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THE GOD-CONCEPT AND THE CREED IN CHRISTIANITY

by

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I. Introduction

I have been asked to comment on the God-concept and the Creed as they are represented in Christianity. Neither my ability nor our format permit an exhaustive treatment, or even a systematic survey. Moreover, the two topics--God and Creed--while related, are quite distinct topics within the main development of Christian tradition. What I propose to do in these remarks, therefore, is touch in a very preliminary way on what I take to be some of the most critical problems in each of these topics, especially as they are related to interreligious dialogue between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

My intention will be to call attention to what I consider to be unique features of Christianity in each of these areas. The purpose of calling attention to unique elements is certainly not to suggest in any way that Christianity is superior. On the contrary, it is merely to highlight the ways in which these great religious traditions are different. The recognition of difference should not make interreligious dialogue more difficult; rather, it should make it easier.

Sometimes, in our efforts to reach community, I am afraid we may minimize our differences and concentrate on things we hold in common. The result can be that differences remain, but remain

unacknowledged and later emerge to cripple our ability to talk with each other. My conviction, on the other hand, is that it is our differences that can constitute the basis of genuine dialogue and community. It is not necessary for us to agree in order to be in dialogue. In fact, if we agree, there is not much to talk about. It is in our differences that the real beauty of the diversity of human spiritual life emerges. I believe it is possible to appreciate these differences and, in fact, to celebrate them as one of the foundations of interreligious dialogue and genuine inclusive human community.

II. Theism

A. Theism and secularism

The problem of interreligious dialogue is complicated by the fact that one of the most dramatic processes in the modern world has been the emergence of secularism. A secular culture, not explicitly informed by any religious tradition is a new phenomenon.

The historical reasons behind the rise of secularism are complex. They are related to the rise of capitalism, the idea of the separation of church and state, and also to the development of the scientific method. For our purposes, however, it is not necessary to follow up that question. It is only necessary to note that secularism is a fact of the modern world, and that it has not been an important dimension of most other cultures, especially those in which each of our religious traditions emerged and developed.

There are two aspects of secularism that should be mentioned. First, there is the question of the degree to which the idea of secularism is a religious idea. While that may seem like a contradiction in terms, it should be noted that the rise of the secular state occurred within the Christian world--Northern Europe and North America. Not only that, it occurred within the Protestant Christian world, and is closely associated with the emergence of protestantism.[1] For much of the rest of the world, the idea of a secular state just doesn't make sense. And where secularism has emerged in other parts of the world, it is usually a result of influence from Europe and North America.

There are other secular states: China, Turkey, and The Soviet Union, are examples. But there are also many places where the idea of separation of religion and politics is foreign: Israel, Iran, Italy, England, Germany, Burma, Thailand.

The second problem with secularism is whether it, itself, is a religion. Many evangelical Christians in the United States would insist that "secular humanism" is a religion. And there have been several court decisions to support that opinion. In the 1940's, the Supreme Court in the United States ruled that conscientious objection to military service could be based not

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[1] R. H. Tawney. Religion and the Rise of Capitalism. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926. Max Weber. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York: Scribner's. 1958.

only on religious conviction, but on philosophical grounds if that philosophy functioned for the individual in the way that religion functions for religious people. In answer to the question of when is a secular philosophy a religion, the court said, "When it functions like a religion."

In order to clarify the meaning of "secular," it may be useful to distinguish between "secularism" and "secularity." Secularity refers to a belief or attitude that is neutral toward religion. It is a sort of "least common denominator," which holds no values on its own, but merely provides a context within which a variety of value systems may exist. "Secularism", on the other hand, is a full-blown philosophy, one that stresses the sufficiency of human knowledge to work out the solutions to human problems, and which eschews all forms of religion as superstition.

