2007 BENJAMIN EBY LECTURE

Christian Theology Today: What is at Stake?

A. James Reimer

The Theological Agenda

Several years ago I was called upon to respond to author-journalist Tom Harpur at a public event at Waterloo North Mennonite Church. Harpur had just come out with his best-selling book, *The Pagan Christ*, in which he denies the actual historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth.[1] He says there's nothing new in Christianity. All its claims are plagiarized from ancient pre-biblical sources. What early Christian texts have "stolen" from pagan sources and transformed is the notion of an "inner Christ" in each person. It is this pre-Christian concept of the "inner Christ" that religious people need to recover for today. Harpur's book struck a sympathetic chord in thousands, if not millions, of people who yearn for some kind of spiritual renewal. In my response to him, I acknowledged the obvious relevance of his writings for many but disagreed sharply with his assumptions and his understanding of early Christianity and what is needed today. I was clearly in the minority in that audience and was almost booed off the stage. What I want to argue here is that the kind of assumptions we bring to contemporary global issues, including the yearning for spirituality, are of vital importance.

Christian theology has a responsibility to address the burning issues of the day in a way that people can understand:

> 1. Global warming has now replaced the nuclear crisis of my generation as the most serious threat to the survival of the world and, with it, the human species and every species on earth.
>
> 2. Violence, war, and hunger ravage human populations in various parts of the globe, accentuated by recent "terrorism"

and by the "war against terror" unfortunately labelled by some as a "clash of civilizations."

3. Modern technology, perhaps more than any other force, is homogenizing the contemporary world as a kind of monolithic tyranny that reigns over the global village – computers and the cyberspace communities they create are the supreme symbols of modern communication, creating virtual communities rather than real communities.

4. The imperialism of modern liberal democracy is willing to make strange alliances with totalitarian regimes in its attempt, ironically, to colonize, democratize, and "free" developing countries, and is ready to use violence in order to do so.

5. There exist dominations of various kinds: women by men, the poor by the rich, homosexuals by heterosexuals, visible and invisible minorities by majorities.

6. We live in an age of pluralism; in modern and postmodern societies diverse religious and non-religious groups co-exist, sometimes with conflicting ideologies, seeking both to remain faithful to their convictions and to live beside each other within the same temporal and physical space.

7. A pervasive secularism drives many in their daily lives, a disillusionment with all religious institutions, including the Christian church, and the loss of the symbolic power of traditional religious language, especially in the western world.

8. A massive new yearning for spirituality is evident throughout western secular culture, both inside and outside the church, which is frequently but inadequately met by traditional religious institutions and dogmas.

These are but some of the realities of the contemporary world that responsible Christian theology, as I understand it, is called upon to address. I have tried

to do so in many of my own writings, both scholarly and popular. In this lecture I will not speak to these issues directly, even though each deserves careful theological reflection and Christian action. What I will do is address them indirectly, by examining the theological assumptions and convictions that underlie our way of looking at the world and motivate our actions. For I believe that the beliefs and motivations behind our actions are as important as the actions themselves. There are those like theologian Gordon Kaufman, who identifies himself as a Mennonite, who have argued that traditional Christian beliefs about God, the world, and human beings are no longer viable in the face of the challenges we now face. What is called for is a thorough re-conceptualization of God. What is necessary if we are going to solve our global problems, these thinkers say, is to deconstruct the past and reconstruct ways of understanding divine, human, and earthly reality that are more adequate for today.

In my theological work I have argued strenuously against this deconstructive/re-constructive way of doing theology. I have consistently challenged my students, colleagues, and academic peers, both inside and outside the Mennonite community, to retrieve the classical and pre-modern tradition in creative and imaginative ways in order to address today's complex issues. I have taken this approach not only because I believe the ancient way of looking at the world is more profound than the modern and postmodern, but because I believe the message of Jesus and the Apostles, including the historic church's basic understanding of that message, to be true.

This does not mean I believe the church throughout its history has always been right in the decisions it has made: its identification with power and the use of force against the marginalized in society, including women, is only one instance of where it has been wrong. But the church's basic confession of the one living God in three persons – creator, redeemer, and reconciler of all things – I take to be true. I believe any attempts to fight for social and economic equality and justice, and to save the world from nuclear and ecological calamity on our own, without this confession of faith in the one living God who has a purpose for this world and to whom we are accountable, is bound for disaster. The foremost challenge for theology is how to translate this "inside-churchly" language into words, concepts,

symbols, metaphors, analogies, and images that are understandable to those both inside and outside the church.

