MYTH, SYMBOL AND THE CHURCH IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN KNOX

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John Knox may well be remembered someday as a "theologian of the Church" whose New Testament studies at the middle of the twentieth century provided the groundwork, or rather perhaps, "groundplan," for a renewal of the Church in unity and energy. Knox specifically focused on the problem of disunion in the Church in his book, *The Early Church and the Coming Great Church.*[1] He sought to provide a solution to the problem by exploring the question: How normative is early Christianity? His answer, as might be expected, turns on the principal themes of his interpretation of Christian faith and the role of the New Testament, and among these the community of the Church has a central role. In one of his last books Knox insisted on the Church as the *distinctive* Christian reality. "All Christian theology is an effort to explicate and explain the Church's existence and what is found in it," he wrote.[2] As a New Testament scholar Knox was necessarily concerned with the language of faith—the Church's description of its "saving" experience. Before turning to Knox's understanding of the role of myth and symbol in the life of the Church, some elements basic to his understanding of the Church might be noted.

MEMORY AND THE COMMUNITY

In one of his earliest books, Knox said, "One might almost define the church as the community which remembers Jesus."[3] There is more than the element of memory in Knox's definition of the Church, but it is *this* element which provides access to the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. The connection between the past and the present is found in memory. He writes: "I have ventured the assertion that it is in the church's memory that the earthly human Jesus has present reality. . ."[4] The Church is, in a sense, constituted by its common memory. Knox says, "A 'community' is by definition a 'sharing,' and

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[1]John Knox, *The Early Church and the Coming Great Church* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955).

[2]John Knox, *The Huumanity and Divinity of Christ* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1967), p. 66. Knox capitalizes "Church" in his later books, but not in his earlier books. Except in quotations, his later practice has been followed herein.

[3]John Knox, *The Man Christ Jesus,* republished in *Jesus, Lord and Christ,* a trilogy comprising *The Man Christ Jesus* (1941), *Christ the Lord* (1945), and *On the Meaning of Christ* (1947), (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), p. 5.

[4]John Knox, *The Church and the Reality of Christ* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 37.

such memories form an important part of the substance in which the sharing takes place."[5] The uniqueness of a community's memories is what distinguishes one community from another. Common memories are the chief factor in human cohesiveness.

The second element in Knox's understanding of the Church is the *present* experience of "the Spirit." He writes: "Where the Spirit is, there is the church; where the church is, there is the Spirit."[6] To say the Spirit is present is to say God's love is present for the Spirit is also love, the love of God.

These two elements form the basis of the Church: a common memory of an event in the past and a presently shared experience of the Spirit. The present experience is understood and interpreted in the light of that memory of the original event. The memory of Jesus, aided by the scriptures enables the Church to recognize the Kingdom in which it presently lives. The present rule of the Lord permits the community to realize who the Jesus of the past actually was. As Richard R. Niebuhr whites about Knox's view of the Church: "Memory qualifies the present; present experience re-interprets the images of memory."[7] This second element, the experience of the Spirit, Knox equates with the love of God. It is not something we come to believe *about* God, but something *experienced.* "It is the very substance of God's own life being 'poured into our hearts.' "[8] Knox also points out that the experience of "the Spirit" was recognized or identified, in some way, as being the same as the memory of Jesus. The Spirit was not only experienced as a *felt reality,* it was thus experienced.[9] It was the remembered man, Jesus, who was the Lord presently experienced as the Spirit.

This identification, of the memory of Jesus and the new experience of the Spirit as a reality in its own right by the community which shared in the two, constitutes the "Christ event." It is also Knox's understanding of the "Resurrection" and constitutes the *beginning* of the Church. Two other points about the Church might be noted. It is within the community of the Church that reconciliation takes place. "If the Event can be called a 'saving' event," he says, "it is only because the Church is found to be a 'saving' community."[10]

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[5]*Ibid.*, p. 40.

[6]John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 139.

[7]Richard R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 64.

[8]John Knox, *Life in Christ Jesus* (Greenwich, Connecticut: The Seabury Press, 1961), pp. 19-20

[9]Knox, *The Early Church,* pp. 56-57. See also, John Knox, *The Death of Christ* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 109.

[10]Knox, *The Church and the Reality of Christ,* p. 78.