For our purposes, it is important to identify the problem secularism poses. Secularism forces us to recognize that the question of the meaningfulness of talk about God cannot be assumed. Among representatives# from the great monotheistic religions of the world, it is easy to talk about God. But we should not forget that the larger context within which we work is one in which language about God is itself problematical. This larger context cannot be ignored; not only is it an historical reality, it is directly relevant to our discussion. Part of the necessary task of interreligious dialogue# is to be sure that our conversation does not remain simply an in-group and esoteric form of talking. We must always remember that one of the partners in our dialogue, although perhaps a silent partner, is secularism,

asking us to acknowledge its voice.

B. Theism and religious pluralism

It is also necessary to remember that there are other ancient and indispensable partners to interreligious dialogue that do not accept theism. Buddhism is not theistic and Hinduism is not monotheistic. And then there is Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Shamanism. Whatever we, as representatives of "the great monotheistic traditions" say must eventually make sense within this larger religious dialogue.

C. Theism and the God of Abraham

These considerations, as well as others, lead me to ask whether "theism" is a useful subject. The word, "theism" is of rather late origin, and first appeared in the English language at a time when it was popular to try to show that all religious traditions culminated in Christianity.

The words "theism" and "theist" were not used until the seventeenth century. And then they were used at first interchangeably with "deist" and "deism." Later, because deism was linked to a rationalistic philosophy which denied any kind of revelation, "theism" and "deism" came to be juxtaposed.[2]

At present, it seems to me that "theism" is used as a term

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[2] O.E.D., "Theism," "Deism."

meant to show commonality between and among a wide range of religious and theological viewpoints. So that we frequently hear something like this: "Well, we may have a lot of differences, but we all believe in God." Or, if "God" is even too restrictive, we hear talk about a "supreme being" or a "creator."

I have already suggested that this kind of syncretism may cause more problems that it solves. Now I want to take it a step further and suggest that it is also not true to our religious traditions. The God of Abraham was not the supreme being of theism or deism. The God of Abraham had a name, he spoke to his prophets, and he led his people. This is not a matter of merely historical interest, nor is it theological hair-splitting. It has direct relevance to the current raging debate about the gender of God and the use of sexually exclusive language within Christian liturgy and theology. While it may be the case that a "supreme being" is androgynous, or sexually neuter, and while it may be the case that for good and sufficient reasons Christians should adopt inclusive language, it is also clear that the God of Abraham had a name, appeared directly to his prophets, and was masculine.

The particularity and specificity of the God of Abraham is also critical to our present topic. Besides this God, there were other Gods at that time and place in our common history. Whether they were true or false gods was, of course, a question of considerable debate.

III. Christianity and the Doctrine of the Trinity

There can be little doubt that the central thing that

Christians have to say about God is summarized in the Doctrine of the Trinity. I do not want to suggest or imply that this doctrine is self-evidently clear or even that it is understandable. I am not sure it makes sense to me. Nevertheless, I am sure that taken as a whole, it is the central thing that the Christian Church has had to say about God at least since the Council of Nicea in 325. (I will return to a discussion of the significance of this council later in my paper when I discuss the significance of the creed.)

Here is the most common English version of the Nicene Creed:

> I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.
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> And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

This most ancient of the ecumenical creeds of the Christian Church raises many, many questions. It has been repeatedly augmented by other creedal statements. There is hardly a sentence in it that is without its problems and various interpretations. As problematical as it is, I was reluctant to quote it in the context of this interreligious dialogue. But it is the basic

text when we speak of Trinity and of Creed. There are two aspects of the Nicene creed that I want to consider: the idea of God as trinity and the idea of revelation that is behind it.

The great protestant theologian, Karl Barth, wrote:

> It is the doctrine of the Trinity which fundamentally distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian--it is it, therefore, also, which marks off the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in face of all other possible doctrines of God and concepts of revelation.[3]

With regard to ideas about God, the doctrine of the Trinity distinguishes Christianity first of all from all atheistic religions and philosophies. It states that the idea of God is central to Christian life, and that God is not to be identified with any thing in the world or with the world as a whole. Second, the doctrine of the Trinity distinguishes Christian belief from religious and non-religious beliefs in many Gods. It states that there is only one God. Neither of these distinctions should cause us any problems, except as mentioned above with regard to the dialogue with secularism, with non-theistic religions, and with polytheism. The third distinction, however, does create some real problems for us. The doctrine of the Trinity distinguishes the Christian idea of God from deism, theism, and monotheism, including, at least apparently, Islam and Judaism.