Theology as Faith Seeking Understanding

Elsewhere I have identified the task of contemporary theology as follows: "Christian theology in our time calls for a disciplined imagination – the daring exploration of new frontiers of intellectual space; a fidelity to the ancient truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition; an empathetic engagement with all Christians, all faiths, and all peoples; a high regard for nature, experience, and all forms of knowledge; and a resolute witness to peace, justice and reconciliation in a world of violence."[2] Christian theology should not be so obsessed with loyalty to the past that it blinds its eyes to the challenges of today: ecology; violence and war; hunger; technology; imperialism; domination; pluralism; secularism; spirituality. Yet it dare not be so enamoured by every current societal agenda that it betrays its historic texts and convictions for the sake of relevance. I suggest, together with Stanley Hauerwas, for example, that "survival" is not our most basic and fundamental motivation for action as Christians. To make survival the ultimate goal is to undermine that very survival itself. The proper motivation is fidelity and allegiance to the prophetic, apostolic, and confessional tradition as it has been handed down to us. While theology seeks imaginatively to interpret and reinterpret its Judeo-Christian heritage for today, its imagination is not unstructured and unbounded. The Christian imagination is not an undisciplined one; it is disciplined by the historic grammar of faith that I identify as confession, doctrine, creed, and dogma. This is a family of terms that represent the truth claims of Christian faith.

I agree with the medieval theologian Anselm's definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding" or "believing in order to understand." Nevertheless, I take the relation between "faith" and "understanding" to be more complex and dialectical than this definition suggests. I propose that the life of Peter the Apostle is a prototype of how we might understand the relation of faith to theology. The biblical account of Peter's rootedness in the Jewish tradition, his initial response to Jesus, his subsequent confession of Jesus as the "Christ," his pathetic attempt to walk on water and his denial of Christ at the time of the crucifixion, his great sermons after the resurrection

and ascension of Christ, and his mature writings as an elder churchman reflect the sequence of theology from historic community to faith; from existential faith encounter to rational reflection; and from personal narrative to systematic theology.

In the following remarks I use the story of Peter as a way of looking at the relation of faith to understanding and the challenges of contemporary theology. I rely on seven moments in the biblical account of Peter for identifying the assumptions guiding modern theological thought and action.

Theology as Narrative Communal Formation

First, Peter had a Jewish past. We can assume that he was nurtured within a believing Jewish community as described in Deuteronomy 6, where it is instructed on how to pass on its beliefs to succeeding generations. After the Ten Commandments are set forth in Deuteronomy 5, chapter 6 admonishes Jewish families to teach these statutes and ordinances to their children and children's children so that they may fear the Lord their God all the days of their life.

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-8)

We have heard much in past decades from so-called postmodern, post-liberal theologians like Hauerwas, Alastair MacIntyre, George Lindbeck, and James McClendon about *narrative* theology. These theologians repudiate what is referred to as modern "foundationalism." Among some Mennonite theologians there is a strong affinity with this "non" or even "anti" foundationalism; some of them have claimed Mennonite theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder as one of their number. But what is meant by foundationalism? It is the notion that underlying all particular voices and

communities there is a universal rationality common to all human beings, no matter what tradition they come from. In short, there are universal truths that are accessible to all rational beings. This is what postmodern narrative theologians reject.

Instead, they argue that there are many rationalities and ways of looking at the world, each one with its own linguistic coherence. For example, one person may call another person "irrational" in her arguments. This may well be true, but it assumes that underlying both arguments is a rationality common to each, and that if there is disagreement, then one person must be rational (right), the other irrational (wrong). Postmoderns would claim that both might be inherently coherent and rational but have different rationalities. In the postmodern context, there are diverse communal narratives, each with its own rationality. Different cultural-linguistic communities of formation shape the way people speak, conceptualize, believe, and act, quite differently from each other.

The Apostle Peter, postmoderns might say, was raised and formed in a particular community with a particular language and narrative (the Hebraic). Christians are, or at least ought to be, similarly shaped by a narrative community (the church). In my theological work I have showed some sympathy for this kind of narrative theology; I firmly believe that our tradition shapes us linguistically, culturally, and religiously. I have also welcomed the attention to imagination and the language of metaphor, symbol, and story that frequently comes with this kind of narrative theology. Feminist theologians, like Sallie McFague, have made an important contribution in emphasizing the narrative and metaphoric nature of theology, in particular our concepts of God. McFague calls us to find new non-patriarchal metaphors for God.

