

PROTAGONIST CORNER

A Case for Pious Language

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Superman in the role of God incarnate! As jarring as it sounds, as trivializing of the core of Christian faith as it seems—such was the suggested interpretation in a major news magazine as it sought to make sense of the appeal of the recent movie, *Superman*. The reviewer cited the unmistakable themes of the sending of the son, the action of a savior, the effecting of a “resurrection,” and the persistence of life as clear evidence that our contemporary culture now uses epic, fanciful films as substitutes for the “great myths and rituals of belief, hope and redemption.” “Why shouldn’t those great revelatory myths come back into the collective consciousness in the most effective and dramatic ways that our civilization, God help it, has set up?” (Jack Kroll, “Superman to the Rescue!,” *Newsweek*, January 1, 1979, p.50.)

The observation opens up the possibility of several kinds of theological inquiry. But for present purposes I will not quarrel with the assumption that the Christian claims for God incarnate, salvation, and resurrection are but one illustration of a class of claims known as the “great revelatory myths.” Nor will I take issue with the implied suggestion that we are better off in having these “myths” reproduced even in the admittedly garish image of Superman. What is worthy of comment is the possibility that some in our culture may in fact find their only contact with salvation, redemption, and resurrection in the mutant form provided by this aspect of popular culture.

It bespeaks an urgent issue for the Christian community which has not always been able to speak meaningfully of God incarnate, salvation, and resurrection amidst the private and public forces of contemporary life. In fact the Christian church and its preachers have tended to mute distinctive Christian themes, substituting others thought to be more immediately useful and understandable because borrowed from the surrounding culture. Ironically, the culture has apparently seen fit to invent an alternative mechanism for reintroducing at least surrogates for the themes of Christian faith.

The issue for Christians, and especially for Christian preachers, is whether they have an intelligible language which embodies the themes central to their definition as Christians. Are Christian people involved in *careers*, or are they *called* to the service of a God who has the well being of the human family as his cause? Are ministers in the Christian church expected to attain a high degree of *competency* in their *professions*, or are they to strive for a *faithful stewardship of gifts* in their *fields of service*? Are tensions between husbands and wives properly understood in terms of *conflicting needs* related to varying stages of personal growth, or in terms of the failure of both to recognize the *inherent incompleteness* of either partner in a creation where humanity is established as

male and female? Is the terror of death tamed by *familiarity with the typical psychological experiences* through which the terminally ill pass, or by a *personal trust in the reality of God* who does not deny yet transcends the pain and separation death brings?

An obvious response to all these questions is that they pose false disjunctions. In none of these cases is it a matter of either one mode of understanding or another. In fact, the most insightful Christian theology is often one that integrates the authentic Christian perceptions and those gained from other sources of knowledge and insight. Yet there seems to be a clear danger that contemporary Christian preaching is failing to accomplish such integration, substituting the other sources of knowledge and insight in its place. At least this is one way to understand the call by contemporary American culture for Superman to provide theological insight. Preachers within the Christian community should remember that there are distinctively Christian ideas and views for which cultural sources of knowledge provide no substitute. If the Christian community does not keep them alive, they will either die or be replaced by the ersatz religion of Superman.

Yet the challenge all this poses is not simply for clergy or other "professional" theologians. It is a challenge for all Christian women and men to learn to use the language of faith in describing their own life experiences, letting that language open up new vistas in otherwise common-place experience. But surely it is a prime task of the preaching ministry today to see that the challenge is issued and response is made. Happily there are some specialist theologians who have recently transcended the methodological preoccupation of so much modern theology and have tried to give a summary of the Christian faith in an intelligible and illuminating fashion. Other Christian people can be guided in the quest for a suitable and usable language of faith by such as Karl Rahner (*Foundations of Christian Faith*) and Hans Kung (*On Being a Christian*). Nonetheless, the task is finally a very personal one which no one can entirely do for another. It is a matter of thinking about *my* life and the life of my world in terms of the basic themes of Christian faith, letting its fullness be disclosed by those themes. Preachers who succeed in advocating such language of faith will do so in direct proportion to their own capacity for construing the concrete details of their own lives in terms of the central claims of Christian faith.

In part this is a call to the use of pious language. Our consciousness is shaped by the language we use. If we persistently use the language of "Career" as we contemplate our life's involvement, we will surely end with only the narcissistic project of the self at the center of our attention. A quite different kind of consciousness is engendered by talking about our life's tasks in terms of the call of God to a covenant fellowship and service. Rather than narrowing our awareness of the project of a self, this kind of language broadens it to the project of God with the whole creation.

Such pious language is always fraudulent when it is reduced to the parroting of clichés and jargon that has no grounding in one's own experience of faith and life. But where such pious language grows from such nourishing roots, it becomes a means of intensifying, clarifying, and extending the grace and truth

already known. In a culture which looks to Superman for at least a nostalgic hold on transcendence and hope, it is not too much to suggest that the recovery of pious language is an urgent task for all Christians; that its recovery depends in large measure upon the strength of the preaching ministry; and that its achievement could have a profound impact on the health of the church and the life of the world.