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[3] Church Dogmatics, I/1, p. 346.

I want to first of all make this distinction clear and then see if it makes sense.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as affirmed in the Nicene Creed quoted above and reinforced in the Creed of Chalcedon in 451, quoted below, claims that Jesus is God. Although this is clear in the Nicene Creed (God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father) it was reaffirmed by Chalcedon as follows:

> We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchanbeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

So whether or not we can finally make sense of it, it is clear that the doctrine of the Trinity wants to say that Jesus is God. And in this respect, it intends to separate Christian belief from both Islam and from Judaism, neither of which finds such a confession possible, necessary, or perhaps even intelligible.

Of course, many Christians also find such a claim

unintelligible. In fact, the Nicene Creed itself was a victory for one party over another within the Church. The other party, the Arians, believed that Jesus was a prophet of God, or the messenger of God, but they found the doctrine of the Trinity unintelligible. And there have been many others in the history of Christianity who have agreed with them.

In addition, among Christians who accept the Nicene Creed, there have been many different theological efforts to exolain just what is meant by the doctrine of the Trinity. While the doctrine may be what is properly called a "mystery" and never fully explicable, that conclusion should not be reached too soon or too easily. It is the job of theology to make "mystery" intelligible. What sense does it make to speak of God in this way?

A. God and love

The history of Christian doctrine, both before and after the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, contains many answers to this question, some more successful than others. I will mention only one, suggested by Tertullian about 200 CE and developed more fully by Augustine in 419. Again, I want to emphasize that I do not take this to be the definitive explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is merely one way of trying to make sense out of it.

The doctrine of the trinity had its inception in the effort of Christians to find the most effective and accurate way of describing God as love. This is the primary statement about God in Christianity: God is Love. The doctrine of the Trinity is a

way of trying to say this as clearly, accurately and carefully as possible. How so?

One question that immediately arises whenever we ask about love is whether it is freely given. This can be illustrated with the example of love between two people. If I love you in order to get something from you, something like security or recognition, or something else, can I say that this is pure love? Maybe not. It may be the case that one of the characteristics of love is that it is free; that I am not under any obligation , compulsion, or condition to grant it, nor do I expect anything for myself as a result of it. In the case of God's love, this leads to the question, does God need the world? Could God be love if there was no world to love, or did God have to create the world in order to have something to love? If God's needs the world in order to be love, then God needs the world in order to be God. God would have had to create the world. And in that case, the world would not be the result of God's free love and God's love would therefore be less than perfect.

The problem was not foreign to Isaiah. An idolater is described in the following way:

> He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for thou art my god!" (44:14-17)

The point of the passage is this: idolatry, or false love, is love that is not free; it is love that is designed to produce a particular result. The man is really interested in the god only in so far as the god can provide salvation--just as the meat provides nourishment and the fire warmth. Similarly, adultery is love for another human being when the object is not the other person, but the benefits that may accrue to the lover.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to describe God's love as genuine and free love: love that is not designed to produce a result, but that is freely given in God's love for the world without consideration of what the world may give back to God. The Doctrine of the Trinity says that God's love is complete within God. The love of The father for the son and the son for the father and the father and the son for the spirit is a complete manifestation of the characteristic of love. God is complete in himself and does not need to create the world in order to have something to love. The love of God for the world, therefore is totally free.

The Trinitarian formula also addresses an additional problem: If God does not need the world in order to be complete, what assurance can humans have that God will not abandon the world? The Trinitarian answer is that because God has come to the world in Jesus, the world and all in it have been taken up into the inner life of God and participate in the inner life of God's own love.

B. God and revelation.

All of this may seem like theological scholasticism. How

does it relate to the basically simple teaching of Jesus? Most Christian theologians acknowledge that the Doctrine of the Trinity is not explicit in the teachings of Jesus nor in Scripture. They argue, nevertheless, that it is necessarily implied by the scriptural witness.

Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian (1886-1968), has worked out this line of thought perhaps more completely than anyone else. He argued that the Doctrine of the Trinity is necessarily implied by the idea of revelation in the New Testament. The consequences of this line of reasoning are profound for epistemology as well as for the concept of God.[4]

Barth's argument requires that we make a distinction between abstract knowledge and existential knowledge. Abstract knowledge is "knowledge about." Existential knowledge is direct, experiential knowledge. This difference, which is captured in the difference in German between <u>erkennen</u> and <u>wissen</u> and in French between <u>connaitre</u> and <u>savoir</u> is frequently lost in English, although we know what we mean when we say, for example, "I know him, but I don't know a lot about him," or "I know a lot about her, but I don't really know her." This is the difference between existential and abstract knowledge. I can be in love and know what that means and I can tell you about it, but you will

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[4] Church Dogmatics, I/1.

not know the same thing I know. (In this regard, it is important to remember that in some languages the same word is used for "know" and for "sexual intercourse.")

Barth argues that revelation has to do, not with information, but with existential knowledge. What we know through revelation is not some information about the human condition, or about the course of history, or about metaphysics, or even <u>about</u> God. What we know in revelation is direct, existential knowledge of God.

The kind of knowledge we are talking about when we talk about the knowledge of God is existential knowing and not abstract knowing about. Abstract knowing is the process of moving from the lack of information to the acquisition of information. It is detached and dispassionate and gives us control and power over its object. This is its strength and usefulness. Existential knowledge is not a matter of indifference. It is passionate and committed, permitting us to participate in the life of its object. Existential knowledge is not a means to an end but is an end in itself. It is the process of moving from unconsciousness to consciousness; from non-experience to experience.

We know existentially in many different ways. We know

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5 The best discussion of this subject that I know of is by Will Herberg in an unpublished paper, "Existentialism--Religious and Atheistic."

physical things through objective experience. I know my table, for example, because I have eaten at it many times and have repaired it many times and played under it when I was a child. We know skills through practice and effort. We know other people by experiencing them objectively, by experiencing ourselves when we are with them, and by experiencing other things and people in their presence. We know ourselves through an even more complex combination of experiences. And we know God in still a different way. When we know God we know something different, in a different way, and with different effects from when we know anything else that we know. The meaning and value of the knowledge of God is not a subset of some other kind of knowledge.

What all existential knowledge has in common is that it is experiential rather than abstract. We know God because God is present to us. I cannot do much better about describing this process than I can about describing how we know how to walk. We just walk. And we just experience the world in the light of the presence of God. There is no great mystery here. It is simply the way things are. Actually, the only great mystery is the degree to which we have allowed our words and questions to mystify us so that we sometimes manage to convince ourselves that we do not know God because we do not know how to describe the way in which we know.

The puzzling question is, then, not how do we know God, but how is it that we can pretend not to know God. Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian, said, "Morals hide us from the face of our human beings; religion hides us from the face of God." What

he meant, I believe, is that our beliefs are the biggest barrier to our knowledge of God. It follows that the way in which we know God is by escaping our beliefs so that we can experience what our experience really is.

What do we know when we know God? The main traditions of Western spirituality have given us a dualistic picture of experience. They have placed physical knowledge on one side and spiritual knowledge on the other side. They have told us that in order to know about things of the spirit we must separate ourselves from things of the world.

This has been a tragic mistake. What has happened in Western religions is that the goal of spiritual knowledge has been confused with the method of spiritual knowledge. The method of attaining spiritual knowledge may well require separation from our present perception of the world. But the goal of spiritual knowledge is to return us to a clear knowledge of the things of the world.

This understanding of the non-duality of the world of experience is more clearly retained in Zen. Alan Watts has written, "The perfection of Zen is to be perfectly and simply human. The difference of the adept in Zen from the ordinary run of men is that the latter are, in one way or another, at odds with their own humanity." For Zen, spirituality is not thinking about God while you are mowing the lawn. Spirituality is thinking about mowing the lawn when you are mowing the lawn.