The Church is for St. Paul and for John Knox, "the body of Christ." To be "in Christ" was for St. Paul to be a part of the new creation which God was bringing into being. The risen Christ was the evidence. To be "in Christ" meant, as Knox says, "to belong to the eschatological kingdom of God which had already appeared within history as the church."[11]

For Knox, the "body of Christ" is a continuing reality and is not without some historic structure. Obviously there are deep divisions within the body, but that does not preclude a recognition of the continuing reality of the Church. There continues to be a community sharing a memory of Jesus and experiencing the presence of the Spirit. Knox says he has for example, experienced the essential substance of the Church in a variety of groups of people and "denominations," for, he says, "It does not follow from one's failure to acknowledge the structures that one does not share in the life of the body."[12] Nevertheless, Knox argues, the fact and importance of the Church's historic structure should be acknowledged, regardless of the difficulty in discerning just what the normative form of the Church should be. The Church is the objective historical fact—a fact "implicit in every expression of Christian devotion and in every confession of Christian faith."[13]

Myth and Meaning

The devlopment of the Church christology, Knox suggests, can be viewed as steps in the progressive realization and understanding of itself as the very body of Christ. This process involved what can only be called the gradual "mythologizing" of the Christ Event. Knox says he recognizes that the usual connotation of the term "myth" may not seem appropriate to many a Christian as applied to items in his confession of faith, but that it *is* so applicable and could not in the nature of the case be otherwise. Not only is myth the only way of expressing and conveying to others the divine meaning of an experience, it is also the means of realizing for ourselves the truth of an experience. To say God "acts" is to use mythological language, "since God transcends both space and time and therefore cannot be said to 'be present' or to 'act' in any literal sense of those terms."[14] In *Myth and Truth,* Knox notes that he does not use the term "myth" in any specialized sense, such as historians of religion and anthropologists tend to do, but simply to refer to a human story of a divine action.[15]

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[11]Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul,* p. 141.
[12]Knox, *The Church and the Reality of Christ,* p. 142.
[13]*Ibid.,* p. 146.
[14]*Ibid.,* p. 88.
[15]John Knox, *Myth and Truth* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 1964), p.3.

In one of his earliest books, *The Man Christ Jesus,* Knox pointed out that myths could be true or false. They are true when they express some quality or dimension of reality which we have experienced. They may be man's only means of expressing his deepest meaning—that ultimate meaning, Knox says, of which man's "experience in the world makes him aware but which ordinary rational terms are utterly unable to convey."[16]

Mythological language was the only way the Church could describe the meaning of the Event which had brought it into being. The "story" was an essential part of its history. They could not be separated. The life of Jesus as realized in the community of his followers led inevitably to the creation of the story, just as it led to the creation of the church. No bare record of Jesus' words or life could convey the reality actually revealed to those who had known him. The story of the suffering Son of God caught up into itself and transfigured every remembered word and event of the earthly life of Jesus. In doing so, Knox says, the story conveyed, not less but more truly, the value and meaning those remembered words and events had actually possessed for those who first witnessed them.[17] Myth or "story" is thus the way this kind of "concrete" knowledge can be expressed. Part of the meaning of the Event is grounded in history—for example, the earthly life of Jesus; but part of the meaning of the Event—the "coming" of the Spirit, for example—can only be expressed with mythological language. Actually, there is even more to it than that, Knox suggests. He questions whether there is such a thing as a "bare fact." Certainly we can have no knowledeg of an objective event as such. "History and interpretation, distinguishable in idea, cannot in fact be separated."[18]

Granted that myths have this power to express something not otherwise expressible, what does this mean for modern man? Is this part of his problem of "meaninglessness"? A number of people have been wrestling with this problem and it perhaps is the chief reason for much of the current interest in myth and symbol. Thus, Paul Ricoeur says there can be no return to a primitive naiveté with respect to an appreciation of symbols, for something has been lost: the immediacy of belief. He is hopeful, however, that moderns can, in and through criticism, work toward a kind of "second naiveté" which is accessible only in hermeneutics. Personal involvement is required, he says; otherwise you have "truth standing off at arm's length." To enter one must break into a circle: "You must comprehend in order

[16]Knox, *Jesus, Lord and Christ,* p. 52.
[17]*Ibid.,* pp. 55-56.
[18]*Ibid.,* p. 63.

to believe, but you must believe in order to comprehend."[19] In a similar vein, Knox writes: "The New Testament belongs to the church. The church wrote it; only the church can read it."[20] Meaning is open only to those within the community of common experience.

