

PROTAGONIST CORNER

Faith Beyond "The Book"

Edward Huenemann

The Program Agency, UPUSA, New York, New York

"We will not textualize the faith, as has been done in the West." This comment by the Catholikos in Lebanon, of the Armenian Orthodox church, provokes a very deep response in me. Our western confidence that "it's in the book" was clearly challenged. As a Presbyterian Calvinist I felt a particular sting in his off-hand comment. Is our western Christianity, and particularly our Protestant image, so marked by bibliolatry that others see a danger we don't see? Why should the Catholikos of suffering Christians in the region where Christianity began not be totally enamored of our western biblical Christianity, even after studying at Oxford and serving as bishop in New York City? It is even more disturbing to realize that his comment was not a defensive one addressed to an enemy, but an open and free comment addressed to a friend. I had to hear him and try to understand. Perhaps many of us should!

In the October, 1978, issue of the "The International Review of Mission" Herbert Klem, Project Director with Daystar Communications, Nairobi, Kenya, published an article entitled "The Bible as Oral Literature in Oral Societies." Early in the article he writes, "We generally assume that people who hear our message should go on to read the Bible for themselves and thus be responsible for their own Christian development. Our plans to produce growing churches and mature Christians are dependent on studious, Bible-reading people. Mass literacy is our foundation for Christian education with traditional missionary programmes relying heavily upon literacy and written teaching materials" (p. 78, International Review of Mission, Vol. LXVII, No. 268, Oct., 1978). The writer argues that such reliance on print will reach only a small minority of people in most of the world, and even in a country with as high a literacy rate as the United States it will reach only a minority--because "20% of adults in the United States are functionally illiterate; and an additional 33% are 'marginally competent'." Even among those competent to read many do little or no serious reading of biblical material. It is apparent that our heavy reliance on "it's in the book" tempts us to a communications method which cannot convey the gospel to the vast majority of people on this globe.

Mr. Klem uses this pragmatic argument to open up the question, what does the "textualizing of the faith" really mean? Both the Catholikos and Mr. Klem, the one from the Orthodox tradition and the other from a third world perspective, suspect that the preoccupation with text also harbors a kind of imperious authoritarianism on the part of the "keepers of the text." This suspicion, to the degree to which it is justified, raises a serious challenge about faithfulness to the gospel on the part of those of us who are "possessors of the book."

Mr. Klem concludes "though we must continue to teach people how to read the Bible, we must also recognize how the use of this medium frequently selects a small and elite segment of a total audience. In many situations oral teaching styles are appropriate to the masses. In America and in Africa various groups are setting

extended Scripture passages to music. We are preparing Bible translations consciously structured for poetry, singing, and memorization. Non-readers hear these messages gladly" (p. 485).

How much of our "textualizing of the faith" is motivated by a certain elitism, and how much is our hermeneutical struggle informed by a sincere love of the gospel and a desire to communicate in faith? These are hard questions worth pondering. Even Luther knew that if it had not been for his hymns there might not have been a reformation. The Orthodox have always tried to distinguish the function of an icon as mediation of presence without final and definitive analysis, from idolatry which simply identifies the work of human hands with divinity and so claims too much for itself. Our "textualizing of the faith" could succumb, and perhaps often does, to the idolatry of claiming too much under the guise of biblical authority. The text ceases to point to the reality beyond itself and becomes a "closed book." It is the Protestant version of turning an icon into an idol.

Taking the context in which we try to communicate in faith seriously will help save us from the idolatry of "textualizing the faith" in a way which tries to bind the word of God to our limited mode of understanding and communication. This is not to challenge the normative role of scripture in the Christian community, but it is to challenge the confusion of knowledge of the text and our defense of it with a defense of the faith once delivered to the saints. The Word does not simply live in a book the careful handling and keeping of which guarantees us a place of authority. The third world and the old churches of the Middle East are inviting us to discussion of The Word in living terms. They will be happy to have us, if we leave our idol at home. Levels of discussion are possible beyond either western bibliolatry or acculturated textual criticism. The whole range of human communication--from literal reading together, to speaking with one another, to singing together, to praying together, to eating bread together, to sharing of funds, to working together--exposes the context which will make sense of the original text in present idiom. The sense of the text, the spirit of the Word, resists the "textualization of the faith."

A fuller appreciation of this fact would enable us "western Christians" to seek the truth in love with people of other traditions and cultures without first threatening them with our superior knowledge of the book. Of course, whatever knowledge of the book we may have gained is to be treasured, as a means of grace--a way to the living Word. But an icon is not an idol to be used to symbolize and absolutize our power. Even a Calvinist may have to learn from others how to appreciate the Bible without turning it into a weapon to be used against others. Others, either Orthodox, or primitive (in the positive sense of original) Christians may help us understand it better. Even "theologians of the word" have to be saved from themselves.