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## Jesus Christ Beyond Postmodernism

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**Abstract:** Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. But Christologies are many. Do all these Christologies articulate authentically what the real Jesus of the New Testament was and what he stood for? The insights of postmodernism may help us in our inquiry into whether the various Christologies that emerged at different historical moments and different contexts refer to the real Jesus Christ of the apostolic experience. All Christologies emerge from an experience of Jesus Christ as the absolute meaning of one's life and the expression of the same in a language meaningful to a particular context. It can so happen - in fact this has already happened in the history of Christological reflections - that a particular Christology is produced that does not refer to the real Jesus Christ of the apostolic experience.

**Keywords:** Jesus Christ, Christology, New Testament, Postmodernism.

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## Jesus Christ Beyond Postmodernism

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Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. But Christologies are many. Do all these Christologies articulate authentically what the real Jesus of the New Testament was and what he stood for? The insights of postmodernism may help us in our inquiry into whether the various Christologies that emerged at different historical moments and different contexts refer to the real Jesus Christ of the apostolic experience. All Christologies emerge from an experience of Jesus Christ as the absolute meaning of one's life and the expression of the same in a language meaningful to a particular context. It can so happen – in fact this has already happened in the history of Christological reflections – that a particular Christology is produced that does not refer to the real Jesus Christ of the apostolic experience.

In this article an attempt is made to understand, how postmodernism challenges the traditional and historical articulations about the person and message of Jesus;<sup>1</sup> secondly, how the insights of postmodernism help us to delve deep into the mystery of Jesus Christ and, finally, how the person and mes-

sage of Jesus go beyond the approaches of postmodernism in revealing the mystery of Reality.

### I. Postmodernism's Challenge to Christology

One of the notable contributions of postmodernism was that it challenged the settled foundations on which social order, state's governing principles, rule of law etc. were built and unsettled them. Postmodernism, first of all, challenged the contention of the modern period that humans are rational and coherent subjects. It showed that what was thought to be the natural product of the human reason was indeed a product of social forces expressed through language. It affirmed that even our own self-understanding about ourselves was not something objective but was constructed by the way reality was named to us (Thistlethwaite 1995: 269). An understanding of the significance of language is the key to the understanding of power structures, social organizations, social meanings and individual consciousness. Philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Louis Althusser and Michel

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Foucault contributed to the development of a poststructural critique of all that we take for granted in life and, more importantly, the way we understand ourselves and our world. If this approach to reality leads us to a better insight into the mystery of life and transforms our consciousness for better it can also challenge the foundations of our Christian faith, namely, our understanding of Jesus Christ as the centre of our lives and our commitment to him. But everything that falls under the name of postmodernism or poststructuralism may not lead to a transformative experience.

In his challenging and insightful book *Jesus and Postmodernism* James Breech raise a rhetorical question: "What has Jesus to do with postmodernism?" He says further: "Those of us entrusted with the resources and responsibility for generating knowledge and understanding of the Christian tradition can and should ask what relationship postmodernist theologies, which present themselves in Christian guise, have with the historical Jesus" (Breech 1989: 22). This cautious remark of J. Breech about postmodernism and the historical Jesus points to the typical ambivalence of all that goes under the umbrella of postmodernism. However, there are certain challenges posed by some postmodernists like Michel Foucault which can wake the theologians up from their dogmatic slumber and give new insights into the inexhaustible mystery of Jesus Christ.

Michel Foucault (see Carrette 1999) has shown convincingly that each

system develops its own way of organizing concepts through language. Each system has its own "discursive field" and the discourses in that particular discursive field will not have the same recognition and acceptance or power in another field. This may be obvious enough. Theological discourse will not have the same impact and acceptance in other discursive fields like politics, economics or other secular fields. Once the dominance of theology in all other fields suffered heavy battering during the Enlightenment and irretrievable loss of credibility during the periods of modernity and the advancement of science and technology, it became clear that theology cannot answer all the questions that are raised about society and life. At this juncture two options were open to theology. Fall back into fundamentalism and dogmatism, or to discover the potentialities of the theological discourse to liberate religion from its obscurantism and exclusivism and release its innate power for integral human liberation.

Theology cannot be neutral. It is the articulation of faith dialoguing with the context of the theologian. The context of theological reflection itself is a complex web of power relationships, humanizing or dehumanizing structures, religious beliefs and practices, cultural elements, socio-political and economic systems etc. Therefore, a theologian himself or herself might support an existing oppressive system consciously or unconsciously, while being immersed in the context if he or she has not transcended the context itself through a liberating experience of the *theos*. The

*logos* the theologian constructs can be prophetic and liberative or supportive of and justifying the existing structures of oppression. According to Foucault, words are the products of historical forces and functions in fields where meaning is made or not made (Thistlethwaite 1995: 272). If we analyse the context, content and consequences of some of the Christologies of twentieth century, it would become clear to us that Foucault's insight into the influence of historical forces and powers in the making of the language of a particular discursive field is valid.

