

Holiness, Righteousness and Justice, and Toward Concept Fulfillment

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Toward Concept Fulfillment

A few years back I was invited to attend a meeting called by the then director of the proposed Billy Graham Center for World Evangelism. The director had just returned from a similar meeting in Latin America where he had discussed the concept of evangelism with a number of Latin American theologians. It was apparent from his remarks that their concept and his were quite different. For one thing, they maintained that the communication of the gospel requires a concrete incarnate witness, not merely a verbal announcement. They also maintained that the proclamation of the gospel should be understood as a form of social action. Finally, they were laboring under the impression that discipleship should be conceived in an ethical context.

It was clear from this director's remarks that these ideas were not only very different from his own, but that he believed them to be quite unacceptable. "You know", he said to me after the meeting, "many hospitals have been built in the name of spreading the gospel. Yet often scarcely a handful of patients have responded to the care they received by accepting Christ. (I didn't stop to inquire whether he thought Jesus should have healed the ten lepers—only one returned, you recall, and he was a Samaritan. Perhaps I should have. It would have been interesting to get his response.)

A similar situation confronts our organization as it embarks on the fragile experiment to devise a truly international denomination. Unless we have totally succeeded in reproducing Christians abroad in our own image, we are bound to discover some Nazarenes out there who have come up with some "incredible" ideas as they've put the concept of holiness into the context of their own culture and circumstances.

I was particularly reminded of this possibility last month while listening to a presentation by Andrew Young, former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. and present mayor of Atlanta. Young observed that we do a grave injustice to our missionaries and our Christian schools when we insist that third world revolutionaries have invariably gotten their radical ideas from the Soviet Union. When you teach people that they are children of God and that they are made in His image, Young reminded us, that is revolutionary!* (We used this concept to *justify our own revolution*. . . see our declaration of independence.)

*For a provocative exposure to the way the context of Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolt affected the interpretation of scripture, see *The gospel in Solentiname, Vol. IV*, by Ernesto Cardinal (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982).

How Will We Respond to The "Incredible" Notions of Natives?

Upon hearing the strange ideas of some of our international church members, our first response might be simply to dismiss them as mere manifestations of an ignorance befitting new and not-so-experienced Christians. . . or possibly to write them off as merely another annoying form of syncretism. ("If only these people could separate authentic Christianity from the trappings of culture" we might say.)

What appears to us to be strange and possibly unorthodox ideas may in fact emanate from ignorance and even syncretism. Before jumping to these conclusions, however, we would do well to reflect on one man's experience. The person is Ron Frase. He is currently chaplain at Whitworth college. During his presentation at The Church and Peacemaking in a Nuclear Age conference in Pasadena last May, Ron reflected on his years of experience in Latin America. In preparing for his ministry there he recounted how he had attended all of the best schools . . . Wheaton College, Princeton Seminary, Fuller, etc. . . . and how in the process he had devised answers to all of life's pressing questions. After he had his theology all packaged and systematized, he departed for Brazil. To his dismay, he discovered that people there were not interested in his answers. They wanted to know what Christianity had to say about human rights, . . . whether a Christian can be a Marxist, . . . and whether revolution was compatible with the gospel. "Sadly", he confessed, "I had to face the fact that I had spent most of my post high school years studying answers to questions that no one was asking." (I find his comment disturbingly reminiscent of Tom Skinner's book, *If Christ is the Answer, what is the Question?*)

My own conviction is that the poor, threatened, humiliated, and hopeless Christians of the first, second, and third world have some important things to tell us. My concern is that we hear and heed the questions they and their spokesmen are raising in a context of religious persecution, flagrant human rights violations, political and military corruption, sickness, hunger and malnutrition. Moreover we need to wrestle with . . . even agonize over . . . how our theology of holiness relates to these realities.

Contextualization for a New Day

In their effort to convey Christianity within the context of a non-Christian culture, contextualization has become a byword for missiologists. A less than profound illustration of this concept comes from the writing of Eugene Nida (1976, p. 221). He recounts the problem a Bible translator was having trying to communicate the concept of sanctification to a tribal group in the interior of Mexico. After considerable struggle he hit upon a word which these Indians used to describe a garment that had been washed and remained clean.

