



Understanding and communicating Christological truths: potentials and problems in the context of modern Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT

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This essay examines how systematic theology can understand and communicate core Christological truths in modern Viet Nam. It adopts “understanding” and “communicating” as key tasks and defines the doctrinal truths at stake as Jesus Christ’s full divinity and full humanity, and his uniqueness as the way of salvation. The author situates the discussion within a Vietnamese context marked by (1) Mahayana Buddhism and popular religious cults, (2) Marxist-Leninist and scientific-technical education, and (3) rapid globalization. Buddhism and folk religiosity can foster openness to transcendence and support narrative proclamation, yet they may also encourage superstition and weaken Christ’s uniqueness or historicity. Marxist-materialist habits challenge belief but can purify superstition and awaken spiritual hunger and historical inquiry. The essay concludes by proposing two complementary parameters: narrative-symbolic Christology and a scientifically framed appeal to spiritual experience.

Understanding and communicating

With these two terms, I would like to refer to *the* tasks (or *two of the* tasks, depending on what we understand systematic theology to be) of systematic theology. These are the two last functional specialties among the eight ones proposed by B. Lonergan in his *Method in Theology*.¹ With these two tasks, systematic theology presupposes and starts from the conviction and affirmation of theological truths. From there, systematic theology seeks to understand and explain these truths in concepts and terms intelligible to its audience.^{2x}

To perform these tasks, systematic theology needs to build a coherent whole of concepts that

¹ Cf. B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, London 1975, 127-133. The eight functional specialties in theology are Research, Interpretation, History, Dialectic, Foundations, Doctrines, Systematics, Communications. He seems to consider the so-called systematic theology as belonging to the functional specialty of Systematics (cfr. *Ibid.*, 339-340, 349-350).

² “The aim of systematics is not to increase certitude but to promote understanding. It does not seek to establish the facts... Its task is to take over the facts, established in doctrines, and to attempt to work them into an assimilable whole” (*Ibid.*, 336).

are familiar to its audience and that make sense among themselves, in relation to one another.³

This essay does not aim at building a system of interacting concepts, but only at indicating the parameters for such a to-be-built system of conceptualization.

Christological truths

By “Christological truths,” I simply mean the doctrinal truth about (1) Jesus Christ as true God and as true man; and the truth about (2) him as the unique way of salvation. These two truths interact and are dependent on each other.

Modern Viet Nam

The social, cultural, and religious contexts of modern Viet Nam are characterized by (1) Buddhism and other traditional religions, by (2) a communist education of Marxist-Leninism and of natural sciences, and by (3) a speedy process of globalization whose most obvious effect is the growing mentality inclined to consumerism and secularism.

Despite the common heritage of national and cultural identity, and despite the speedy process of globalization, there still exists a great variety of sub-cultures and cultural intersections. It is possible to talk about city culture as distinct from rural culture, about the culture of the youth as distinct from that of the old. Within the same population, different subcultures may coexist, sometimes in conflict, claiming their own territory or blending to form new mixtures.

Each of the three elements indicated above that influence the context of modern Viet Nam can be found more eminent in one section of the population than in others, but generally all three can be found at the same time, interacting with one another, in any section of the population.

In this essay, I will point out the potential and problems posed by the first two elements for a possible systematic Christology. These two elements (Buddhism and other religions, Marxist education, and scientific technical mode of thinking) are more peculiar to the society of Viet Nam. The third one can be said to be common to any other culture.

Potentials and problems

a. Buddhism and other folk religions: The majority of the population practices Mahayana Buddhism, mixed with Taoist, Confucianist, and traditional cults. Even those who call themselves Buddhists do not, in practice, consider that the ultimate absolute principle of salvation is the state of Nirvana. They also worship Buddha and others as divinities.

- *Potentials:*

This facilitates a sense of the transcendent: the sacredness and the good. On the cognitive level,

³ “The facts and values affirmed in doctrines give rise to further questions. For doctrinal expression may be figurative or symbolic. It may be descriptive and based ultimately on the meaning of words rather than on an understanding of realities. It may, if pressed, quickly become vague and indefinite. It may seem, when examined, to be involved in inconsistency or fallacy.

The functional specialty, systematics, attempts to meet these issues. It is concerned to work out appropriate systems of conceptualization, to remove apparent inconsistencies, to move towards some grasp of spiritual matters both from their own inner coherence and from the analogies offered by more familiar human experience” (*Ibid.*, 132).

they tend to easily acknowledge the existence of Something or Someone who is transcendent. It is always possible to speak about “Ông Trời” (Mr. Heaven) or God. On a practical level, they believe in Karma and seek to do good for the sake of a better existence.

A historical figure from the past becomes a divine figure and is worshipped in temples, which is common. Every village or commune has its own divinity who used to be a hero or a person of high status in that village. Beliefs and cults are commonly created around a historical figure to make that person a god. This practice facilitates preaching about Jesus Christ as a historical figure and as God.