We have already mentioned that Jesus is one but Christologies are many. The prominent models of Christ in the twentieth Century, like the Germanic Christ, the Latin Christ of France, the Anglo-Saxon Christ, the Afrikaner Christ, the Black Christ (Thistlethwaite 1995: 267-268; Davies 1980: 72), the liberationists' Christ, the feminists' Christ, the Brahminic Christ and the Dalits' Christ are either sources of oppression or sources of liberation.

The Germanic Christ emerged from the claim that the German people were the chosen ones through whom salvation is offered to all. Drawing implications from Luther's theory of the *Two Kingdoms* and the order of creation, the protagonists of this theology, namely, the German-Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) attempted to make a synthesis of Nazism and Christianity. They eliminated everything Jewish from the Bible and declared Germany as their holy land and Hitler, the embodiment of the law of God. Though the *Confessing Church* (*Bekennende Kirche*)

movement led by M.Niemoeller and others valiantly confessed the Jesus Christ of the Christian Tradition at the cost their own lives, the Germanic Christ of the Nazi-period prevailed over and supported an oppressive, racist and tyrannical system till its collapse.

The royalist movement in France presented a Latin Christ whose atoning death was for the French race alone. Such an exclusive racial bias could also be clearly seen in the Anglo-Saxon figure of Christ who was believed to be the greatest member of the great Anglo-Saxon race and was blond and Nordic like the Olympian gods. According to this understanding, Jesus was the white man par excellence (Thistlethwaite 1995: 268; Davies 1970: 152). For the Afrikaner, Christ became the symbol of racial superiority, an Aryan God. The Afrikaner Christ could be invoked by the white racist regime to strengthen and support its brutal oppression of the black majority. The black Christ of James Cone and others can become the symbol of black racism against white racism if this Christ is not recognized as the one who liberates both the whites and the blacks from their dehumanizing prejudices and discrimination and hatred of one another.

The attempts at presenting a picture of Christ meaningful to the Indian Context has produced the image of Christ as an *Avatara* or incarnation like the other *avataras* of Vaishnavism. Those theologians who find the insights of *advaita* or non-dualism more meaningful to understand the mystery of Christ understand Christ as *Isvara*, the link between the Absolute and the rela-

tive. Both the *Avataric* Christ and the *Advaitic* Christ can become the supporter and upholder of the dehumanizing caste-system which condemns a vast majority of Indians to undignified and worthless human existence. S. Kappen observes: "Landed on the Indian soil, he [Jesus] took more after Vishnu than Siva. Like the former, he is solar (*sol invictus*), patriarchal, conservative, preserver of the world-order, proto-type of and protector of priesthood, patron of whoever happens to be in power" (Kappen 1977:19).

The Dalit-Christ of the victims of caste oppression can be liberative if while restoring the dignity of the victims he liberates the oppressors from being the victims of their dehumanizing religious system. If the Dalit-Christ is presented as the one who supports the violence and hatred of the victims against the upper-castes, then he too becomes a victim of the victimized in their collective effort to justify their ideologies and actions.

Not only modern Christologies but also classical Christologies have their ideological underpinnings. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite affirms that even the fundamental Christian affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord' reveals a number of complex issues when it is submitted to poststructuralist analysis. When the persecuted Christians who were only a minority affirmed that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' they were at the same time asserting that Caesar is *not* Lord. In this way the early Christian community subverted the hegemonic and military power of the Roman empire by a counter-culture of love (I Cor 13) and a

life according to the beatitudes (Lk 6:20; Mt 5:1-11) (Thistlethwaite 1995: 274). So the faith affirmation in a subversive language was at the same time a political statement about the power of the powerless against the all powerful Roman power structures. However, when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, the same faith affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord' assumed a new meaning of power and domination. The Lordship of Christ was understood in imperial terms and, therefore, Christ becomes the protector and supporter of the existing system of hierarchical order, the legitimizer of the divine right of kings. The kenotic image of Christ gives way to the kyriarchic figure of Christ. Consequently, the Church of the poor and the marginalized became the imperial Church of domination and control. S.B.Thistlethwaite says:

If traditional Christian doctrine was formulated at a time of imperial rule that invested its doctrinal language with militarism, hierarchy, and the reification of gender and race dominance, how do we reconstruct Christian doctrine to recover the critique of power and the communitarian vision of the first three centuries? The context of the first three centuries was one of resistance to oppression. The use of the political language of 'lord' or 'king' then produced a practice of subversion of dominant modes of authority. Hence, what we have to do to begin to reconstruct Christology, is to put our feet somewhere else; we have to move our lives and our commitments away from authoritarianism to the road to Emmaus (Thistlethwaite 1995: 276).