However, I have some reservations about the narrative theology movement as a whole, especially when seen as the only legitimate approach. For one thing, it is not clear what constitutes coherent "community" today. We are faced with not only a multiplicity of overlapping communities but the disintegration of traditional communal and human relationships altogether, in favor of individual experience or virtual internet human interaction. For another, narrative thinkers tend to suspect all forms of foundationalism, often including a rejection of all universal and propositional truth claims. While unaided human reason may not be able to prove rationally the truth of faith

claims, yet the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) hold to universal truths that transcend narrative. The Ten Commandments of Deuteronomy 5 and the great commandment of Deuteronomy 6 are instances of such claims.

Theology as Existential Encounter with the Living God

Second, we note Peter's unconditional response to Jesus' call at the seaside to leave his fishing nets and follow. In Matthew 4 we read of Jesus calling the first disciples at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, shortly after his baptism and temptations in the desert.

> As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matt. 4:18-20)

The critical word here is "immediately." There may have been events in Peter's life leading up to this moment – we have already identified the Jewish community in which he was raised – but in the biblical account above there is no mention of these. We are simply told of Jesus' call to follow and Peter's unconditional response. It represents the initial, personal encounter between Jesus and Peter, the second moment on the way from faith to systematic reflection. It is pre-reflective (to the extent that anything is pre-reflective). Peter is confronted by a call from the outside and responds existentially. Faith – and, I would also say, theology – assumes existential encounter and only subsequently leads to rational, systematic reflection. Unlike philosophy, for example, theology when properly understood presupposes a divine reality that encounters and grasps us.

The twentieth-century Existentialist movement in philosophy and theology, which had its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century with the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard, has emphasized precisely the personal, *immediate*, vertical, particular, and decision character of human existence and action. Secular existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have pointed to the dark, irrational depths of existence. They identified the loss of meaning, and the anxiety that comes with this loss, as the central problem of the twentieth century with its two total wars and

the nuclear age. We live, these thinkers maintain, in an age without eternal horizons, without God, leaving us radically free without boundaries and limits to human action and mastery. We live on the abyss in the face of non-being and death, tempting us with anxiety and despair.

Christian existentialists like Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and to some extent the Catholic Karl Rahner and the early Karl Barth, influenced by Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, have incorporated important elements of existentialist philosophy into their theologies. Although quite different from each other, they all point to the irrational depths of human existence and the mysterious and awesome otherness of God who encounters us personally from beyond or from below, and addresses us. God is not an object of rational reflection (not an object beside other objects) but a *divine subject* who grasps us in an immediate sense. What is required in the face of meaninglessness is the "courage to be" and a "leap of faith." Peter took just such a leap of faith in his encounter with the ultimate in Jesus's call.

I have been critical of some forms of political theology, and of John Howard Yoder in his book *The Politics of Jesus*,[3] for not taking seriously enough the language of personal encounter and the vertical-existential experience of God in their work. Modern pietism and the evangelical movement, despite their frequent suspicion of existentialism, perhaps constitute the wing of contemporary Christianity that has most diligently tried to preserve this personal and decision-character of the experience of God. In my own life this evangelical, existential dimension has always been very important, although with time and academic studies one is sometimes in danger of losing it and intellectualizing the faith.

Recently I was brought up short by an e-mail from a high school classmate of some forty years ago. "I don't suppose you even remember me," he wrote. "I still think fondly and with some shame of the days that we spent in my personal salvation in the Altona [Manitoba] high school. I made fun of you with my friends after our serious sessions, but never forgot my commitment to Christ. A few years ago when I was on my deathbed and after an out-of-body experience, I called on our Lord and said, 'Lord, I have not been a bad person and I want to see the light.' He did indeed extend His grace to me and I have never thanked you enough for that time you spent

with me to save my soul. I know I did not really appreciate what you did at the time, but the Lord knows I have appreciated it. Thanks again and God bless you." Although this e-mail took me a bit by surprise – it reminded me of the little evangelist I once was – it impressed upon me once again the primary importance of a living encounter with God in all theological work.