In considering Knox's understanding of how myths can "work" for modern man, it is interesting to compare C. G. Jung's view of the problem. We cannot turn the clock back and force ourselves to believe what we know is not true. But we can give some attention to what the symbols really mean. Not only would this mean the preservation of the treasures of our civilization, Jung suggests, "but we should also gain new access to the old truths which have vanished from our 'rational' purview because of the strangeness of their symbolism."[21]

Knox states the problem this way: How can modern religious man both have myths and at the same time know that it is myths he has? He must have myths to be "religious" and as a "modern" he knows that it is myths that he has. How can myths "have the kind of value a myth must have to be a myth—once we recognize them as myths?"[22] Knox says he believes the clue to the answer lies in making a distinction between two elements in the intention of myth. In the first place there is the intention to convey the quality of some reality in our experience, and secondly, there is the intention to account for the origin of this reality as objective fact. The two must be clearly distinguished. In our acceptance of the myth as a whole (which is the only way a myth can be accepted), we are not accepting each element in the same way. We can accept the myth as "expressive" if it seems ot us to convey adequately the felt reality, the concrete meaning, of something in our existence. We can accept it as "explanatory" if we find ourselves accounting for this "something" by the actual objective act of God of which the myth intends to speak. We have to find the myth "true" in both senses, but the meaning of the word "true" in the two cases is not the same.[23] Others, for example Tillich, have sought to speak of this first meaning of "true" (the expressing of a felt reality, a concrete meaning), by referring to the quality which a symbol has of "participating" in that to which it points. This is the aspect which modern man can still share with

[19]Paul Ricoeur, "Symbol: Food for Thought," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. IV, Spring, 1960, pp. 196-207 .

[20]Knox, *Jesus, Lord and Christ*, p. 66.

[21]C. G. Jung, "A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity," *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol. XI. (Bollingen Series, Vol. XX: New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), p. 199.

[22]Knox, *Myth and Truth*, p. 29.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 30.

primitive man, while taking the "explanatory" aspect as true in a different sense.

The Event and "Concrete Realities"

In his explication of the meaning of the New Testament Knox found his understanding of the Church and the way in which it produced the scriptures to be an invaluable tool. His understanding of "story" or myth has been, of course, a prime means for that explication. Much of his writing has been an exploration of the development in the Church's reflection on the meaning of what he has called the Event. He points out that as Jesus was the very heart and center of the Event in and through which God was understood to have acted, the Church's reflection tended more and more to be interpreted as God himself became man.[24] Christological reflection was not only inevitable, but necessary and valuable, because the basic christological terms stand, Knox says, "as mythological terms invariably do, not primarily for abstract ideas, but for concrete realities known within the experience of the community."[25]

The *development* of christology in the New Testament and in the subsequent history of the early Church has been a major concern throughout his writing, and has perhaps found its fullest expression in his book, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ.* Further, Knox has suggested, the "more developed" the mythology (that is, very likely, the less true it is as "objective truth"), the more "true" it may be as to meaning—that is, the more expressive it may be of felt reality, the kind of "concrete" knowledge so important to Christian faith in Knox's view. Faith does not give answers to *any* questions; rather, it is our answer to God—our recognition of and response to the ultimate divine reality which has disclosed itself within our experience. For Knox, faith is "a kind of knowledge—and indeed the surest kind of knowledge there is, the knowledge of concrete reality, the knowledge that consists in immediate awareness."[26]

Meaning, in a sense, might be said to be the test of a myth for Knox. We have seen that myth has to do, in his usage, with a "divine action," but he makes a distinction that is important to his explication of the New Testament. Myth at its best, he says, is interpretative of fact, whether the fact belongs to nature or history, but myth carries in itself the tendency to be also inventive of fact. When this happens, it is no longer myth, but rather what he would call "legend." In his view, legends can conceivably be proved true or false by historical

[24]Knox, *Myth and Truth,* p. 29.
[25]*Ibid.,* p. 188.
[26]Knox, *Myth and Truth,* p. 11.

evidence; myths cannot be. There is a difference, he feels, between a story which came into being to express the inner meaning of a known fact in nature or history and a story which alters, or even invents, the fact itself. "In the one case we have a fact creating a story, in the other a story creating a fact."[27] The Nativity stories, Knox suggests, are an example of the latter.

