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Christian Identity in a Time of Pluralism

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Christian Identity in a Time of Pluralism(1)

R. Panikkar

ὅς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλῃ τῆς  
ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ σωθῆναι  
ἀπολέσει αὐτήν.

Matth. XVI, 25

Qui enim voluerat animam suam salvam  
facere, perdet eam.

For whoever wishes to save one's own  
life will lose it. (2)

I. Identity in Pluralism

There is no single answer as to what a christian is or what the christian fact may be (3). If we accept a true pluralism, the answer to the question of christian identity should also be pluralistic. But what does it mean? A strictly univocal answer denies the very foundations of pluralism, while an equivocal answer would not be an answer at all. An answer has to be an answer even if it displays many possible layers of meaning.

There may be a plurality of antagonistic answers, but this is not a pluralistic answer. If we were to succeed in finding a deeper or a common answer underlying all the plural answers, i.e. if we were to find analogy in the different answers, then the 'primum analogatum' so located would automatically become the basis for a super-system, which would in turn reduce pluralism to mere psychological or sociological variations on one and the same intelligible theme. This is to say that pluralism would then be only a matter of taste or of

(1) This topic was discussed in Strasburg, June 30-July 9, 1976 in the X International Ecumenical Seminar sponsored by the Institute for Ecumenical Research under the theme: Christian Identity - Confessional Identity - Christian Unity. Cf. a review in Journal of Ecumenical Studies, XIV, 1 (Winter, 1977), pp. 195-196.

It was also the topic of Fall Meeting (November 19-20) 1976 of the Pacific Coast Theological Society under the very title of my paper, which was one of the two position papers of the discussion. The present study is a revised version of my presentation there.

(2) Whoever cares to preserve one's own identity is lost. The text goes on saying: "qui autem perdiderit animam suam propter me, inveniet eam". "Whoever loses the own life for my sake shall find it". Cf. also Matth. X, 38-39; Luc. XVII, 33; Io. XII, 25.

(3) Cf. an insightful and standard modern definition: "A christian is ordinarily defined as 'one who believes in Jesus Christ' or as 'a follower of Jesus Christ.' He might more adequately be described as one who counts himself as belonging to that community of men for whom Jesus Christ — his life, words, deeds, and destiny — is of supreme importance(..)" H. Richard NIEBUHR, Christ and Culture. New York (Harper Colophon Books), 1975, p. 11.

sociological milieu; it would amount merely to perspectivism and not to the supra-intellectual harmony which undergirds true human tolerance of mutually exclusive worldviews.

Pluralism, by definition, does not admit of a pluralistic system. Pluralism belongs to the order of the mythos and not of the logos. We speak of pluralism not when we discover a plurality of possible answers to a problem but when, while recognizing that these answers may be mutually incompatible, we find we cannot deny their legitimacy given a certain standpoint, albeit one which we cannot accept intellectually (1). Pluralism is not just a plurality of answers to one problem; it is a fact which challenges rational analysis. (6)

I would like to venture a hypothesis and for the sake of brevity and clarity, I shall present it in the form of a thesis. This thesis takes pluralism seriously and should be considered a further evolution of the ideas expounded in my paper for the 1964 Eucharistic Congress of Bombay in which, after affirming that Christians have no monopoly on goodness, or truth, or salvation, I proceeded to describe a Christian as "a conscious collaborator with Christ in the threefold function of creating, redeeming and glorifying the world" (2). In that paper I was trying to speak from within the broadly acceptable Christian myth (3). I was reflecting on phrases like that of Gandhi: "If I had to face only the Sermon of the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian'" (4). Here by contrast, I am approaching the issue on the basic pluralistic assumption that one cannot take for granted that there is or even should be a particular worldview which should be called specifically Christian (5).

Just to put another example: We may agree that a Christian is somebody who affirms a special relation to Jesus Christ, but the understanding of this relation cannot be expressed in any univocal way and the analogy cannot go beyond the formal or structural contents of the word 'relation'.

(1) For the roman-catholic side, Cf. B. LONERGAN, Doctrinal Pluralism. Milwaukee (Marquet University Press), 1971, defending a pluralism of communications and distinguishing a number of necessary differentiations of consciousness.

- H. Urs von BALTHASAR, Die Wahrheit ist Symphonisch, -- Aspekte des christlichen Pluralismus. Einsiedeln (Johannes) 1972.

Za.1 L (2) Cf. a reprint of this paper with the title "Christians and so-called 'Non-Christians'", Cross-Currents, XXII, 3 (Summer-Fall) 1972, pp. 281-308.

