Sinlessness and Uncertainty in Jesus

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The Expository Times 2005 116: 361
DOI: 10.1177/0014524605055213

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ARTICLES

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There are over seventy separate occasions on which Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as asking questions. A substantial number of these are open questions; and some of them seem to imply that Jesus was himself uncertain about an answer. Can this analysis be reconciled with the orthodox Christian doctrine of his sinlessness?

TO what extent can the Jesus of the Gospels be seen as uncertain and even, in a particular sense, doubtful? That idea may come up against the idea of his sinlessness (as affirmed, for example, in Heb 4:15). But the true meaning of sinlessness must be that the human will of Jesus was in complete harmony with the divine will; for sin is any intention that is contrary to the divine will. That harmony had to be established from moment to moment. That is how the will of human beings must work. Although habits and patterns are developed in human life, conformity to the divine will cannot be simply a once-for-all decision, because the divine will has to be discovered in every situation, in the flow and flux of life. These moments of discovery are the moments of 'creative doubt', when different courses of action, each good in its own way, present themselves for choice. Sinlessness does not mean that the divine will takes over, like a kind of auto-pilot, so that no further decisions are necessary and life glides along the one perfect course, pre-set and reaching its destination without further adjustment.

Perhaps we may compare the idea of sinlessness with the idea of the inspiration of Scripture. An inspired word spoken in a specific historical situation may have been infallible, in the sense that it gave absolutely reliable direction to the thoughts or actions of particular people at a particular time. But that 'infallibility' is not an inherent quality of the text. An 'infallible' word spoken yesterday may become fallible tomorrow. Its inspiration has to be re-established in each interaction between the text and the reader. So also sinlessness, because it is concerned with acts of the will, must be re-established in each moment of decision. If we say that Jesus had a completely pure will, we must still suppose that it had to be exercised continually in actual choices. In that sense, it was constantly in peril. Otherwise it would be as though he had handed over his freedom to the necessity of sinlessness. If, then, he made continual choices, it is reasonable to suppose that there were, for him as for all others, times of creative doubt, when he was equally aware of conflicting claims made upon him. We may believe that he always exercised his freedom in the service of love, and we may call that the condition of sinlessness.

We must also bear in mind that no human decision is ever taken in complete freedom. Every choice is a consequence of other choices, one's own and other people's, and all human choice is perpetually contaminated by corporate error and guilt. We do not live as isolated individuals, and the choices with which we are presented seldom, if ever, permit an ideal course of action. Sinlessness, in the sense of a completely pure will, does not change that. The idea of incarnation in a sinless human being must not degenerate to a fantasy in which every situation offers a single sinless option, contrary to all experience, nor must it suggest the undesirable state of an otherwise human being uniquely isolated from corporate contamination. A theology of sinlessness must not set Jesus so far distant from normal human experience that it cannot make sense of his baptism

or the redemptive significance of his crucifixion. At the beginning and the end of his ministry, at his baptism and on the cross, the Christian gospel itself declares that the saviour was completely identified with ordinary, that is, sinful humanity. The sins are not 'his own' in an individual sense. But that is often true of anybody's sins, and we are right to credit with more than usual holiness those who suffer most from a sense of corporate guilt. The notion of sinlessness may in fact be misleading. It would be better to use an alternative vocabulary, which emphasizes the total self-giving and love in Jesus which struggles with the intractable ambiguities of decision, recognizing that there are seldom perfect solutions to real dilemmas. This issue was implicit in the Monothelite controversy in the seventh century. Its outcome was to affirm, in the terminology of the day, the co-existence of a human will and the divine will in Jesus.

This question is relevant to considering Jesus' role as teacher, as portrayed in the Gospels. There is no reason to exclude uncertainty here. The best teacher is not one who knows all the answers and hands them out on request, but rather one who knows what are the important questions. Perfection in that kind of teacher, if the idea means anything, would have little to do with omniscience conceived in factual or propositional terms. It would mean the utmost ability to lead disciples to the truth, but the truth as a way of life, not as a scheme of doctrine. Genuine learning would take place through the personal experience of the learner, not through the adoption of formulas which could be misunderstood, or even lack meaning, so long as the relevant experience was lacking. The most effective teacher is often the one who is also a learner; and learning implies at least the kind of uncertainty associated with exploration of the unknown. There is plenty of room for uncertainty in the best teacher, when teaching is about personal life. Each person's life is different. There can be no direct 'transfer of learning' from one life to another. Since each life has to be lived in the interplay of human relationships, it demands a continuous succession of improvisations. Even if Jesus possessed complete human insight into the characters of other people, he would still be uncertain how they would respond to particular challenges. According to Luke, he prayed for Simon Peter, that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32). His prayer, and its failure, revealed his uncertainty.

