Recent Religious/Political Developments in a New Testament Theological Perspective

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UNPRECEDENTED DEVELOPMENTS

Massive political and social changes took place in the last few months of 1989 and the first months of 1990. With amazing speed citizens toppled long-entrenched Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. President Gorbachev instituted dramatic economic and political changes within the Soviet Union. Democracy came to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Panama and Nicaragua.

At the same time, unprecedented religious developments occurred. For example, the recent meeting between the Pope and a Russian-Communist president was a first. In Eastern Europe there is a dramatic revival of attendance and interest in the church. State television has aired religious programs. More than one hundred thousand Bulgarians gathered for worship in the central square in Sofia on Christmas Eve. The newly-inaugurated Czechoslovakian government attended mass at the cathedral as part of the ceremonies. Hundreds of Russian Orthodox churches have been reopened and are crowded.

Equally dramatic is the news from Communist China, where the church is alive and growing. Churches in the capital were jammed for Christmas services: "Believers, curiosity seekers and amiable soldiers jammed the capital's lit-up churches, which all miraculously survived centuries of rebellions, wars, official atheism and dogged persecution."

Similar developments are reported in Shanghai where the cathedral has reopened. The Catholic Church claims 120,000 faithful and thirty-six places of worship in Shanghai alone.

Who are these faithful in Communist China? Father Joseph, the aged priest in charge of the cathedral, reports:

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I am not amazed that the young come to church.... Most are members of old Christian families where mothers and grandmothers passed on the faith. Now the faith is bearing fruit. The young suffer from a crisis of confidence, they want something to believe in.  

The article which reports the revival of religion in China also accounts for that revival by the headline: “Chinese try religion to fill ideological void.” Perhaps a more insightful headline would account for the packed churches on the basis of the cessation of Communist persecution. At any rate, the headline speaks a partial truth. Father Joseph points out that “the young suffer from a crisis of confidence, they want something to believe in.” To some extent, then, the headline is accurate. The collapse of the Communist world-view and program for salvation has left an ideological void. However, the secular reasoning of the headline is not a complete answer.

In order to fill an ideological void, religion had to be present as a live alternative. In short, the secular reasoning of the headline fails to account for the amazing staying power of religious faith in a hostile environment. Again, Father Joseph’s words give an answer. The article speaks of “old Christian families” whose “mothers and grandmothers passed on the faith.” The Orthodox Church in Russia also has shown the amazing staying power of the faith in defiance of some of the bloodiest persecutions on record. After seventy years of persistent persecution by an atheistic state, the faith was passed on and constitutes a live option for filling the ideological void caused by the collapse of Communism.

The secular response that religious faith rushes in to fill an ideological void is deficient on other grounds as well. It does not account for the dramatic growth of the faith in areas where there was no ideological void left by Communism. Of course, the rapid growth of the Church in places like South Korea and Africa south of the Sahara immediately comes to mind. According to recent estimates, one in four South Koreans is a Christian. Methodist membership in South Korea is a good barometer; a few years ago it passed the one million mark. The church has set a goal of two million members by 2000 with the strong possibility that the goal will be met. In addition, South Korea has ceased to be a missionary importing country and has become a missionary exporting country. South Korea is sending missionaries to other Asian countries.

At a recent church supper, the Anglican rector and I were lamenting the marginal role of the Church in England. The rector pointed out that the picture was much more encouraging in places like Africa. Today there are more Anglicans in Africa than there are in England! I contributed that certain Methodist conferences in Africa were establishing new congregations more rapidly than ministers were being trained to fill those pulpits. A priest seated nearby said that of all the missionary provinces in the Roman Catholic Church, Africa was near the top of the list in winning new converts to Christ. If present trends continue, Africa south of the Sahara will become largely Christian in the next century.

Finally, the facile secular assumption concerning an ideological void is confounded by Poland. One wit put it this way: in the days of Polish independence the
country imported priests and exported grain, while under Communist control the country exported priests and imported grain! Poland did not experience an ideological void and the Church has gone from strength to strength under the very shadow of the Communist state.

THE PARALYSIS OF MOST CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

Where have we come in our analysis? So far we have commented on the recent religious revival in Russia, in China and in some Eastern European countries. We have noted the rapid growth of the Church in places like South Korea and Africa. Also, we have argued that the secular interpretation of such developments—that religion fills the ideological void created by the demise of Communism—is only partially adequate. While it accounts in part for the crowded churches in Russia and China, it does not account for the staying power of faith in those same places. Nor does it account for the recent rapid growth of the Church in third world countries.