According to Chuck Kraft of Fuller Seminary, contextualization in the fullest sense involves fitting Christian concepts within the world view of the culture of concern (Kraft, 1979, p. 362). A concept which is central to the Nazarene theological world view is holiness. If third world peoples (by this I refer to the poor, disadvantaged, and exploited people of all nations) and their spokesmen are to meaningfully convey the reality of their circumstances and the substance of their concerns to those of us more fortunate Nazarenes, it will probably have to be via our concept of holiness. If this be true, then it is most important for us to ask, "What potential does our concept of holiness have for comprehending issues of structural evil, collective sin, and social injustice confronting third world peoples today?" In short, what

potential does Christian holiness have for comprehending and productively dealing with justice issues?

My fear is that the way this concept has been dealt with in the past has left little room for dealing with such issues. While we have preached that God is love we have neglected the fact that God is also justice. While we have proclaimed our theology of holiness, matters of structural evil and social sin have either been written off as irrelevant issues or redefined as matters emanating from personal sin. So accustomed have we become to the comfort of our first world yacht that we scarcely notice the struggling, sinking masses--who are desperately paddling in the murky sea of injustice on which we float--desperately struggling to somehow stay alive for a few more hours. When on occasion they do catch our attention, our all-too-frequent response is to hand them a copy of our manual's statement on holiness.

While this is my fear, my hope and faith is that our passion for holiness will force us to consider and constructively relate to the justice issues of our day. But by what means will this take place?

Concept Fulfillment

Don Richardson (1981, p. 416) employs the term concept fulfillment to refer to tapping a concept's latent but pregnant potential. What is the untapped potential of our concept of holiness? Wiley and Culbertson, in their *Introduction to Christian Theology*, define holiness as the very nature of God. They go on to link the concepts of righteousness and justice to holiness. Righteousness, they maintain, refers to God's standard . . . a standard which emanates from and manifests this nature. Justice, in turn, refers to the administration of this standard (Wiley and Culbertson, 1961, p. 107). The suggestion seems clear enough; justice has something to do with holiness and holiness as a concept contains some concern with justice. However by acknowledging a connection here we have only barely begun the process of concept fulfillment as defined by Richardson. We must proceed to examine just what justice is and what its administration involves. And we must link up the results of our inquiry with the concept that comprehends it, *holiness*.

This latter task, linking the fuller implications of justice administration with holiness, may necessarily require further elaboration of the holiness concept itself. To comprehend the fuller implications of God's nature, it is helpful to reflect on the nature and activity of His incarnate son. As we consider the epitomizing of God's nature in the person of Jesus, what do we attend to? Jerry Hull, a fellow sociologist and colleague at Northwest Nazarene College, suggests that our conventional approach has been to focus on the "spiritual" aspects of His message and to view His healing of the sick and feeding of the hungry in terms of a symbolic reference to His concern for the spiritual welfare of mankind. But what might a third world Christian abstract about God's nature upon reading the same scripture? Hull suggests that they might be more inclined to consider His concern for meeting the material needs of the masses while giving special heed to the "disrespectful" way in which he challenged the wealthy and upset the religious power hierarchy of the day. They would also surely find Mary's Magnificat to be particularly revealing of God's nature:

My soul magnifies the Lord. . .
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent empty away. (Luke 1:46-53).

As John Howard Yoder suggests, in his book, *The Politics of Jesus* (see Yoder, 1972), they would likely see the theme of Jubilee justice—cropping up in such places as in Jesus' inaugural sermon (Luke 4:18-19), His model prayer (particularly the passage referring to forgiving our debts as we forgive our debtors), and His parable of the ungrateful man who, after being forgiven a debt by his Lord, harshly demanded full payment from his own debt—as proof positive that a concern for justice is integral to comprehending God's nature. The prophet Jeremiah put it quite simply: To know God is to do justice (Jer. 22:16).

How Do We Do Theology?

How are we to avoid missing the fuller implications of God's holiness within the context of our contemporary world? Sensing that the so-called theologians of the North Atlantic have remained oblivious to the realities of much of their world, people such as Orlando Costas, Bill Pannell, Vinay Kumar Samuel, Robert McAfee Brown, and a host of other theologians are now suggesting that a new way of doing theology is in order. Orlando Costas (1974) outlines three key ingredients of a new approach. It will be worth our while to briefly consider each:

1. A Different Starting Point: The Poor

This starting point is not as new as it might first appear. Robert McAfee Brown (1978, p. 142) cites two passages from Barth's writings to illustrate this point:

God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the loft and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.

