

JESUS CHRIST IN THE AGE OF **IN/TOLERANCE**

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Who is Jesus Christ "amid the fundamentalisms and relativisms of the hour"? The phrase appears in the Colloquy's ads & flier, &--as incoming responses indicates--needs some elucidation. When the phrase emerged in the colloquy-planning dinner conversation last evening, there was agreement that (as in the case of pornography) "I know it when I see it." "We've been speaking of pluralism," someone said; "how distinguish that from relativism?" My response disappointed me enough to motivate me to use a Think-sheet to sort out at least some of the terms in this **word-field** (semantic domain).

1 Using the con/text metaphor, we can say this: For Christians, Jesus Christ is the **text** in every historical-cultural-political **context**. One solid & good meaning of "relativism" is that life & literature should be read, interpreted, understood not in the abstract but concretely, in context, "relative to" its time-place-conditions. This is the bedrock of hermeneutics.

2 "I know it when I feel it" well expresses the distinction between "fundamentalism" & "relativism." To use the dual term in this Thinksheet's title, the feel of fundamentalism is **intolerance**, the feel of relativism is **tolerance**. I half agree with Allan Bloom when in THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND he says that in our educational system, tolerance has emerged as the supreme virtue. Yes, it's true of the public-education establishment. But "our educational system" in the broader sense includes the Protestant fundamentalist K-12 I visited recently, where you can feel intolerance emerging. What we have world-wide as we move toward century's end is a multilayered crosshatching of in/tolerant **con-frontations**. Our question thus is, Who is Jesus Christ amid these clashing pairs of fundamentalisms & relativisms?

3 Jesus is crucified on the crossbeam of the **extremisms** as the right digs in against pressures from the left & the left butts out under pressures from the right. The right imprisons him in the past, making nonsense of Bonhoeffer's question "Who is Jesus Christ for us *now* [in our *Sitz im Leben*, our life-context]?" Ditto for the Colloquy's question, Who is Jesus Christ "amid...."? Baha'i is doctrinally big on tolerance, but under Manhattan pressures (said a reporter to me last week, after attending a Baha'i church) it solidifies into something "as narrow as any other fundamentalism."....What happens to Jesus Christ on the transept's other end? He vaporizes into the neognostic "cosmic Christ," into a generic or androgynous spirit (naughty to sing "Crown *him* with many crowns"); or he shrinks to a "young, flawed & failed Late-Jewish Palestinian rabbi," or to a moral model of a limited range of virtues, or a race-&-culture-bound idealist whose vision is nontransferable into other cultures (so Christian missions are inherently imperialist & doomed). The Crucifix pleads with us to be neither isolated from nor assimilated into the sub/culture-context in which we seek to communicate the gospel.

4 In American church history, the antonym of "fundamentalism" is "**modern-ism**," a radical form of 19th-early 20th-c. **liberalism**. A difference: liberalism, the philosophy of freedom, correlates with tolerance; modernism correlates with intolerance toward "the cold, dead hand of the past" & the reps thereof, ie fundamentalists of all types & in all fields. The tension between the two appears in movements for change. Eg, Carr the liberal & Lenin the modernist (the latter, against the former, insisting on atheism). This dynamic is alive in mainline hymnal-committees, such as the UCC's (the liberals wanting a mix of language styles, the modernists fighting against any use of "noninclusive language")....Culturally, the antonym of "modernism" is "archaism."

5 The most important nuance, here, is the **spirit/substance** distinction. A person holding to classical Christology, as I do, may be tolerant in spirit (what I call "orthodox open"): a person of nonorthodox convictions may be, in spirit, intolerant of "contemporary ancestors" (as I once heard Shailer Mathews call funda-

mentalists). Study helps to the mastery of substance, but only listening can foster open-heartedness, the humble-generous-learning spirit. The Craigville Theological Colloquies aim at the advancement of learning in spirit as well as in substance, & convert or alienate anyone whose style has been to maintain control by demanding (1) the right to be heard & (2) the privilege of not listening.

6 The antonym of "relativism" is "**absolutism**," the doctrine that absolute truth can be known & I absolutely know it. The essence of "fundamentalism" as an American Protestant movement finding normative expression in the 1910-15 booklets, "The Fundamentals," is biblical inerrancy, an absolutist dogma unavoidably engendering an arrogant, intolerant, illiberal spirit: I have the truth, & you will listen to & agree with me or go to hell. Discourse is woodenly seen as only referential, excluding the attitudinal & performative. Caution: By the grace of God, some inerrantists--Billy Graham, for example--do avoid arrogance. And some metaphorically modify their literalism to save their inerrantism--eg, by reading creation's "days" as eras....On the + side, this fundamentalism does preserve the historic evangelical accent on personal experience of God, experiential assurance of salvation, conversion as the first goal of evangelism. ("Fundamentalism" of this sort is a subcategory of "evangelicalism.")

In the Colloquy phrase, "fundamentalisms" is plural. Who is Jesus Christ for Arab Christians living with restrictions & even persecution in a Muslim-fundamentalist state? Besides of religion, there are fundamentalism of race (racisms), nation (nationalisms), culture, sex. All fundamentalisms are captive to the **over/under** phenomenon: overclaiming for one's position, underappreciating the positions of others. Irony: In this perspective, relativisms can be fundamentalisms!

7 **Pluralism** has come to mean radical multiculturalism, the doctrine that one cultural strand in a society is as good as any other & should be given as much attention as any. Historically, this is disastrous, history being bent to fit the dogma; politically, it is community-fragmenting; religiously, it is idolatrous, one's own group being given sacred status (eg, David Duke's white racism); educationally it's chaotic (separate schools for separate tribes?) & propagandistic (eg, the bloated claims of Afrocentric curricula). Theologically, it's world-faith, a syncretism or at least melange of all religions, one considered as good as (never better than) another....In philosophy of history, pluralism is "historicism," the doctrine that historians should study cultures & periods without hoping to find any overall pattern-meaning & without imposing any value-system of their own--cultures being historically determined & not inter-comparable (a position that slides easily into radical conditionalism, scepticism, social solipsism, particularism)....All the above meanings are pejorative.

Of course "plurality," a fact of nature-history-life whose antonyms are "singularity" & "unity," is to be distinguished from "pluralism," a perspective whose philosophical antonym is "monism" & whose cultural antonyms are many: eg, "chauvinism," "ethnism," "racism," but also "community."....Metaphysical pluralisms are distinguished by their focus on substance or attribute or process or event....Politically, what I may call unitive pluralism is the recognition & honoring of subcultures within a common culture. Whether the common American Anglo culture can survive its present radical pluralist ("multiculturalist") challenges is the sociohistorical question now facing us. Many groups are intolerant of, even antagonistic toward, the common culture ("white-male dominance" was its origin but need not be its future).

8 Pluralism is a subcategory of **relativism**. Truth is "relative to" particular societies, cognitive systems, historical epochs, particular founders of religions. Truth is internally-pragmatically known within a community; general truth cannot be inferred crossculturally; absolute truth (in sceptical relativism) is unavailable. Tolerance is an implicit virtue of relativism: each society should respect every other society, for no society can lay special claim to an overarching truth-value-canon. Since meaning is only internal to each system, a universal gospel is ruled out: Jesus Christ cannot be "for all." But can dialog & evangelization be reconciled in this age of in/tolerance? Yes--with faith, goodwill, & humor.