Indeed, recent religious developments are a phenomenon that cries out for an explanation. Yet, recent interpreters of religion have turned out to be false prophets; they could not predict the future. Did not Harvey Cox once predict that ours would be the last generation to worship in churches? Nevertheless, the Church is alive and well and experiencing remarkable growth in the least expected places. Did not a death-of-God theology just a few years ago write God’s obituary? Yet, Who has buried whom? Truly, God has confounded the wisdom of the wise. Indeed, there are few religious interpreters on the scene today and those few frequently turn to the social sciences for answers.

Where, then, shall we look for an explanation? Our secular experts and media have been weighed and found wanting. Shall we turn to sociological analysis? Shall we consult biblical passages for guidance? Dare we say that God is doing a new thing in the world today?

Before we continue with our analysis, a word of caution is needed. Let us not “buy into” the secular option that lies so close at hand. Let us not think that the alternatives are either political and social analysis or biblical passages that speak about the work of God. Secular analysis, if it speaks of God at all, would confine religion to the sphere of the private, to the individual conscience. Consequently, some politicians manage the remarkable feat of being both pro-choice and anti-abortion at the same time: they are pro-life as private individuals, but pro-choice for public policy. Hence, religion is another ideology that fills the void in one’s private life when the former ideology collapses. The primary distinction between the two ideologies is that Communism has the right to dictate public policy whereas religion does not. Let us not allow such secular reasoning to confuse our analysis.

Such a privatized view of religion is contrary to Scripture as well as traditional Christianity. The Bible claims that God is the Lord of history. If no sparrow falls without God’s notice, neither does a great empire. For example, the prophet tells us that God called Cyrus, who did not know Him, to end the Babylonian captivity of Israel.
For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me (Isa. 45:4).

I have aroused him in righteousness... he shall build my city and set my exiles free...says the Lord of hosts (Isa. 45:13).

Accordingly, God works in, under and through the political and social dimensions of life, as well as in the private sphere. Biblical religion and its Marxist persecutors clearly understand the public nature of religion. Existentialism and its successor, secularism, have tried to confine faith to the private sphere of the individual conscience.

If Isaiah was correct in describing God’s preparation for the mission of Cyrus in destroying the Babylonian empire and subsequently in releasing the exiles, what shall we say about the collapse of the Communist ideology and subsequent growth of the Church? Would not a modern Isaiah (if such public revelation were still possible) see the activity of God in the right political, social and ideological conditions for the renewal and growth of the Church? If Nahum could see the judgment of God in the demise of the wicked city of Nineveh, could not a modern Nahum see the judgment of God on an ideology that championed the grossest violations of human rights and human life? After all, the altars of Communism are running red with the blood of millions of innocent victims—-from the Kulaks of the Ukraine to the flower of the Polish officer corps in Katyn forest, Tiananmen Square being only a more recent example of Communist brutality.

A NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

With such an understanding of the activity of God, let us see what light New Testament passages may shed on the current religious revival. In a remarkable essay entitled, “The Work of God Goes On,” Gerhard Lohfink3 analyses the “work” that God does according to the book of Acts. Lohfink, for example, quotes the words of the famous Gamaliel to the earliest persecutors of the Church. Let us describe the scene. Shortly after Pentecost, Peter and the apostles are teaching and preaching the Resurrection in Jerusalem. The high priest and the council, having previously arrested Peter and the apostles, this time want to kill them. Gamaliel, a member of the council, gives this advice: “...I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking [this work in Greek] is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:38f). According to this passage and others, the founding and growth of the Church is the work of God. This work of God continues after Easter in the life and mission of the Church. If this is true, God then “works” in, under and through the social and psychological dynamics of life. How else does the call of God come to people? Also, in the sense that the Church is an historical phenomenon, the work of God takes place in history.

Perhaps we can add even more specificity to the work of God through the Church by examining a remarkable passage in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. In chapters 9-11, Paul is discussing the relationship of the Church to Israel. As Paul
approaches the climax of his argument, he writes this remarkable sentence: "...I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved..." (Romans 11:25f). While nearly every word in the sentence needs explanation, for our purposes we will discuss only a few of them. Let us begin with the word "mystery." The background of this term clarifies its meaning. The background is Jewish and, more specifically, Jewish Apocalyptic, which is both a literary form (a genre) and a way of thinking. Jewish Apocalyptic portrayed God’s purposes for history and the nearness of the end, often by means of visions and heavenly journeys. Accordingly, the term "mystery" designates a purpose or secret of God which cannot be known by reason; God must reveal it to selected humans.4

According to some apocalyptic speculation in the end time the nations would be converted and make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This kind of thinking seems to lie immediately behind Rom. 11:25. However, in the "mystery" that Paul is sharing, God has formed a new people in Christ and the unbelief of the Jewish people has caused the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles. In the end time "all Israel," that is, the Jewish people who do not yet believe in Christ, will be drawn to faith in Him by God.