The upsurge of interest in Eastern spirituality, and spirituality in general, in contemporary western society is indicative of the perennial yearning of human beings for an *immediate* encounter with a living divine reality. I recently received an e-mail from another friend, Alan Armstrong, who describes his long spiritual journey from a conservative evangelical background, through a period of religious scepticism and darkness, to forms of Christian orthodoxy at Conrad Grebel University College, and finally to Christian and Eastern mysticism. Here is what he says:

> It really was the Buddhist techniques that helped me become a better Christian. I continue to confess my faith in Christ and I am a Christian, yet I have now been so fortunate to see first hand the profound truths that are present in other mystical traditions (my exposure is primarily to Buddhism and Sufism), and I believe that there is unity among these truths, that in some way, what we call "the Christ," that mystical presence, is available to all humanity regardless of their religion. Having said all that, my desire right now is to practice my faith in Christian community, and to come to know the Christian mystics, to use my Buddhist teachers as a path back to the mystical, contemplative, center of Christianity.

Christian belief and theological reflection, no matter how profound, becomes dry intellectualism or obsessive moralism without the waters of spiritual experience and an immediate encounter with a living divine reality.

Theology as Dogma, the Grammar of Faith

However, a spirituality without form, no matter how dynamic, becomes distorted. In fact, Tillich goes so far as to say that "dynamics without form" is demonic, where the irrational dimensions of life take over.[4] For Christianity, this is where doctrines, the central categories of the faith, are important. This

brings us to the third moment in Peter's life, his confession. Having been raised in a Jewish community, having responded to Jesus' immediate call to follow him, and having presumably spent time following, observing, and reflecting as a disciple on the meaning of Jesus' life, healings, and teachings, Peter makes the remarkable claim that Jesus is the Christ. The narrator tells us:

> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (Matt. 16:13-17)

This is the foundational claim of the early church ("You are the Christ"), the second and core article of the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds. It signifies a considerable degree of rational reflection by Peter on the meaning of that initial, existential encounter at the seaside. Appropriating the faith through a public confession involves our emotions, our intellect, and our will as a response to the movement of God in our lives.

In my Mennonite theologizing I have insistently called for an imaginative retrieval of confessional, doctrinal, creedal, and dogmatic thinking as a way of structuring our spiritual and historical experience and of grounding our ethics. Two of my books, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* and *The Dogmatic Imagination: Dynamics of Christian Belief*,[5] deal extensively with this subject. I have argued that confessions, doctrines, creeds, and dogmas are a family of terms and concepts that have much in common: they all have to do with *orthodoxy*, that is, with right beliefs and right thinking about the faith. They make truth claims. They structure faith. They are the grammar or language of faith that we pass on to our children, students, baptismal candidates, and congregants.

Quite understandably, my generation has expressed great suspicion and fear of the language of doctrine in a way that was not true of our parents'

generation. This suspicion and fear was generated by the experience of doctrine as rigid, oppressive, and exclusionary. This, I have argued, is a misuse and misunderstanding of doctrine. Properly understood – the way the early Christian community understood them – doctrines were developmental and dynamic, and were meant to bridge what the community believed and what the new challenges posed. These doctrines are not to be interpreted literalistically and woodenly, but as dynamic metaphors and symbols of ultimacy. The symbols are more than rules regulating human beliefs and behavior (as Lindbeck claims); they help to mediate the divine reality to which they point and to shape moral behavior.

I have been accused of giving the words of the ancient creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, Chalcedon) too much authority. However, I do not interpret the creeds in a literal, plenary infallible, verbally inerrant way. The doctrines constituting the creeds are fallible, human expressions of ineffable divine mysteries. The central mystery to which they point is the reality of the Trinity: the core Christian claim that the one God of Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles has manifested himself in three ways: as transcendent creator of the world (Father), as historic redeemer of the world (Son), and as dynamic reconciler of all things (Spirit). While male imagery has traditionally dominated Trinitarian discussions, the essence and manifestation of the one God in three persons transcends male and female gender. If these divine images are going to maintain or recover symbolic power for us, they will need to be gender inclusive or genderless. God as three-in-one is the non-negotiable core of the faith, and faith in Jesus as the Christ (fully human and divine) is intrinsic to this threefold view. All other doctrines and beliefs are grounded in this central Trinitarian and Christological claim. This is theology's starting point for all attempts to address the contemporary theological agenda that I outlined earlier.