Jesus' role as teacher would not be helped by an inhuman omniscience which alienated him from the struggles which his disciples had to undergo in learning 'the way'. And although he understood his disciples with a penetrating insight, he was sometimes surprised by their obtuseness. We must not make too much of the evidence of a few texts, such as Mark 7:18 and 8:17–18, with their refrain of 'Don't you understand?', but his very surprise indicates that he had followed the road of learning by experience which he thought they, too, had taken. An omniscient mystagogue would take for granted the ignorance of his neophytes. A rabbi would expect some measure of intelligent understanding in his disciples and might overestimate their progress in 'the way'. Jesus is shown to be more like the rabbi than the mystagogue. And although the records of the sayings of the rabbis often give an impression of unshakeable confidence, we must assume that they had at least worked through doubts and uncertainties which the records would not show.

One possible indication of this kind of uncertainty in a teacher lies in the asking of questions. There are over seventy separate occasions on which Jesus is portrayed, in the synoptic gospels, as asking questions. Some are simply requests for information. A larger number are rhetorical questions, asking nothing except the nod of assent. But that still leaves a substantial number which are open questions. Some are open in the sense that the individual is left a real choice, although it is clear what Jesus himself thinks; others are questions to which Jesus' own answer is apparently uncertain.

We may guess that some of these open questions are intended merely to set the listener thinking. Examples might include:

> Why does this generation ask for a sign? (Mark 8:12)
>
> How is it that the Scriptures say of the Son of Man that he is to endure great sufferings and to be treated with contempt? (Mark 9:12)
>
> Why do you call me good? (Mark 10:18)

It is perhaps no accident that these, and the majority of such questions are found in Mark's gospel. It would fit in well with his urgent style of writing. But there are other, more interesting, examples which are so difficult to answer in a simple way that we may suppose Jesus himself had no concise answer to them.

The form of the question is less important than the issue raised. Here are some examples:

1. Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? (Mark 3:33)
2. Who do men say that I am? (Mark 8:27)
3. How long shall I be with you? How long must I endure you? (Mark 9:19)
4. Who set me over you to judge or arbitrate? (Luke 12:14)
5. Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? (Luke 12:51)
6. Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? (Mark 15:34)

It is only with the last of these examples that we can feel much confidence in the actual form of words, but each one raises great issues, to which we shall return. Here it is enough to note that the practice of asking questions is part of the image of Jesus presented by all the synoptic gospels. The actual number of questions recorded in each of the three is roughly the same, but the incidence is higher in Mark in relation to the length of each gospel. Perhaps that is a measure of its greater sense of urgency and dramatic vigour.

It may come as more of a surprise to discover that the fourth gospel, with nearly forty instances, presents an equally questioning portrait of Jesus. There is this to be noted, however: that there is not a single example in John of a question exactly corresponding to any of the questions recorded in the synoptics. Even the substance of the doubt or uncertainty corresponds only in the agony in the garden. 'What am I to say? Father save me from this hour?' (12:27). The practice of asking questions is similar but their content is different. In the fourth gospel two kinds of question stand out, and both of them seem to be directed at the reader rather than forming a necessary part of the story that is being told.