Many interpreters believe that here Paul is sharing "a new special revelation which he has himself received."5 Others doubt this. However, whether or not Paul is speaking about his own experience, God has revealed this insight to a chosen human.

The words translated as "the full number of Gentiles" could more literally be translated, "the fullness of the Gentiles." Unfortunately, the meaning for "full number" or fullness cannot be described with the same precision as the meaning of the word "mystery" above, since Paul does not define it further. There seem to be three major possibilities for understanding the word. It can mean "the full number of the elect from among the Gentiles," or "the added number needed in order to make up that full total," or even, "the Gentile world as a whole."6

A Chinese student at Garrett-Evangelical Theological School takes the latter view and speaks eloquently of the need to evangelize over one billion of his fellow countrypeople. Whether or not he is correct in interpreting "full number" to mean the great majority of the Gentiles, he seems to be correct in insisting that the evangelization of the Gentiles must take place within history. That is, Paul is not speaking of an act of God at the end of this age; he is speaking of the mission of the Church. The evidence for this view lies in the word "come in." The Greek for "come in" is found only three times elsewhere in Paul, but is frequently used in the Gospels for entering into the Kingdom of God. The coming in or entering into the Kingdom took place within Jesus’ ministry and takes place today. In using this term Paul is probably "drawing here on pre-Pauline tradition which stems from Jesus."7 Thus, Paul seems to have in mind the very kind of evangelistic work in which he himself was engaged when he wrote the letter to the Romans.

Note the precision that this passage from Paul adds to Lohfink’s discussion of the work of God. The incoming of the Gentiles takes place in the course of history and is being realized in the growth of the Church. In one sense we are witnessing
the filling of an ideological vacuum; in another sense we are witnessing the continuing work of God in history. In still another, the fullness of the Gentiles is being realized and God is working out His purpose for history.

Our next step is to set the work of God through the Church within the context of God’s redemptive purpose for history. Here we turn to Oscar Cullmann, the famous representative of the Salvation History approach to New Testament theology.

How does Cullmann set the work of the Church within the context of redemptive history? What is his approach? The title of his famous book, Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History, contains his basic thesis. The NT writers, as well as the OT prophets, held a linear conception of time in contrast to others who view time either as cyclical or as illusory. Lines have beginnings, middles and ends. Since time is linear, history also has a beginning, a middle and an end. However, there is a particular history in which God chooses to reveal Himself—namely, the history of the Jews. The very midpoint of this history is the Christ-event where God reveals Himself most fully. The primary focus of the Christ-event is His death and resurrection. It is the mid-point in that the sacrificial death of Jesus atones for the sin of the world and the resurrection of Jesus previews the goal of history in the resurrection of the dead.

The midpoint, where God’s rule (Kingdom) breaks into our time, points to the end of history when God’s rule will be fully realized. In describing the relationship of the Christ-event at the midpoint to the full coming of God’s rule at the end of history, Cullmann uses an analogy drawn from World War II. He speaks of the Christ-event as D-Day and the fullness of God’s rule at the end of the historical drama as V-Day. D-Day stands for the decisive battle in a war and V-Day stands for victory day when the war is won and is over. After the Allies had established a second front in Normandy and the Germans were not able to push them back into the sea, everyone knew the decisive battle had been fought; it was just a matter of time until Germany, now fighting on two fronts, would have to surrender. Similarly, Christ’s death and resurrection is the decisive battle fought against sin, death and the devil. The decisive battle points to God’s final victory in the full coming of His rule at the end of history. The dead (I do not mean universalism) will participate in that Kingdom. Then, all ambiguities and suffering will meet their fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.

The Church is located on the time line between D-Day and V-Day. This timespan is “the period of the Church.” In World War II many fierce battles were fought after D-Day. If the decisive battle has been fought at Calvary and won in the Resurrection, what further battles must be fought and won before V-Day? The Church battles sin, death and the devil through its proclamation of God’s decisive victory in the Christ-event at the midpoint. Cullmann makes this crystal clear: “This missionary proclamation of the Church, its preaching of the gospel, gives to the period between Christ’s resurrection and Parousia its meaning for redemptive history....” St. Paul gives the same message in Rom. 10:17: “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of [about] Christ.” Thus successive battles are won as increasing numbers come to faith in Jesus.
However, even after D-Day there were setbacks and losses, such as the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. So the Church seemed to suffer one defeat after another by atheistic Communism, which did bestride the earth like a colossus. But this idol too had feet of clay, and fell. The words of Rev. 14:8 seem a fitting epitaph: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion.” The poet, John Bowring put it this way: “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time....”