Theology as Doubt and Denial

However, orthodoxy ought to be understood not univocally but dialectically. Doctrines, creeds, and dogmas are earthly, human, churchly signs of faithfulness to spiritual encounter, personal ethics, and social justice. In order to remain true to the essential realities to which they point, they need to develop over time, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even the neo-

orthodox theologian Karl Barth says, "Dogmatics is the science [discipline] in which the church [. . .] , in accordance with the state of its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of its proclamation critically, that is, by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of its confessions."[6] These doctrines include within them both a "Yes" and a "No." A Yes to divine reality and a No to literal portrayals of that reality. Without this Yes-No character they can become idolatrous, as when we worship human words rather than what they mediate and point to.

This dialectical quality of faith is represented in Peter's astonishing betrayal and denial of Christ, the fourth moment in Peter's career. Peter had been raised in a nurturing, believing community, had left his nets to follow Jesus, and had personally confessed Jesus as the Christ. Now, at the critical moment of Jesus' crucifixion, he fails the ultimate test. In effect, he apostacizes. As earlier he had publicly confessed Christ, he now publicly denies him. As earlier he sank in doubt when over-confidently going to meet Jesus on the water (Matt. 14:22-33); he now at the end openly denies that he had ever known Jesus.

> Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; . . ." Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples. . . . (Matt. 26:31-35)

> Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before all of them, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath. "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock

> crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Matt. 26:69-75)

For me, the high point of Bach's magnificent *Saint Matthew Passion* is the dramatic portrayal of Peter's denial, ending with the recitative "Und ging heraus und weinete bitterlich" (Then he went out and wept bitterly), which is followed by the moving alto aria, "Have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, my God, let Thou my tears persuade Thee." This is succeeded by the chorale: "Tho' from Thee temptation lured me, Lord, to Thee I come again. Thy forgiveness is assured me through Thy Son's despair and pain. I do not deny my guilt, but Thy mercy, if Thou wilt, far exceedeth my transgression, of which I must make confession."

Tillich has made the provocative claim that doubt – and, I would add, rejection – is not the opposite of faith but is in fact included within faith. The opposite of faith is not doubt but absolute certainty. The Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith, he says, covers not only our sin but our doubt and betrayal as well. One might say there is in profound Christian faith itself an "atheistic" moment, an element of doubt, denial, and even rejection. Jesus himself must have experienced some of this on the cross when he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). In his prison cell, Bonhoeffer, like Luther and Hegel before him, experienced this when he talked about the weakness and death of God on the cross. I think it was Bonhoeffer who at one point proclaims that "the curses of the atheist may be more pleasing to the ears of God than the hallelujahs of the pious." The short-lived, so-called "Death of God" movement of the 1960s made agnosticism a key tenet of its theology: God has died, proponents said. Friedrich Nietzsche too lamented the death of God. We have killed God, he said in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The problem with this theological movement was that it considered this death of God a permanent state and not a moment in the life of humanity (if not God himself) followed by the resurrection.

I propose that we see the story of Peter and his denial as representing the experience of the Western church since the Enlightenment. A good segment of the church lost its way. It was so enamoured of the thought of the great masters of suspicion – Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx,

Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud – not to mention the historical critique of the Bible and the tradition, that it lost its biblical and classical heritage. Yet the Enlighteners forced the church to ask important questions about itself and its dogmas. Somewhere along the way, the church's dogmas became petrified with humans worshiping the Bible, the dogmas, and human rituals rather than the living God who encounters us. The church owes the Enlightenment a great debt of gratitude, not only for its critique of religious idolatry but for its emancipatory impulses, as expressed in various liberation movements, including feminism and womanism. Any denunciation of the Enlightenment by postmodern critics dare not overlook these positive contributions.

Theology as Systematic Thought

One need not specialize in theology to do theology. All Christians, young and old, are engaged on some level in theological reflection. Something about the Christian faith drives the believer to give an account of the faith and to ask ever deeper questions about the nature, meaning, and truth of the claims being made, the relation of different elements of faith to each other, and the application of the faith to all aspects of life and the world. Early Anabaptists, faced with persecution and martyrdom, frequently quoted 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands of you an accounting of the hope that is within you." This accounting is not a fideistic (blind faith) defense of the faith; rather it involves the heart, soul, and mind.