(3) Cf. also my article "The Theological Basis for Christian-Non-Christian Co-operation in Social Thought and Action", Religion and Society, V, 1 (Barganlore, March-1958).

(4) Apud my quoted article.

(5) Cf. the recent book by D. TRACY, Blessed Rage for Order. New York (Seabury) 1976, with the tantalizing subtitle The New Pluralism in Theology and which assumes that there is a "basic meaning of the Christian Faith Itself" capable of many articulations and symbolic representations. The problem then becomes 'the pluralism of faith'.

Karl Rahner's efforts to find a general basis for his 'transcendental Christology' depends not only on the postkantian and evolutionary mentality of ~~Modern~~ <sup>W</sup>Western Man, but also on a maximalist position that many ~~Christians~~ <sup>E</sup>Christians would not accept and would even refuse to acknowledge as being implicit in their '~~Christian~~ <sup>E</sup>Christian belief' (1). Many would declare themselves ~~Christians~~ <sup>E</sup>Christians without necessarily admitting that Christ is the 'absolute savior' and even without giving to Christ a metaphysically central place (2). A certain type of ~~Christian~~ <sup>c</sup>Christian ~~Humanism~~ <sup>h</sup>Humanism would consider Christ a great human master of the ~~Western~~ <sup>w</sup>Western civilization along with others and would not accept the claims of the major orthodox traditions of the past.

## II. A Thesis by Way of Hypothesis

The problem of human identity is a well known and thoroughly debated philosophical problematic (3). The question of identity in self-conscious beings entails self-identity. Human identity cannot be satisfied with external marks. It has to be self-identity (4). It consists of the conscious, and somewhat desperate, search for 'something': a self or a non-self, which will guarantee the unity or at least the continuity of the person (5). I say desperate because the question of human identity inevitably leads to the impossible enterprise of self-awareness: It is the I ~~is~~ asking for its own 'I'. But this means already asking for a 'you' -- a 'me' -- supposedly identical to the I (6). What confers identity is, in the final analysis, not the result of one's particular reflection upon it (self-identity depends on my underlying notion of self), but the radical fact of that reflection (the myth underlying my 'self-consciousness') (7). What confers human identity is the fact of looking for it. Ultimately my thesis addresses a particular instance of a more general problematic concerning the peculiar nature of human events as distinct from physical facts. I shall not however pursue this philosophical line of inquiry but concentrate rather on our concrete question.

The thesis runs like this: the criterion

- (1) "Dieses in Geschichte absolute (...) Verhältnis zu Jesus Christus mag zureichend oder unzureichend in der theologischen Reflexion... ausgelegt werden, ... mag sich in die Unreflektierbarkeit der letzten existenziellen Entscheidung der einzelnen Christen entziehen: Wo es ist, ist Christentum, ... wo dieses Verhältnis nicht als absolutes in der Geschichte vollzogen und interpretiert wird, hört eigentliches (explizites) Christentum auf." Grundkurs des Glaubens, Freiburg (Herder) 1976, p.205.
- (2) "In einer phänomenologischen Deskription des gemeinchristlichen Verhältnis zu Jesus Christus können wir... sagen: dieses Verhältnis zu Jesus Christus ist gegeben durch den 'Glauben', dass in der Begegnung mit ihm (...) das alles umfassende und alles durchdringende Geheimnis der Wirklichkeit überhaupt und des je eigenen Lebens (Gott genannt) 'da ist' zu unserem Heil...", op. cit., p. 204.
- (3) Cf. G. VESEY, Personal Identity . London (MacMillan) 1974 and the 122 bibliographical entries of the appendix.
- (4) Cf. A.O. RORTY (Editor), The Identity of Persons, Berkeley (University of California Press) 1976. There are 8 pages of useful bibliography (325-333) and 12 chapters by different authors. Of interest mainly for the problem of individuation.
- (5) No wonder the western encounter with buddhism creates so many new -- and enriching -- problems. Cf. by way of example, M.C. Miller, "The Concept of Identity in Justus Buchler and Mahayana Buddhism", International Philosophical Quarterly, XVI, 2 (March -1976), pp. 87-108.
- (6) I should mention here my trinitarian interpretation of reality as succinctly suggested in The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man. New York (Orbis Books) and London (Darton, Longman & Todd) 1973, especially pp. 51 et seq.
- (7) Cf. the difficulties of a theory of identity based on memory and perception alone: L.Ashley and M. Stack, "Hume's Theory of the Self and Its Identity", Dialogue (1974), pp. 239-254, and J.L. Biro, "Hume on Self-Identity and Memory", The Review of Metaphysics (1976), 19-38.