What happens, then, when we know God is that we are able to experience our experience fully. Most of the time we do not experience our experience fully. We have developed various ways

of going unconscious. Basically, it is our belief-systems that get in the way of our experiencing our experience. Those of us who are academics tend to avoid experiencing our experience by judging it, evaluating it, comparing it to other experiences. People also use various forms of imagination and fantasy to avoid fear, disappointment and other emotions as a way of avoiding the immediacy of our experience.

This understanding of the experiential character of the knowledge of God should serve to distinguish what I mean here from pietistic and romantic understandings which focus on an experience of God in which God is not only the object, but the content of knowledge.

The knowledge of God is the collapse of our belief systems so that we fully experience our experience. When we know God, we are able to attend totally and completely to whatever it is that we are doing, because we do not have to be wondering where God is and if God approves of whatever it is we are doing.

The Zen master, Lin-Chi, said:

> There is no place in Buddhism for using effort. Just be ordinary and nothing special. Relieve your bowels, pass water, put on your clothes, and eat your food. When you're tired, go and lie down. Ignorant people may laugh at me, but the wise will understand.

Another Zen master said, "When it's time to get dressed, put on your clothes. When you must walk, then walk. When you must sit, then sit. Don't have a single thought in your mind about seeking for Buddhahood."

How does all this relate to the Doctrine of the Trinity? Barth argues that if we know God existentially, God must be

present to us. For God to be present to us means that God comes into our world. The Doctrine of the Trinity is a way of trying to speak theologically about ~~how~~ this. Revelation implies Incarnation, and Incarnation implies Trinity.

IV. The Creed

I have already quoted two of the most important creeds in the history of Christianity. There are many others. There are less comprehensive creeds that have their origins in scripture and precede the great Ecumenical creeds. And there are many creeds that followed them, one of the most recent and important being the Barmen Declaration of 1934 which defined the Confessing Church and its opposition to the Third Reich and the German Christians.[6]

It should be clear that Christianity differs from both Judaism and Islam with regard to the status of creedal formulations. Participation in Judaism is defined in terms of belonging to a community. Creeds are definitely secondary. Participation in Islam, on the contrary is defined in terms of affirmation of a creed. Christianity takes neither course which raises the question of exactly what it is that defines a person

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[6] Locke, Hubert (Ed.). The Church Confronts the Nazis. New York: Edwin Mellon, 1984. Locke, Hubert (Ed.). The Barmen Confession. Lewiston: Edwin Mellon, 1986.

as a Christian.

There is at least as much diversity within Christianity about Creeds as there is about the Doctrine of the Trinity. And this diversity is present both with regard to the content of creedal statements and the authority they hold. As in the previous portions of this paper it will not be possible to review this diversity. I can only suggest what seem to me to be critical points for discussion.

Almost all Christians accept the Nicene Creed of 325 quoted above, as well as the "Apostle's Creed" which probably is somewhat older. The Orthodox Churches acknowledge the authority of the Creeds of seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787). In addition to these Councils, the Catholic Church recognizes the authority of later councils (Trent [1545-63], Vatican [1869-70], Vatican II [1962-65]) as well as ex cathedra statements by the Pope. Most protestants accept the earlier ecumenical creeds as well as later creedal statements from within their own traditions, but ascribe varying degrees of authority to creedal statements in general.

Christianity is as divided about the authority of creeds as it is about their content. For many modern Christians, especially within Protestantism, creedal affirmation is definitive. Some Protestant churches call this "believer's baptism" and hold the creedal affirmation of the individual to be the essential definition of Christian. Most Christians, however, practice infant baptism, a practice which obviously makes creedal affirmation secondary. (Some Christians explain infant baptism

in terms of the creedal affirmation of the parents, or the larger community.)