In what I call the fifth moment of his career, Peter in his second sermon as recorded in Acts 2 manifests a remarkable level of systematic analysis, even though he and his fellow Apostles are described by the narrator as "uneducated and ordinary men." In his sermon he explores the meaning of recent events in the context of Old Testament theology and expectations, and the demands they make on the hearers:

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them

> were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.
>
> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. . . .
>
> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them. . . . "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. . . .
>
> This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. . . . Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."
>
> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins be forgiven; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:1-38)

Recounting the Christ-events in the light of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, Peter's sermon includes the basic elements of the *kerygma* (the message, the "rule of faith") that would later be formulated systematically in the creeds: the foreknowledge of God; Jesus' crucifixion; his abandonment to Hades; his resurrection; his ascension to the right hand of God; the call to repentance; the forgiveness of sins; and the gift of the

Holy Spirit (2:14-36). Peter gives a highly systematic interpretation of all the events leading up to Christ's death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Particularly striking is the Trinitarian theology implicit in the sermon: "This *Jesus* God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right of *God*, and having received from the *Father* the promise of the *Holy Spirit*, he has poured out this that you both see and hear" (2:32-33).

The fully-fledged doctrine of the Trinity as it developed later in the fourth century, both in the Eastern and the Western church, was but a theological working out of the claims made in the New Testament. Theologians and the church began articulating more clearly the unity and distinctions between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit in light of Jewish monotheism. The early Christians and church theologians recognized these three as distinct realities within one divine unity; they never sacrificed monotheism in favor of polytheism. As noted earlier, I have made in my own work the teaching of God as Three in One, One in Three the core doctrine around which all other tenets of our faith are organized. This point is particularly important today as we dialogue with Jews, Muslims, and others.

Theology and Other Religions

An aspect of modern and postmodern existence is *pluralism*: within a given society diverse religious and non-religious communities co-exist within the same territorial space, frequently with conflicting ideologies and beliefs. The question this raises for both political thought and religious belief is how to live with "the other" peacefully. Although this situation represents a shift from the time of Christendom (the medieval period when one could assume a Christian hegemony in society), pluralism is not alien to the context of the Bible and the early church. Pre-fourth century Greco-Roman society was defined by just such religious pluralism and diversity based on polytheism. It is in light of this background that Peter's dramatic vision of the sheet coming down from heaven should be interpreted. This is the sixth moment in Peter's move from existential faith encounter to systematic theological reflection, and to mission.

Acts 10 recounts how the early Jewish-Christians, here represented by Peter, begin engaging non-Jews, in this particular case a member of the

pagan military. Cornelius is a centurion of the Italian Cohort, in charge of 100 soldiers of the Roman army. We are told that he, with his whole household, was an upright, devout, and godly man. This sympathetic portrayal of a Roman military man must have been provocative for Jews at the time, and should give Mennonite purists pause as well. One afternoon Cornelius has a vision in which the angel of God appears to him, and assures him that his prayers and alms have been received by the Lord. He is ordered to go to Joppa to meet with Simon Peter. It is noteworthy that he sent "two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him" (10:5-7) in the military, to Joppa in order to find Peter.

While these men are on their journey, Peter also has a vision. He was on the rooftop of his house, hungry, when he saw a large sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. On it were all kinds of creatures considered unclean by Jews. Peter heard a voice telling him to eat, but he refused, saying, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean" (10:14). This happened three times and then the sheet disappeared. While Peter was still reflecting on the vision, Cornelius's three representatives appeared. The end result is that Peter and some fellow believers accompany the men back to Caesarea to meet Cornelius. Peter addresses Cornelius and the assembly around him with these words: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane . . . . I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:28-35). Having said this, Peter launches into the message of Jesus, and while he is still speaking the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentiles.

We could spin out many themes arising out of these texts, but I want to concentrate on just one, the Christian attitude toward other religions. We are told in no uncertain terms that God shows no partiality among the nations (and we could include religions here). Anyone in any nation – or religion – who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. Critics could, of course, point out that Acts 10 ends with Christ being preached to the Gentiles (and other religions); they received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. In other words, these pagans, with their pagan religiosity, were converted to the one true religion. But I think this is too easy an interpretation.

There is a clear recognition of the authenticity of the piety, devotion, and upright morality of the Centurion and his household prior to any conversion, a religious sincerity that was acceptable to God. Also, at no point in the story are we told that their newfound faith in God demanded that they give up their existing professions.