First, there are nearly a dozen questions asked in the form 'Do you believe?' or 'Have you faith?'. Then there are about half that number introduced with the word, Why? Why are you trying to kill me? Why are you indignant with me? Why do you not believe me? Why question me? Why strike me? Why are you weeping? These, too, pose the underlying question of belief. If those who are questioned believed the truth about Jesus they would not do what they are doing or think what they are thinking. Some of the other questions in this gospel, though they are not in the same form, have the same underlying purpose: to challenge the reader to faith. It is only to be expected that the evidence of hesitation or uncertainty on the part of Jesus would have been almost eliminated in a gospel which proclaims from the beginning the identity of Jesus with the Word made flesh. Even so, there are two possible hints at the reality of something less than total foreknowledge in Jesus. One is the turmoil of soul before the final decision, already mentioned. The other is the question 'Do you also want to leave me?' (6:67), soon followed by reference to the expected betrayal by Judas Iscariot (6:70–71), and the unexplained change of plan about going up to Jerusalem for the festival (7:8–10).

To sum up, we may say that Jesus' characteristic of asking many questions forms part of the image presented by all four gospels. In all the Gospels there are traces of genuine hesitation or uncertainty, though these are much less evident in the fourth gospel. They point to moments of what may be called creative doubt. Some at least of the doubts suggested by the unanswered questions of Jesus would remain alive to the end of time. We have already noted six of them, set out above.

1. The first poses the problem of reconciling the claims of natural affinity, sacred in the eyes of a Jew, with the overriding claims of a new community created by the Gospel. Can the claims of natural affinity be reconciled with the creation of a community independent of such natural ties and transcending all limits of race and culture? Are Church and nation inevitably in conflict with each other?

2. The second is no mere question of nomenclature. It puts under review the categories that men use to docket their heroes. The question is first about what other people think, and then about the disciples' beliefs. Mark does not say what was in Jesus' own mind, except the idea of suffering which must be coupled with whatever image they might have of him. Matthew elaborates the dialogue and shows that, in his understanding, there was a revelation to Peter, and through Peter the confirmation of a revelation already given to Jesus. But at the end of the dialogue the original question is still alive. For the question of suffering must be related to the question whether or not Jesus is seen as the messiah. Does unity in the truth of Jesus depend upon recognition of his

claims as the Christ, the Messiah, or can that truth be released from its Hebraic terminology without loss of its essential meaning? Can the Christ be found in other faiths?

3. The third question is the surfacing of a problem vital to Jesus' future plans, but not relevant to the challenge of the moment. It may read like a sigh of impatience, but its form, if accurately remembered, must have been suggested by an unanswered question in Jesus' own mind. How long a period lies before humanity in the achievement of its goal of genuine community? Which will come first – eco-catastrophe or ecumenical reconciliation?

4. The fourth can be interpreted simply as a denial that Jesus' mission has room for the kind of case-work which is being thrust on him. But the underlying meaning is more perplexing than that. The law-giver *par excellence* was Moses, and Jesus has claimed the right to re-interpret the divine law given by him. Must he therefore agree to exercise the detailed judgement of particular cases, which had been such a burden to Moses (Exod 18:12–27)? Must he train his disciples, as Moses trained reliable men, to be his deputies? The whole problem of a new law fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah (31:33) was contained in that simple question which appears merely rhetorical. What is the role of law in human society? Can love ever transcend justice?

5. The fifth example is, if anything, even more inclusive in its scope. It poses the greatest problem of human society: the relation between truth and peace in a sinful world. No doubt the peacemakers are blessed, but even they must not sacrifice truth to peace. And what if men fight about the proper way to establish peace? Here, if anywhere, is an unanswerable question which echoes down the ages amid the tumult of wars fought by the followers of the prince of peace. Is the objective of human development a reconciled community or a community living in perpetual tension and achieving through tension a perpetual creativity?

6. And then there is the last question, spoken by parched lips on the cross. No answer could possibly be given that side of death. It was the expression of the last and greatest uncertainty. Must humanity learn the same lessons over and over again through the experience of failure, or will there be a time when all anguish will be eliminated and all parturition, of the spirit as well as the body, will be in joy and in full awareness of the divine presence? The questions, and the doubts, remain and we see no sign after many centuries that they can be answered and resolved. They are continually restated, providing items on the agenda of the Church, and of humankind, in every generation. Yet perhaps there is progress in the restatement.

