary, the whole point of distinguishing, in this second sense, between being implicitly a Christian and being explicitly one is to acknowledge a formal difference. And *it is precisely with this formal difference that everything specifically and properly Christian has to do*. One is not specifically and properly a Christian solely and simply because one has a certain self-understanding, but only because, or insofar as, one makes use, and so lives as to give others to make use, of certain specific *means* of coming to that self-understanding and continuing in it. Recognizing, as Christians must, the significance—indeed, the decisive significance!—of these means, should they not, as a general rule, at least, avoid speaking of anyone as implicitly a Christian except in the first sense of the words?

To press this question is the other reason, then, for this further attempt at clarification.

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If the claim of the Christian religion to be the true religion is valid, then a Christian may say of anyone having or expressing an authentic self-understanding that she or he is implicitly a Christian. Why? Because the understanding of existence that she or he thereby also has or expresses has to be true and therefore can only be substantially the same understanding of existence re-presented by Christianity. To say in this sense, however, that someone is implicitly a Christian presupposes the validity of the Christian claim and is simply a Christian way of saying that the person in question has or expresses an authentic self-understanding and therefore also has or expresses a true understanding of existence.

But there is another clearly distinct sense in which someone may be said to be implicitly a Christian. In this other sense, saying this is by no means simply a Christian way of speaking nor does it in any way presuppose that the Christian claim to be the true religion is valid. Consider what is now widely supposed to have been the case with the first disciples of Jesus, if not also, indeed, with Jesus himself.

According to many scholars, the witness of the earliest community represented by the so-called Jesus-kerygma was lacking altogether in explicit christology, whence the inference that Jesus' own witness was probably similarly lacking in any explicit christological claim. At the same time, however, scholars commonly say that the sheer fact that certain disciples "followed" Jesus already during his lifetime, and that they continued to bear witness to him even after his crucifixion, implied a claim to the effect that Jesus is of decisive significance for human existence—just as Jesus himself is commonly inferred to have implied a claim to the same effect by what he said or implied about the decisive significance of his own witness of faith. But, then, assuming that what constitutes Christianity explicitly as such is some formulation or other of this very claim, and so what I mean by "the constitutive christological assertion," one may say that a member of the earliest Christian community and, quite possibly, Jesus himself could have been, at most, implicitly a Christian. In this sense, however, what one means in saying this is not simply that the self-understanding of such an earliest Christian or of Jesus himself was authentic and that the understanding of existence she or he also had or expressed was true; one means, instead, that

what she or he thought, said, or did, although still not explicitly Christian and therefore christological, was nonetheless such as to imply the claim for the decisive significance of Jesus that all formulations of the christological assertion are but ways of making explicit.

In sum: to say that someone is implicitly a Christian may be either a specifically Christian way of saying something about a non-Christian—namely, that her or his self-understanding is authentic because the understanding of existence it presupposes is true—or a way that is not specifically Christian of saying something about someone who is—namely, that what she or he thinks, says, and, does, although not explicitly christological, nonetheless implies the assertion that all christological formulations properly function to explicate.

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Whether or not a given form of secular culture is implicitly *true* religiously is one question, whether or not it is implicitly *Christian* religiously is another.

If I am right that "there is no basis for speaking even of an implicit Christian faith or witness except where there is particular historical experience of Jesus in his decisive meaning for us," then some such distinction between questions is unavoidable.

The true religion is some explication or other, of that self-understanding/understanding of existence which is authorized by strictly ultimate reality in its self-presentation in original revelation. Therefore, secular forms of culture may be said to be implicitly true religiously because, or insofar as, they imply the *true* religion in this sense of the words. On the other hand, secular forms of culture may be said to be implicitly Christian religiously because, or insofar as, they imply the *Christian* religion in the sense of one explication among others of the true religion.

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