Even the doctrine of the incarnation, that God became human, was construed to mean that God became male, to exclude women as if they were non-persons. Thus, a sublime doctrine of faith could be manipulated to suppress the legitimate rights of women who form fifty percent of the entire humanity at a given time. Indeed, God became human means that in Jesus of Nazareth, God became the flesh of *our* flesh, of every human being, male and female, the oppressor and the oppressed, the ruler and the ruled, the black and the white, the Brahmin and the Dalit. The critique of postmodernism, thus, compels us to look into our fundamental faith-affirmations which we often take for granted and challenges us to reconstruct them that they may be able to unleash their liberative potentialities to build true communities of authentic humans without domination or discrimination of any sort.

## II. Postmodernism's Insight into the Mystery of Jesus

The irreverent iconoclasm of the poststructuralists is exhibited in their deconstruction of systems, dogmas, doctrines and practices that claim to be absolute and terrorize humans to submit their lives to an illusion of certainty. Therefore, if there is an absolute dogma in postmodernism it is the doctrine of relativism. When such relativism becomes not only a creed but also an attitude towards the reality of life itself, it terrifies the guardians of public and private morality and traditional values, religious authorities, structures and systems of power like those of governments. It is obvious that if there is noth-

ing that is certain or absolute, anything goes. No insistence on the practice of morality is possible as its foundations can be questioned and rejected or relativised. It may be one possibility.

Nietzsche's announcement that 'God is dead' seemed to have liberated humans from the tyranny of subjugation and enslavement that prevented them from becoming superhuman. One of the dogmas of postmodernism that 'Death is God' seems to liberate humans from the inhibitions of responsibility and conscience. Mark C. Taylor, a self-proclaimed postmodernist theologian, says, 'Postmodernism opens with the sense of irrecoverable loss and incurable fault. This world is infected by the overwhelming awareness of death – a death that 'begins' with the death of God and 'ends' with the death of our selves' (Cited in Breech 1989: 15). For J.D. Crossan, the New Testament scholar, human life is a life towards death. His 'theology of limit' allows the possibility of the experience of transcendence, the experience of God. Death being the final limit of life becomes the door to final transcendence, to God. Taylor's affirmation that 'death is God,' leads to the destruction of traditional values and morality giving way to nihilism, profanity and perversion. Through the 'theology of limit' J.D. Crossan too relativizes morality and affirms its subjective nature. However, this does not lead to anarchy or nihilism but promotes "freedom for human responsibility, personal and social decision, and the creation of those conventions that make us what we are" (Crossan: 1979: 117 cited in Breech 1984: 17). J. Breech, who refers to

J.D.Crossan in his study on *Jesus and Postmodernism*, seems to think that J.D.Crossan's approach to the reality of death is similar to that of Taylor though the way they articulate the implications of the same for morality is different. However, both J.Breech and J.D.Crossan reach almost similar conclusions at the end of their study and analysis of the parables of Jesus. According to J.Breech, a closer look at the parables of Jesus in the context of post-structuralism shows that the parables of Jesus do not end with a closure although the evangelists present them as if they were stories with an ending. The parables in their original form, according to J.Breech, were not stories with an end. "In Jesus' parables we see a mode of being human, neither that of those who live episodically nor that of those who live in moralizing plots. Both these modes are imprisoned in time, in their own temporal sequences.... Jesus' characters transcend their own temporal sequences. In that sense, they are out of time"(Breech 1989: 76-77). Both the characters in the parables as well as Jesus himself transcend time though they exist also within the bounds of time to some extent. Both Jesus and other humans are persons who live unending stories. J.D.Crossan, at the end of his study of the parables in contrast to the myths says that the parables subvert the myth's final word about reality and thus opens up the possibility of transcendence.

