

## THE WAY TO NICEA

### Foreword

In a recent study of "Biblical Hermeneutics" published in Semeia, Paul Ricoeur not only conceived live metaphor as creative expression but also attributed a similar power to parable, proverb, and apocalyptic.<sup>1</sup> So with his customary subtlety and finesse he brought to light how the gospels succeeded in taking us beyond the pedestrian confines of ordinary language and into the realm of religious meaning.

As there is live as well as dead metaphor, so too there is live as well as dead religion. Again, as creativity is discerned in the emergence of a religion, so too creativity is to be acknowledged in its vital acceptance, in living it day by day, in bringing about the adjustments to cultural variation and changing circumstance that the very vitality of a religion demands. So it is, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith remarked, that "All religions are new religions, every morning. For religions do not exist in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished, and static; they exist in men's hearts."<sup>2</sup>

With such creative vitality, its risks and its dangers, we have to do when we take for granted the distinction between writings included in the canonical scriptures and the broad spectrum of other writings, contemporary or subsequent, approved or suspected or rejected. But in the early Christian centuries further factors were involved. Besides the archaic style of Jewish Christian writers and the fantasy of Gnostics

there was a puzzling undertow, a logical concern for clarity and coherence, that was destined eventually to add to the ordinary language of the bazaars and to the religious language of the gospels the incipient theological language of the Greek councils.

It is with this movement that these pages are concerned. But the reader must be warned that we do not propose to add to erudition by research, or to clarify interpretation by ~~de~~ study, or to enrich history with fresh information. Such functional specialties we presuppose. Our purpose is to move on to a fourth, to a dialectic that, like an x-ray, sets certain key issues in high relief to concentrate on their oppositions and their interplay.

The reason for this procedure, which to an outsider might appear not only jejune but also violent, is that ante-Nicene thought was propelled by two distinct though related determinants. The explicit issue was christological, and to this the major writers explicitly adverted. But underpinning it and going forward without any explicit advertence on anyone's part, there was a far profounder matter: the emergence and the development of dogma, which began indeed at Nicea but continued down the centuries.

So it is that the christological thought of Tertullian, of Origen, of Athanasius, is to be studied on the basis of the explicit statements of these writers and in the context of the explicit Christian tradition. But if one would understand the long-term outcome of their thinking, an outcome they did not intend or desire, then the appropriate tool seems to be some type of dialectical analysis.

Bernard Lonergan

- 1) Semeia: An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism, published irregularly by Scholars Press, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59801.
- 2) Quoted by Walter Conn, Studies in Religion / Sciences religieuses, 5/3, Winter 1975, p. 222.