

CONSIDER JESUS: WAVES OF RENEWAL IN CHRISTOLOGY.

Elizabeth A. Johnson. New York: Crossroad, 1990. ISBN 0-8245-0990-0

This book is adapted from lectures Elizabeth Johnson gave in South Africa. She writes, she says, for “thoughtful believers,” whom she hopes will find their lives and ministries enriched by reflecting on recent theological insights into Jesus Christ. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter had his response (Mark 8: 27-29), but the same question is put to every generation of believer. As individuals and church, we must respond to the question and this book helps us formulate our own answers. As Johnson puts it, “Now it is our turn”--- for our generation faces its own new crises, demands and challenges.

The book’s governing metaphor, as the title suggests, is that of waves breaking on the beach. Like waves that follow one upon the other, there have been successive understandings of Christ which have formed, swelled and then broken upon the consciousness of the church. Johnson focuses on contemporary Christology, mostly from a Catholic perspective, because she says, Catholics have had a different set of theological problems and assumptions than Protestants. Later in the book though, the contributions of contemporary Protestant theologians are introduced to address specific modern questions, such as Christ’s suffering and the cross.

The book begins with a quick survey of Christology, starting with the scriptural witnesses. Each New Testament writer had specific Christological insights shaped by the preachings and experiences of the local churches. For example: for Paul, Jesus is the crucified and risen Christ; for Luke, Jesus is the Savior of all and is filled with the Holy Spirit; John sees him as the enfleshed Word of God. From the Second through the Seventh centuries, as the church expanded into the Hellenistic world, church councils reflected on Jesus’ being: What was his relation to the only God named Father? Were there two Gods? Was Jesus a lesser god? What about Jesus’ humanity? Was he of real flesh? Etc. This was a period of intense debate over Jesus Christ’s identity. Chalcedon (451) at a crucial point in this debate confessed Jesus to be, “one in being with the Father, as to divinity and one in being with us as to his humanity”--- “truly God and truly human”.

The medieval period (Eleventh through the Sixteenth centuries) was relatively mild, with no new major theological eruptions. Under the influence of Aristotle’s philosophy, Scholasticism became the dominant method for theological reasoning. From the Sixteenth through the Twentieth centuries, the Catholic Church went into a defensive mode as it faced the threat of the Reformation and questions posed by the modern world. Though this was a period of dry intellectual approaches, it was also a rich devotional time for Jesus piety.

The first wave of a modern renewal of Christology began in the 1950's with the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon. Karl Rahner made a strong criticism of the state of Catholic Christology, accusing theologians of repeating old neo-scholastic teachings, while ignoring the scriptural and dogmatic truths of Jesus’ humanity. Modern theologians began to turn their attention to what faith in Jesus, as savior of the world, means in our encounter with world religions and atheists. The church moved out of its self-imposed ghetto and Johnson’s

book charts the new “waves” resulting from these stirrings of the theological waters.

Catholic theology began its revival in the mid-twentieth century. In Christology a new look was given the question of the divine and human natures of Christ, with special emphasis on Jesus’ humanity. One consequence of this emphasis was the deeper appreciation of our inherent dignity because of every human’s union with God. Thus, the Second Vatican Council stressed this dignity of all humans and called everyone to address whatever disfigures and impoverishes this dignity in the world. Johnson says that when the Vatican Council encouraged the church to dialogue with the modern world, we found that three major shifts had occurred in contemporary intellectual history in Europe and they have had a strong influence on Catholic theology since the Council.

The first, called “the turn to the subject,” was influenced by Kant and shifted attention to the human person’s process of becoming. This was a change away from the dominance of authority and tradition, towards human experience as an important norm for knowing. For Christology, this meant an interest in Jesus as a real human historical person with his own personal traits and life story and his impact on our own becoming fully human and free persons.

The second shift in modern thinking was a turn toward the negativity of much human experience. Modern evils like genocide, torture, the massive destruction of war, etc. turned thoughtful attention to human suffering in history. Thus, there evolved a new sensitivity to individual and social human pathology. The impact on Christology has been the study of the social and political consequences of Jesus’ ministry of preaching and healing. Thus, Christology shifted to reflecting on how praxis, the doing of truth in love and justice, becomes a way of knowing Jesus Christ.

The third major shift was a new way of perceiving the people of the world as a small global community. Moderns began to see that all living beings are part of an interconnected world and that we are all affected by each other’s actions. With this deepened global awareness developed a growing appreciation for other religious and philosophical systems and the wisdom they offer, as we all face the death-dealing powers of our world. Thus, for Christology, new questions have arisen about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. Who is Christ in the light of the world’s diverse religious paths?

The book explores the responses to these great shifts in modern human consciousness. Rahner, Johnson says, would be a happy man to see the diversity and passionate controversies in Christology that have arisen in the Catholic community. In examining the “waves of renewal” that have swept to shore since the mid-twentieth century, she claims that while this may be a fascinating intellectual exercise, it is more than that—it is our attempt to answer the question Jesus Christ is placing before us today, “But who do you say that I am?”

Johnson reviews how the scriptural renewal that resulted from the Vatican Council focused new attention on Jesus Christ’s life story as a historical person and the consequences of our faith in him on social justice and liberation and feminist theologies. I found the chapter, “God and the

Cross,” helpful during this past Lent’s preaching. The chapter addresses questions that come to the forefront during Lent: Where is God in all humanity’s suffering? How does God relate to it? Did God want Jesus’ suffering? Does God want our suffering? Does God suffer? Key for me in this chapter was Johnson’s tracing various theological responses to these questions, first through the scriptural witnesses and then through theologians like Aquinas, Maritain and Moltmann. I particularly liked Johnson’s elucidation of Schillebeeckx, who says that on the cross God “enters into compassionate solidarity with the suffering one in order to save.... God is with [Jesus] in the midst of his suffering, near but silent, bending over him to gift him with life. The evil of this world, with all its power, is weaker than God, the compassionate one who enters into solidarity with the sufferer and ultimately saves” (page 125).

The book closes with a brief prediction of the future. Johnson believes that the newest wave now forming in Christology and one that will continue well into this century, is about the universality of Jesus Christ regarding all the peoples and creatures of the earth and the whole cosmos itself. Here she notes that the “Humano centrism of much of Christology is expanding toward a cosmic vision of the significance of Jesus Christ” (page 143). Today theology has “retrieved the genuine humanity of Jesus Christ” remembered his concrete story, realized his liberating power for the poor and oppressed and probed the breath and depth of his saving power for the peoples of the world and the whole earth itself. But the next wave in Christology will be the Christologies that will come from the young and expanding churches of Africa, Asia and India. She sees the current age as a period of Christological ferment “unmatched since the first century” (page 145).

Preachers need to be serious students of theology. Study gives us a chance to be silent and listen, and Elizabeth Johnson’s theological reflections and creative insights provide a wonderful listening post for us. We Dominicans say that preachers are “to give to others the fruits of our contemplation.” Johnson is a wise and rich companion for our needed contemplative moments.

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