For most Christians, throughout most of the history of Christianity, what has defined being a Christian is baptism. In some instances, infant baptism is understood to indelibly identify a person as a Christian. In other instances, a death-bed baptism assures a person's membership in the Church. At some periods in history, when a previously non-Christian geographical area was conquered by Christian forces, entire populations were baptized en masse without regard to their individual creedal awareness. So we must deal with the fact that the dominate mode in Christian history has been to subordinate creedal affirmation to belonging to the Church. And we must acknowledge, secondly, that belonging to the Church has been most frequently defined in terms of baptism.

This is why, for most Christians, the critical issue has not been the creed, but the sacraments. To make baptism the critical factor in determining who is and who is not a Christian only makes sense if baptism is seen, not as a human action, but as a sacrament--that is, as an act of God, placing a mark on an individual as a chosen one.

Creeds, then, are secondary to sacraments, and primarily to the sacrament of baptism. In fact, all the evidence suggests

that Christian creeds originated as baptismal formulae.[7]

Within this context, and given the previous discussion of revelation, it follows that a creed functions in a unique and peculiar way in Christianity. In Judaism, anything like a creed is a declaration about the history of a people. In Islam, it is a statement of the truth. In Christianity, there is no creedal criterion of truth in creedal form. (I am well that many Christians, evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox, would disagree with this statement. Within each of these traditions, however, there is a distinction between dogma and doctrine, which attempts to make the same point. It is the dogma, contained within the doctrine that is true.) The truth, in Christianity, is existential knowledge of God through Jesus. Creeds are always only approximations of this existential truth.

In Christianity, therefore, a creed is not a condition of faith, but is a product of faith.

> This is the origin of Christian symbols or creeds. They never precede faith, but presuppose it. They emanate from the inner life of the Church, independently of external occasion. There would have been creeds even if there had been no doctrinal controversies. . . .The Church is, indeed, not founded on symbols, but on Christ; not on any words of man, but on the word of God; yet it is founded on Christ as <u>confessed</u> by men, and a creed is man's answer to Christ':

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[7] Schaff, Philip. <u>The Creeds of Christendom,</u> Sixth Edition. New York: Harper, 1931. Vol. I, pp. 4ff.

question, man's acceptance and interpretation of God's word.

This understanding of the creed will certainly not be acceptable to everyone. Some Jews and Muslims will disagree with the understanding of sacrament on which it is based. Christians will disagree among themselves about exactly how creed relates to sacrament. It should, however, be understandable. There is a difference between understanding and agreement. What such a theory of creed implies, obviously, is the doctrine of the Trinity. Only if Christians have the direct existential experience of God does this relativizing of the creed make sense. Christians will disagree about exactly where and how this existential meeting occurs: Orthodox will claim it occurs in the act of the sacrament itself, Catholics through the visible Church, and Protestants (for the most part) within the individual. In every case, however, what is presupposed is the presence of God within the world. Christianity is rooted in this presence, not in the presence of a community covenanted by God nor in a messenger from God.

Two corollaries follow from this understanding of Creed. First, creeds arise in particular historical contexts to solve particular doctrinal disputes within the Church. This was true of the Nicene Creed which was directed at the conflict over Arianism. And it was true of the Barmen Declaration which was directed toward the apostasy of the German Christians during the Third Reich.

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[8] Schaff I, p. 5.

Second, the relative subjection of creed to sacrament in Christianity means that salvation (or enlightenment) is not dependent on one's own action or belief, but on the action of God. For many Christians it is a great comfort to realize that their spiritual life and destiny is not dependent on their own vacillating and frail affirmation, but rather on the loving activity of God.

Conclusion

I have tried to point out what I take to be distinctive about the God-concept and the Creed in Christianity. I hope I have not over-done it. My intention is not to throw down a challenge, but to contribute to a definition of the dialogue. Only within the past month the United Church of Christ within the United States adopted a statement that in its eyes the covenant between God and Israel had never been abrogated. That is the first time, to my knowledge, with the exception of the Confessing Church in Germany, that a Christian church has acknowledged the unique and legitimate difference of Judaism. More of that kind of recognition and acknowledgment is required for effective dialogue. We must come to the position that we can affirm that the legitimacy of the partners in dialogue does not depend on our common assumptions, but on our unique contributions to the religious life of all human beings.