A RECONSIDERATION OF CULLMANN’S APPROACH

At this point a discussion of the validity of Cullmann’s basic approach is appropriate since his work has been subjected to intense and hostile criticism for over forty years. However, recent developments in New Testament research have tended to support Cullmann’s approach rather than that of his critics. Let us discuss the primary criticisms of his work as well as these recent developments in the field.

While Cullmann’s critics have called into question many of his assertions, their primary attacks were directed to two areas. First, his critics have shown that Cullmann overemphasized the unity of the NT. Rather, there was theological and ethnic diversity in the Church almost from the beginning. Today, nearly everyone agrees that his critics were right in this area. However, his critics went further, saying that there was no one NT theology. Rather, the NT is composed of such diverse books, one can only speak of a series of NT theologies. Hence there is little unity in the NT.

Second, his critics have disputed his basic assertions about a time line of redemptive history. While the author of Luke-Acts invented the phases of redemptive history in order to account for the delay in the coming of the Kingdom, Cullmann arbitrarily read a time line of redemptive history into the other books of the NT. Thus, Cullmann’s time line of redemptive history characterizes little else beside Luke-Acts. In short, the NT is characterized by diversity, not unity.

While Cullmann was not able to answer his critics effectively, subsequent research has served to reopen the whole debate. Ironically, the primary challenge to those who championed the diversity of the NT was first raised by the Bultmannian school, Cullmann’s sharpest critics. Ernst Käsemann, a member of the Bultmannian circle, wrote a famous essay entitled, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology.” Within this essay he wrote this oft-quoted sentence: “Apocalyptic—since the preaching of Jesus cannot really be described as theology—was the mother of all Christian theology.” By that he meant “that apocalyptic is the real beginning of primitive Christian theology.” At that time few scholars realized how basic the apocalyptic world-view was in shaping the “life-world” of NT writers. Indeed, a primary source of unity of the NT is the apocalyptic world-view which most NT writers presupposed.

While not an exhaustive survey, the following does give some idea of the extent of apocalyptic thinking in the NT. Certainly, Paul was an apocalyptic thinker. Here is a growing consensus that the Gospel of Mark is best classified as an apocalyptic Gospel. The outlook of the Gospel of Matthew is apocalyptic, although
apocalyptic does not seem to have been the primary focus of Matthew’s interests. While the Gospel of John is not primarily apocalyptic in orientation, the primacy of apocalyptic comes to the fore again in 1 John. Again, Revelation and the Petrine Epistles are apocalyptic.

The apocalyptic world-view presupposes that God has a purpose for history and that God is working that purpose out in history. A key motif in apocalyptic thinking is the doctrine of the two ages: this present evil age will be supplanted by the coming age of the Kingdom of God. Thus, history is moving toward eschatological promise and salvation. Accordingly, Cullmann’s linear concept of time (history is going somewhere) is quite compatible with apocalyptic thought. While Cullmann’s concept of time may not be found in every NT book, it is found in most. Most NT writings picture the Church as living between advents, between the already and the not yet, between the initial inbreaking of the Kingdom in Jesus and its full coming at the end of history. Cullmann’s concept of a time line of redemptive history is both compatible with apocalyptic thought and found in more NT books than Luke-Acts.

A second source of unity is the presence of basic themes running through more than one NT book. By basic themes I mean, for example, the saving significance of the Cross of Christ. Recall that for Cullmann the Christ-event constitutes the midpoint of time, because there the sins of the world are forgiven and there the Resurrection constitutes the hope of the world. How basic is the theme of the saving significance of the Cross?

Perhaps the earliest expression of this theme is found in 1 Cor. 15:3: “...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures....” The pre-Pauline “formula originated in a Greek-speaking, Jewish-Christian community.” This ancient theme is basic for Paul, for the Epistle to the Hebrews, for the Gospel of Mark, for 1 John. It is mentioned and developed in various metaphors throughout the NT. It is a basic theme that constitutes a thread of unity throughout the NT, with far too many references to quote.

Whether or not the apocalyptic world-view and unifying themes like the saving significance of the Cross are adequate for the Church today is very much a matter of debate, but this debate cannot be pursued here. Here, we have set for ourselves the task of viewing recent religious developments from a NT theological perspective, not the task of comparing competing theologies and theological methods. Nevertheless, in my view an apocalyptic world-view and a saving Cross are in some sense normative.

CONCLUSION

Today, great victories are being won for Jesus. Eager young Asians, Africans and other third-world peoples are enlisting. Again, South Korea has become a missionary exporting nation. The work of God goes on until V-Day, until the full number of Gentiles have come in.
Notes