As many of you know, I have been involved with others at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and Conrad Grebel University College in an exchange program and academic dialogue with Shiite Muslims from Iran. In fact, on April 28, 2008 I will fly to Iran to give a lecture on "Conceptualizing Universal Moral Principles for Social Ethics: The Pros and Cons of Global Ethics" at an Iranian University. I plan to continue the dialogue. What has impressed me about my Iranian Muslim friends is their sincere piety, expressed in faithful prayer; their concern for a moral, upright life; their high regard, even reverence, for Jesus; and their common search with us for a truth that transcends our different understandings. While there are significant differences between Shi-ah Muslims and Mennonite Christians – e.g., they reject the deity of Christ and a Trinitarian understanding of God, and they have a different view of the relation of the religious community to the state – nevertheless we have much to learn from each other. They can learn from us in the area of Jesus' teachings of love, peace, and nonviolence; we can learn from their emphasis on prayer and mystical spirituality. Each drives the other to a deeper understanding of their own religious traditions. There comes a point, however, where we witness to each other about our own understanding and experience of truth, and pray that the Holy Spirit will appear upon us mutually.

Theology as Doxology

Finally, seventh, theology is doxology – the praise and worship of God. Dialogue with others of different religious convictions can be true encounter only if one is firmly grounded in one's own conviction. So far I have made little mention of ethics. Surely, Mennonite theology, if it is anything, is ethics: the love of neighbor as oneself. Let me draw our attention again to the great answer of Jesus to the question of which is the greatest commandment: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'You shall love

your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

With Barth I want to propose that all Christian ethics be seen as a subcategory of the love and praise of God. According to Barth, "The 'second' commandment has no other meaning and content apart from and in addition to: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.'"[7] Our morality and ethics are not a means to salvation but forms of worship, thanksgiving, and praise to God.

I am working on a book on Christian social ethics, tentatively entitled "A Positive Theology of Law, Order, and Civil Society." In it I explore what a political theology from a Mennonite perspective might look like, and pick up themes from my earlier work on German political theology in the Nazi period[8] and on Marxist-Christian dialogue in the former Yugoslavia.[9] This volume will be a sequel to my *Mennonites and Classical Theology,* in which I argue that all Christian ethics must have dogmatic/doctrinal foundations, especially the doctrine of the Trinity, if it is not to be reduced to human action pure and simple. What I have not stressed sufficiently up to now is how all Christian ethics is rooted in Christian spirituality, particularly the life, worship, prayer, and liturgy of the church. Both ethics and the creeds become lifeless if they are not grounded in doxology. (Two fine recent articles authored by friends of mine have brought this to my attention: Peter Erb's "The Creed, Doctrine, and the Liturgical Occasion: Continuing a Conversation with A. James Reimer;"[10] and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan's "The Church's Worship and the Moral Life: An Anglican Contribution to Trinitarian Ethics."[11])

The seventh moment in my account of the Apostle Peter concerns precisely theology and the church's life of prayer, liturgy, and worship. Theology as an academic or ethical discipline that is sundered from a living community of worshiping believers betrays its historic tradition and role. Mennonites in their concern for discipleship and nonviolent action in the world have not given sufficient attention to the church's liturgical and worshiping life as the ground and context for the politics of Jesus.

When Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, Jesus replied: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matt.16:18). This critical verse has been interpreted in at least two different ways. Roman Catholics have understood the church to be founded on Peter as the first bishop (vicar of

Christ) in the long continuous apostolic tradition. Protestants have interpreted the rock to be not Peter himself but his confession: "You are the Christ." These two views can be combined to say that the Christian community is founded on *both* the Apostle Peter *and* his confession. Peter represents the *apostles* and the historical church community, and his confession represents the apostolic *message*. When people are called to faith, confession, witness, defence, and ethical obedience, they must see themselves as part of an historical institution much larger and older than their individual lives or even their local congregation or denomination. They are part of the church universal that extends through time and throughout the whole world.

Why not then convert to Roman Catholicism, the universal church *par excellence*? I hope Peter Erb will forgive me for becoming somewhat personal here. He and I both come from semi-rural Anabaptist-Mennonite backgrounds – although from different historical streams (he from Amish, I from Russian-Mennonite). We both have moved from a left-leaning liberal period in our lives to a greater appreciation of the classical conservative tradition. We have both sought to leave behind a sectarian understanding of the church for a universal, catholic one. By "sectarian" I mean a church that is withdrawn into itself and sees itself standing over against others in the larger Christian body.