For Taylor, the reality of death as the end of everything, explains postmodernism's predilection for a "demoralized" world that repudiates traditional values and prefers nihilism, per-

version etc. However, for J.D.Crossan, the relativization of morality as a consequence of his 'theology of limit' does not lead to anarchy or perversion but to freedom, responsibility and transcendence. Taylor claims to be a postmodernist while in J.D.Crossan one can detect the influence of postmodernism. J.Breech, who makes a critique of both, does not claim that he is a postmodernist but takes the challenges of postmodernism and almost follows post-structuralism's critique of language in analyzing the parables of Jesus to arrive at a liberating vision of Jesus Christ and his message.

During his earthly life Jesus resisted any attempt to categorize him. Even though the early Christians encountered him as the absolute meaning of their life, therefore, their Lord and God, he can never be defined. Therefore, many Christologies are possible. None of them can exhaust the mystery of Christ as He is that Reality that surpasses every definition and system. Though it is unsettling for the believer not to have one clear picture of Jesus Christ, it leads to a realization that Jesus Christ is the mystery in which s/he is involved and, therefore, he is a pole of his/her own being. This awareness liberates humans from a narrow, limited and static understanding Jesus Christ and provides a refreshingly new and challenging awareness of their own being.

### III. Jesus Beyond Postmodernism

The tendency of the human mind to define the indefinable so that it may be able to handle it further develops

into belief systems, dogmas and institutions. What suffers in the process is the insight into 'the height and the depth, the length and the breadth' of the Mystery that one encounters. If God's own definition of himself in Jesus Christ was to make humans recognize who God is and what humans are, the human tendency to define Jesus Christ makes him just another prophet, social reformer or Guru. Postmodernism challenges every system and structure that attempts to confine reality and manipulate it for justifying and promoting ideologies and power structures that in turn dehumanize humans. At the same time, postmodernism, by its very definition, accommodates all possible approaches to reality, sometimes even contradictory ones, letting each one draw support for what s/he is temperamentally attuned to, namely, despair or hope, anarchy or harmony, meaning or meaninglessness, or everything together. Human life itself provides such a drama of contradictions. Such an approach to reality can be so fascinating as it lets humans be confronted with infinite choices. For the postmodernists infinite possibilities offer an opportunity to choose everything at once. How is it possible in actual life, is another question. Do humans just live with such contradictions without taking decisions that make them authentic humans? There may be many who live as if they were condemned to a futile existence. For them death is the end of everything. However, if transcendence is in the very nature of humans, they take decisions which allow them to go beyond the temporal sequences of events. They do not react to the situations of life which try

to control them. They pro-act to the situations through decisions that reveal their transcendence and influence the lives of others in such way that they too are enabled to unfold their transcendence.

J.Breech raises a pertinent question, "Is there a mode of being human that can be grasped as inherently meaningful, coherent, as grounded in the real and of itself, without being evaluated in terms of some external norms" (Breech 1989: 55)? He quotes the words of Thomas Beckett to the priests before he was murdered as expressed by T.S.Eliot in his drama, *Murder in the Cathedral* :

You argue by results, as this world  
does

To settle if an act be good or bad

You defer to the fact. For every life  
and every act

Consequence of good and evil can be  
shown.

And as in time results of many deeds  
are blended

So good and evil in the end become  
confounded.

It is not in time that my death shall be  
known;

It is out of time that my decisions are  
taken

If you call that decision

To which my whole being gives en-  
tire consent (Breech 1989: 55-56;  
Eliot 1952: 210-11).

Eliot's Beckett is pro-active. He is not controlled by the forces external to him; neither by those murderers nor by death itself. If results or consequences are the criteria to judge life and its actions, then they can be shown as both



good and evil. Beckett's decision is made within the framework of time but it is also beyond time. Postmodernism cannot explain coherently such moral decisions that are made in time but goes beyond the limits of time. In fact, only by recognizing the capacity of humans to transcend themselves and their history one can get an insight into the mystery of human beings. By referring to Beckett's decision to which his whole being gives entire consent, J.Breech suggests that, "the mode of being human inaugurated by Jesus does not receive its coherence from bounded time and cannot be judged by its results. If closure and bounded time do not lend coherence to this way of living in story, what is its principle of coherence? What do Jesus' parables tell us about the truth and coherence intrinsic to a life lived in unending story"(Breech 1989:56)?