The Church is witness of the fact that the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. And this implies that . . . the Church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of its primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the State's special responsibility for these weaker members of society.

That it will bestow its love upon them . . . [is] the most important thing; but it must not concentrate on this and neglect the other thing to which it is committed by its political responsibility; the effort to achieve such a fashioning of the law as will make it impossible for "equality before the law" to become a cloak under which strong and weak, independent and dependent, rich and poor, employers and employees, in fact receive different treatment at its hands: the weak being unduly restricted, the strong unduly protected.

While there is some evidence of a concern for the circumstances confronting the poor within the writings of the so-called "theologians of the North Atlantic", such a concern can scarcely be

considered a starting point for most theologians writing in the holiness tradition. If we are to really come to grips with the social and political forces impacting the poor and exploited peoples of the world—those to which God has manifested a special concern—a reorientation to our way of thinking must occur. Basic to such as reorientation is a fundamental change in, or expansion of, what sociologists refer to as our *reference group*. In our achievement oriented society, it has become conventional to compare our circumstances with those who have more than we do. However in doing so we invariably feel overworked, underpaid, under recognized and, through a little transvaluational logic, just a bit pious and self-righteous. In his book, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, sociologist Donald Kraybill challenges us to fix our gaze downward rather than upward (see Kraybill, 197888). As we revise our focus, our whole outlook changes. We begin to understand that to feel overworked and underpaid is a form of self-indulgence . . . a luxury which, in light of the magnitude of human need, we can ill afford. Furthermore we begin to take seriously the conditions plaguing these masses. It is quite possible that as we identify with their plight we may for the first time become genuinely indignant over the injustices that victimize them!

2. A Different Mode of Engagement: Praxis

This increasingly popular term, *praxis*, means something more than mere practice. Robert McAfee Brown (1978, p. 71) defines it as an ongoing two-way exchange between action and theory. But Brown is quick to point out that not just any action will do . . . only action of a transforming nature. The way the early Christians were described in Acts 17:6 fits the model well. They were referred to as "those who have turned the world upside down".

The underlying premise of this mode of engagement is that theology must both issue from engagement and lead to renewed engagement. In this sense theology is not done via a logico-deductive process of bystander reflection. But neither is it done via a logico-inductive procedure in which grass roots experience becomes the only teacher. Rather it incorporates both approaches. Action forces me to look at my theory again. Yet by reexamining my theory I am compelled to reappraise my action.

This means of doing theology, like the first, is not entirely new. The self-reports of many a respected religious figure manifest this process. At some point they dared to launch out on the light that they had. But by engaging in a continual process of theorizing—acting—reflecting—retheorizing--and action-revising, they have developed a maturity of insight and a genuine integration of head-heart knowledge while leaving behind them a theology for successive generations to pursue.

I suspect that our denomination has gone through a somewhat similar process over the years. Now-a-days I seldom hear the pulpit pronouncements on holiness that I recall hearing so often during my early years. This is sometimes seen as an indication that we haven somehow "backslidden" from an original commitment. But let me suggest another possibility. Could it be that as we have acted on the implications of these former pronouncements, we have revised our "theory" and that what has emerged over the years is a more contextually relevant theology of holiness? Furthermore, as we continue to engage in this process could it be that it will carry us further in the direction of concept fulfillment?

3. A Different Set of Tools: The Social Sciences

Tradition causes us to look to philosophy to provide the tools for crafting our theology. Having grown up with this tradition, it seems logical to include heavy doses of philosophy major into the religion departments of our colleges. When we need assistance in dealing with some social issue or another, we call upon the philosophers for assistance. When the resident pastor is unable to fill the pulpit, we may even invite a philosopher to take his place.

Theologians have grown so comfortable with philosophers that the latter are surely assured a legitimate place in the church for the foreseeable future. But what about social scientists? Do they not have something important to contribute as well? Could it be that their tools might provide valuable insights into the nature of historical, social, political, and economic forces conditioning the circumstances under which men think, feel, and act? Could their insights be of use in addressing holiness theology to the issues confronting our contemporary world? To attempt a full response to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. However I trust that they will provoke due consideration during our conference this week.

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