Yet Erb has decided to convert, and I have chosen to stay within the Mennonite fold. I have high regard for his personal and spiritual integrity, and respect his decision to join Roman Catholicism. He has important, persuasive theological and ecclesiological reasons for doing so. But I have decided that I can contribute to ecumenical dialogue in my own way by remaining in my own theological tradition. (I spell out my reasons for remaining a Mennonite in an article, "A Mennonite-Catholic Conversation: A Personal Tribute [to Peter Erb]" soon to be published in a *Festschrift* in his honor.)[12] No one tradition has the total truth or all the gifts of the spirit. We need each other and each other's gifts for a truly ecumenical and universal Christian understanding of the body of Christ.

Conclusion

What is at stake for Christian theology today is clarity about our basic Christian convictions. I have used the story of the Apostle Peter, the seven

moments in his career, as a way to identify the underlying assumptions by which to guide our addressing the major issues that face us as individuals and as the church.

I began, first, with situating theological work in communities of nurture and character formation. Theological reflection does not begin *ex nihilo*. We don't start from a clean slate. Second, theological thinking is first and foremost a response to and reflection upon an encounter with a living God who grasps and addresses us. Without this, all our theologizing is only a form of human wish fulfillment and self-projection. Third, theology without dogmatic structure and form, without a confessional grammar of faith, becomes pure irrational dynamism at the mercy of demonic powers. Fourth, such structured orthodoxy is to be seen dialectically, having within it both a "Yes" and a "No," an affirmation of faith and a sceptical, agnostic and "atheistic" moment without which it becomes idolatrous. Fifth, only in being aware of the precariousness of one's faith and the danger of idolatry can systematic theological thinking about God and all things in relation to God proceed. Sixth, the systematic task is not a self-enclosed, ivory tower enterprise but one that is open to the challenge and critique of "the other," including "the religious other." Finally, seventh, all theology and ethics is ultimately doxology – a reverence before the awesome mystery of God expressed in pious personal devotion and the prayerful public worship of a believing community.

Notes

All Biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

[1] Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004).
[2] Brochure for A. James Reimer Award at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre.
[3] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
[4] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967).
[5] A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001) and *The Dogmatic Imagination: Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Kitchener/Scottdale: Herald Press (2003).
[6] Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), 9.
[7] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 401.

[8] A. James Reimer, *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: The Political Ramifications of Theology* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).
[9] A. James Reimer, *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).
[10] In Jeremy Bergen, Paul G. Doerksen, and Karl Koop, eds., *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honor of A. James Reimer* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 181-96. *Reviewed in this issue of CGR. -- Editor*
[11] In *Creed and Conscience*, 197-218.
[12] A James Reimer, "A Mennonite-Catholic Conversation: A Personal Tribute," in Michael Desjardins and Harold Remus, eds., *Tradition and Formation: Claiming an Inheritance. Essays in Honour of Peter C. Erb* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2008).

About the 2008 Benjamin Eby Lecturer

A. James Reimer retired in 2008 from Conrad Grebel University College, where he was a professor of Religion and Theology. Recently, he was awarded Distinguished Professor Emeritus status by the University of Waterloo. For many years he also served as Professor of Theology at the Toronto School of Theology (TST), and Director and Academic Advisor of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, focused on graduate level theological education, teaching, research, and ecumenical conversation at TST.

He specializes in modern European intellectual history and modern theology. He has conducted extensive research on German theology in the 1920s and 1930s; modern theology and technology, particularly in relation to the thought of George P. Grant; theology and critical social theory; political ethics; and Mennonite systematic theology.

Reimer is the author of *Paul Tillich: Theologian of Nature, Culture and Politics* (LIT Verlag, 2004), *The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Herald Press, 2003), *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Pandora Press, 2001), and *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: The Political Ramifications of Theology* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); and he is the editor of *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology: Critical Theory and the Future of Religion* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992). He is currently working on political theology, law, and civil institutions; and on a book, *Christians and War,* for Fortress Press.

Reimer received an MA (History) from the University of Toronto in 1974, and a PhD (Theology) from the University of St. Michael's College in 1983. As of 2002, he is a life time member of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey.

About the Benjamin Eby Lectureship

Benjamin Eby (1785-1853) typified, and possibly inaugurated, Mennonite culture in Upper Canada. He and his wife Mary arrived in Waterloo County from Pennsylvania in 1807. By 1812 he was ordained bishop, and in 1815 he was overseeing construction of the area's first schoolhouse. Eby provided outstanding leadership in the church and in education throughout his life. The Benjamin Eby Lectureship, named in his honor and established at Conrad Grebel University College in the 1980s, offers faculty members an opportunity to share research and reflections with the broader College and University community.