In this aspect, it would be appropriate to present the truths about Jesus Christ in narrative forms. It would be appropriate to tell the story of a God who descends to this world, carries out his charitable works, teaches his noble doctrines, and then returns to heaven, becoming the only way to salvation for mankind. This story would find fertile soil to take root and bear fruit in the minds and hearts of the people who are not unfamiliar with stories of legendary historical divinities.

Familiarity with moral values (peace in Buddhism; family, truth, honor in Confucianism) can serve as doorways to acquaintance with Jesus Christ as a “guru”.

- *Problems:*

However, for ordinary folks, sensitivity to the transcendent in most cases leads to anarchical pantheism and superstitious practices.

The narrative approach to the person of Jesus Christ also has its difficulties. It would be the story of a historical figure who comes from a different culture. Unlike the other traditional and national heroes, Jesus could initially be perceived as a stranger to the audience's national and cultural identity. This would not prevent Jesus from being gradually welcomed into the emotional home and religious consciousness of the people, but it would present an obstacle to overcome. Another difficulty is how this story of Jesus Christ would distinguish him from other national religious divinities. Jesus Christ's uniqueness and thus the truth about him as true God would be undermined if he were just one of those divinities who are no more than some “super-humans”, performing magic for the benefit or for the harm of their faithful. The third difficulty involves the danger of not considering Jesus as a true man. The tendency to forget or to pay no attention to the divinity's history would undermine the radically historical aspect of the person of Jesus Christ. Putting Jesus Christ in the rank of national and folk divinities, therefore, would be equivalent to dethroning him from his religious status as true God and to undermining his historical status as true man.

As for Jesus Christ's uniqueness, it seems difficult to preach it to people who are ready to turn to any divinity for their own benefit. It is, in fact, so if we rely on theoretical discourses that present Jesus Christ to them only on a cognitive level. People of such a religious sensitivity live much of their religious life on an emotional level. It would be an appropriate way to introduce Jesus Christ into their lives: to teach them to love Jesus Christ as a person, historical and divine. Once welcoming him into their emotional and religious home, they could embrace Jesus Christ as their only God and only way of salvation.

b. Marxism and scientific-technical/materialistic mode of thinking: For the past 60 years in the North and 30 years in the South, the education system of Viet Nam has laid great stress on subjects of natural sciences and on the philosophy of Marxist-Leninism. The reception of Marxist-Leninism may not be substantial, but the continual repetition of its doctrines inevitably exerts its influence on the mode of thinking of the people.

- *Problems:*

Obviously, an atheistic, materialistic mentality opposes any kind of religious beliefs.

- *Potentials:*

However, it is not the end of religions. There is still hope if we can look at it with a positive eye. It is precisely this type of education and mode of thinking that helps purify people from the superstitious mindset commonly found in folk religious practices. This could prepare the way for a mature faith in Jesus Christ. It is precisely those educated with a scientific-technical mentality who could show interest and seriousness in seeking a historical Jesus and thus be introduced to the authentic person and works of Jesus Christ.

The lack of knowledge of other humanistic subjects in the education system creates a gap in people's view of themselves and of reality. However, it is precisely this emptiness that occasions awareness of hunger and a greater desire for spiritual life. It would be fascinating for people to reconnect with the life of the spirit within themselves and in the world around them. Once aware of the richness of the life of the spirit, the people are prepared to accept Jesus as Christ, whose spirit of the Resurrection is at work in their minds and hearts and in the world.

The language to communicate the truths about Jesus Christ, therefore, could be scientific and open people to the phenomenon of the spirit. It could use the scientific method (psychology, epistemology, etc.) to raise the audience's awareness of their own spiritual life in scientific-philosophical terms.

The appreciation of such Marxist values as social equality and social justice could also serve as doorways to the appreciation of the works, teachings, and person of Jesus Christ, who has historically always taken the side of the poor.

Conclusion

The analysis of the potentials and problems presented above has identified significant parameters for a possible conceptual system and for the communication of such concepts, which would intelligibly present Christological truths to the people of modern Viet Nam. These parameters are:

- A narrative approach that presents the truths about Jesus Christ in interacting with data, images, metaphors, and symbols. These data, images, metaphors, and symbols form a meaningful, coherent whole supported by the structure of the narrative itself. Once entering into the narrative's world of meaning, the audience can be facilitated in embracing Jesus Christ as their God and their salvation.
- An appeal to the awareness of the life of the spirit in modern scientific terms. This would first attract the people to the desire and pursuit of transcendent values, to the awareness of their own human persons as spirit, then to the personal encounter with the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

Depending on the audience, more emphasis can be placed on one parameter than on the other. In any case, the two do not necessarily contradict one another and should not. These two guarantee the truth about Jesus as both a historical figure and the Risen Christ.

References

B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, London 1975, 127-133

Biodata

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