Symbols and the Language of Faith

Knox approaches the atonement theories just as he does christology, that is, from the standpoint of his understanding of "myth and truth." The Cross is significant, he would maintain, not as the *source* of the meaning of the Event, but rather as the *symbol* for it. In his book, *The Death of Christ,* in which he dealt specifically with the question of the meaning of the Cross in New Testament history and faith, Knox quotes Frederick C. Grant's vivid description in *The Earliest Gospel* of the experience of death by the early Christian martyrs. Repeatedly the early Christians saw their friends face death in a variety of cruel forms. They never lived far from persecution and death. Many of them remembered Jesus' death or had heard it described by a living witness. Is it any wonder *in view of their own experience,* Knox asks, that they remembered Jesus' death as the central and decisive moment in the whole event? In view of the centrality of Jesus' death within the Church's memory of him, as well as the key position his death occupies in the Event as a whole, it is not surprising, Knox says, that the Cross should have become the symbol of the whole meaning of the Event. In fact, Knox suggests, the two words, "Christ crucified" tend to sum up and designate the two aspects of the Event: "Christ" standing for all that is involved in the Resurrection, the Spirit, the new creation, the Church; and "crucified" standing for the man Jesus, for what he did and said and, mostly what he was, and for the response many made to him.

When we think of Jesus we think of his cross. The Cross has a centrality within the whole Event of Christ, but just as important, it has the symbolic power, Knox says, "not only to recall the event to mind in a formal way, but also effectively to express and communicate its concrete meaning."[28] Here again, we see Knox's concern with the special kind of knowledge upon which faith is based, the kind of knowledge in which myth and symbol participate. If the classical theories of the Atonement are judged by their plausibility in accounting for the fact of Jesus' death as an incident with the Event, all of

[27] *Ibid.,* pp. 66-69.
[28] Knox, *The Death of Christ,* p. 142.

them are false. But Knox says, if they are judged by their success in making clear and vivid authentic meanings of the Event as a whole, of which Jesus' death proved to be the actual and symbolic center, then all of them are true.

In his Pauline studies, Knox gave attention to the metaphors Paul uses in preaching his gospel, some of which, of course, led to the development of the classical theories of the Atonement. Knox is particularly struck by the fact that Paul, despite his obvious knowledge of the reality of repentance and forgiveness, makes so little use of those terms which are so prominent in the account of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. Paul substitutes the terms "justification" and "reconciliation;" his neglect of forgiveness and repentance, Knox thinks, has some unfortunate effects in the subsequent history of the Church. Again, Knox notes the distinction between the reality known and the inerpretation of it. Obviously Paul knew the reality of repentance and forgiveness, but his *interpretation* of this reality denied the organic unity of the experience. In attempting to explain how it happened that within the new community of Christ he found himself at peace with God, Paul felt obliged to deal with both God's justice and mercy. It was Marcion a generation or more later who was to take the implied separation even further and deny the unity of God himself.[29] Jesus' analogy of the father should have been retained instead of substituting that of the judge. Knox wonders what it was that seemingly made Paul so sedulously avoid metaphors drawn from the home. The second "effect" of Paul's neglect of the ideas of repentance and forgiveness ,was, Knox suggests, "that it deprived him of the only possible theoretical ground for affirming the reality of ethical obligation within the Christian life." Paul's answer to the antinomian question, (Why then not sin that grace may abound? What ground is there for ethical obligation, once one is in Christ?), takes the form of a demonstration that the believer *will* be righteous, not of an explanation of what he *ought* to be.[30] While deeply appreciative of Paul as a person and of his work, Knox feels that it would have been better had Paul been able to pay more attention to the language of faith. Perhaps, in this, Knox has found some incentive for his own careful attention to the question of myth, symbol and meaning in the life of the Church.

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[29]Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul,* p. 150. See Also, John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945).

[30]Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul,* pp. 153-154.