From his own long research on the parables of Jesus by comparing and contrasting them with the stories from all the extant literature of late western antiquity J.Breech concludes: "Jesus' parables were dissimilar from all those extant to three hundred years before his time and three hundred years after him. This does not prove, of course, that Jesus was unique; that is a claim that can only be made from the viewpoint of Christian faith. But this research does prove in the scientific sense that Jesus' parables were dissimilar from all extant contemporary stories" (Breech 1989: 25). Jesus' parables are dissimilar from Graeco-Roman stories of antiquity including Rabbinical parables. How does Jesus' parables differ from other stories which end with a moralizing statement either by an approbation or by a repro-

bation of the actions of the characters of the narrative? Jesus' parables, in their original form, do not have any ending or closure because he narrated without moralizing (Breech 1989: 35). For example, we are not told whether the good Samaritan was rewarded for his actions, whether the elder son got reconciled with the younger son who squandered his share of the father's property, or whether the householder who hired workers for his vineyard at different hours of the day and paid everyone equally found a new way of making every labourer happy etc. The parables of Jesus are realistic but at the same time they are non-didactic, non-moralizing and fictional narratives (Breech 1989: 63). The actions of the main characters in the parables are unmotivated. Yet their actions open up new possibilities for others to act and react to what they have done.

At the end of his study of the parables of Jesus, J.Breech concludes that there is a consistent relationship between Jesus' parables and his own story. As his parables had no ending or a closure, his life too had no closure. The story of his life does not end with death. Death is not the God that winds up the reality of human existence as some postmodernists would like us to believe. Resurrection appears to be the happy ending of the story of Jesus. "Rather in my view," says J.Breech, "the earliest Christians used their own culturally received concept of the resurrection appearances to reflect their conviction that Jesus' mode of being human cannot be judged by its results, that death did not hold the key to the meaning of his mode of being human. The

clear implication of the resurrection experiences is that the personal mode is grounded in a reality which is ultimate, which engenders the lives of those who live in parabolic story" (Breech 1989: 78) According to J.Breech, therefore, like the characters of Jesus parables, Jesus lives in a story without end.

J.D.Crossan seems to arrive at a similar conclusion at the end of his study of the parables of Jesus. "Jesus announced the kingdom of God in parables, but the primitive church announced Jesus as the Christ, the Parable of God" (Crossan 1975: 124). Thus the Parabler became the parable. Further, he says that the Cross became the supreme Parable of the church as Jesus died as parabler and rose as Parable. Unlike myths which establish the world parables subvert the world, and so there is a difference between a mythical religion and a parabolic religion. While mythical religion gives final word about reality and thus excludes the authentic experience of reality, parabolic religion subverts final word about reality and thereby opens up the possibility of transcendence (Crossan 1975: 128). Whatever may be the understanding of J.D.Crossan about 'transcendence,' from the context of his 'theology of limit' it can be concluded that Jesus, the Parable, continues to subvert the human tendency to find false security in myths and systems that provide humans with an illusory comfort and prevent them from unfolding their nature by transcending themselves.

The Christian experience of Jesus Christ cannot but repudiate the philosophical claims of postmodernism that

death is God, or that the human story ends with death. What he reveals through his life and his teaching in parables is that though the human story has a beginning it never ends. Paul seemed to have anticipated the postmodernists' claim that death is the end of everything when he confronted it after encountering the risen Christ and became convinced of the resurrection all. He says, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (I Cor 15:32). However, neither death nor resurrection is the last word on Jesus. The last word then is a new beginning, when "God may be all in all" (I Cor 15:28).

## Conclusion

While it is true that there are different theoretical positions possible within post-structuralism and its philosophical approach postmodernism, we cannot deny that its insights into the significance of language open up new vistas for the understanding of the mystery of Christ. Post-structuralism has convincingly shown that historical and cultural contexts with all their complex web of power structures, human inter-relations, social conditioning and cultural prescriptions shape language. Words acquire an oppressive or liberative meaning depending on the historical conditions and compulsions from which they have emerged. So the language of a particular culture at a particular historical period is not innocent, devoid of any ideological biases and interests. This applies also to religious language. If any christology, whether orthodox, dogmatic, functional or ontological, universal or contextual, does not allow hu-

mans to encounter the living Christ and experience true liberation it cannot be an authentic christology. The Christ-encounter mediated through the context needs to make humans more human enabling them to transcend themselves to build a true community of all humans with right relationship among themselves and with the whole creation.

Postmodernism's insight into the significance of language can positively contribute to the understanding of the implications of various Christologies and enable us to judge whether they are

liberative or oppressive. However, the tendency of certain postmodernists to explain everything by appealing to the inevitability of death and by enclosing everything within the framework of bounded time go against the fundamental human experience of transcendence and the Christian experience of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, humans can encounter not only a timeless God who entered into time but also discover humans who are bound by time yet can transcend it to enter into timelessness.

## Notes

1. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite's insightful essay "Christology and Postmodernism: Not Everyone Who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord'," *Interpretation* 49(1995)3, 267-280 has been a great inspiration for the first part of this article.

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