The questions of Jesus tend to confirm other evidence that his faith was reborn from moment to moment, with all the inevitable uncertainties of daily living. If we see signs of creative doubt, they do not contradict the evidence of his positive teaching. Indeed it was the fundamental nature of his positive truth which increased the possibility of doubts. Through the very nature of his new teaching there were even more open questions, which could receive no blanket answer, but must await the turn of events to elucidate the alternatives and make decision possible. The objection that Jesus was no doubter but a positive teacher presents a false antithesis. Creative doubt was the implicate of positive faith. His teaching that the disciples should not be anxious about the morrow and his promise that they would have the Spirit's guidance in the unknown future were the fruit of his own experience. When, centuries later, his message was summed up in the maxim, 'Love and do what you will', it had built into it all the creative uncertainties of loving. What would love want to do? The peace he promised would come, not through providing answers and eliminating doubts, but by the gift of power to act creatively as each moment revealed new uncertainties.

Whatever may be said of the function of uncertainty, or faith, or creative doubt in the mind of Jesus, it is clear that he was committed to certain great truths which stood out like immovable rocks in the swirling waters. Yet his ministry, as recorded in the Gospels, was a long series of improvisations. That is no defect in the life of one who taught his disciples not to be anxious about tomorrow. It does, however, mean that questions about the purpose of his ministry were perpetually open. There was no settled policy about the relation between teaching and healing, about his relations with the religious or the political authorities, about the development of an organization to embody his message and ensure its transmission. He was surely no methodist, nor pope. Beside him we may think St Francis a prudent planner. Of course there were the inner certainties without which no one could become a leader. Men

and women were somehow constrained to follow him. But those certainties – about God's love, about his own destiny, about the way to transform human society – enabled him still to leave wide open many questions which others wanted to get settled in advance. If ever a man lived by faith, he did. That may seem to describe a merely human Jesus; but in fact faith is the very point of meeting between God and a human person. It is not an unfortunate limitation on human beings, setting them lower than the angels. It is the essential element in our humanity by which we apprehend the transcendent and share the creative activity of God. The notion of incarnation would be supremely illustrated if we could conceive how divinity poured itself through the narrow aperture of faith to fill the humanity of Jesus, as sand in an hour-glass passes from the upper to the lower vessel.

HOLY VULNERABILITY

Enda McDonagh, *Vulnerable to the Holy – in Faith, Morality and Art* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba Press, 2004. £8.99. pp. 218. ISBN 1–85607–460–9).

The title intrigues and the book does not disappoint. Dare we be vulnerable, open to the holy, and, what is the holy?

Father Enda McDonagh, an Irish theologian, after a ministry of lecturing Catholic seminarians, promised himself to write a book about the ultimate questions of the faith, provisionally entitling 'The Risk of God', but the many demands and experiences of retirement led him to the present work.

Central to this is an understanding of 'the Holy' as that which is 'other', or different, both meanings inherent in the Hebrew word for holy: QADOSH. People are 'other', differing from each other in their individuality, the world where we live is 'other' familiar but distinct with a life of its own, and God is the 'Ultimate Other', the 'Holy One' awesomely different; yet we find our fulfilment in our relationship with all three, in being open to them, and so vulnerable.

In the opening chapter McDonagh speaks of the God who 'Let be –', giving his creation an independent identity; who 'Let go –', allowing creation to be and become with a freedom to develop in its own way; but we, as God's creation in his own image must 'Let God –' in being open to him in a free relationship.

The extended title indicates how this vulnerability works out in matters of faith, morality and the arts.

As an Irish priest he is only too aware of the tensions within the Church that have come about from the innovations of Vatican II and a changing society. Here was the 'Other', challenging accepted traditions through changing thought and circumstances.

Our understanding and realization of the 'Holy' comes through personal relationships and this involves sexual morality, and here the different attitudes to sexual orientation are considered in the light of faith.

Art is a celebration of the particularity of things, how each thing has its individuality and relates to what is different. His study of Gerard Manley Hopkins opens up his concept of the 'inscape' and how this leads to an understanding of the holiness within everything. This leads to studies of art and poetry in contemporary Ireland, from the familiar to the sacred.

He ends with a collection of essays including one on 'The Risk of Priesthood' and his own understanding of his ministry, one not far removed from that held by the reviewer, a Methodist minister.

This is an exciting and creative approach to the 'Holy' relating it to so much that is significant and precious in life, while cherishing what is distinct and sacred.

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