for christian identity lies ultimately in the sincere confession by a subject eliciting a corresponding recognition by a community. In other words, the question of <sup>c</sup>Christian identity cannot be resolved if it is formulated in the form of 'what is a <sup>c</sup>Christian?' but only in this other form: "Who is a <sup>c</sup>Christian?". A <sup>c</sup>Christian is one who confesses himself or herself to be such and as such is accepted by other (usually <sup>c</sup>Christian) people. More pointedly: I am a christian if I sincerely confess to being one and (am accepted) as such by a community. The point I am trying to make is that christian identity is an existential fact, not an essential feature. Thus, it does not need a perennially fixed context, nor always the same necessary minimum of doctrine. Christian identity expresses itself differently in different times and places, according precisely to the peculiar self-understanding of both individual and community.

What constitutes <sup>c</sup>Christian identity is the sincere and factual confession, *μαρτυρία* of a person finding positive resonance in a human community. It is neither the mere caprice of an individual or group shouting to be 'christian' if no other individual or group accepts it. Nor is it a matter of merely doctrinal statements -- necessary as these statements are in any given situation.

If I am right in this thesis, the consequences are far-reaching indeed (1). But I shall restrict my presentation to clarifying this theologumenon. But before doing so, we shall have to reflect a little on the pluralistic situation at the root of our present-day identity crisis. I shall conclude the presentation with some philosophical reflections followed by other, more theological, considerations.

### III. The Pluralistic Genesis

In an era when a single myth hovers almost palpably over a culture, forming as it were a horizon in terms of which truth and reality can with surety be defined, there is little doubt as to who is a christian and what

(1) Issues like "Christian Missions", "Christianity and World Religions", "Christian Marxist Dialogue", "Church-State Relations" and many others should then be basically reviewed.

christian identity means. Either the question does not arise, so thoroughly is it taken for granted, or orthodoxy proclaims itself the undisputed criterion, with all the refinements that theologians may consequently append to the central fact of a universally recognized christian identity. Orthodoxy is considered the true mirror of the orthopraxis, of the means or way to salvation, which constitutes the practical and existential aspect of religion (1). In times of a unified myth, orthodoxy becomes crucial, not necessarily due to a cartesian identification of the true nature of Man with his reason, but rather to the lack of differentiation between the doxa and the integral human being. In such a time orthodoxy is so much taken for granted in its fundamental tenets, that a denial of these tenets is seen as tantamount to a denial of plain humanness (2).

The modern problem does not arise because christians recognize different models of and loci for orthodoxy. This feature has been common enough since (at least) the schism of the 11th. and especially the 16th. centuries. Heresy and apostasy are well-accepted situations (3). But today the problem arises mainly because the very conception of orthodoxy does not seem to be sufficient for christian identity; so polyvalent has it become and to some so irrelevant, that it offers no common foothold and certainly no criterion of identity (4). If the ortho-doxa of a particular church has become problematic, that of the sum of the different christian groups is patently nonexistent. If by an artificial 'tour de force' one could extract some rather vague common denominator of all christian beliefs at a given time, by the next year there might well have appeared another 'christian' church which would believe the hypothesis (5). What then makes a christian christian? (6)

Orthodoxy refers to belief, while faith transcends the realm of the doxa. If we distinguish faith as a constitutive human dimension, namely that dimension which keeps us constantly open to a 'plus',

(1) Elsewhere I have told the following story: Spanish Civil war. Bilbao, 1936. The basques are catholic and fighting with the 'communists' against Franco. A foreigner, a protestant minister, takes the occasion to explain to a group of workers: "Here you are, believing christians and fighting against your fellow-catholics joining the red brigades. Join the protestants who are the real followers of the Gospel which is what you want." Violent reaction of the basques 'comunists' up to the point that the protestant minister had to save himself: "We have abandoned and are fighting the Only One Catholic, Apostolic and true Church outside of which there is no salvation and now you, dirty fellow, want us to join an heretical sect...?"

They knew what was christian identity in the unbroken roman-catholic myth. They put all their lives -- and eternal lives -- at stake! They were not fighting just to conquer a piece of earth or bread...

That unifying myth of friend and foe alike is no longer too common.

(2) Cf. my distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxis in "Sur l'herméneutique de la tradition dans l'hindouisme". Proceedings of the Colloquium organized by Istituto di Filosofia, edited by E. Castelli. Paris (Aubier) 1973, pp. 360-364, especially.

(3) Cf. for instance the efforts of Charles Journet in a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic climate to save the concept of 'heresy' from existential connotations of bad will, sin, evil, etc. Theologie de l'Eglise. Paris ( ) 1957.

(4) Cf. my "Sécularisation de l'herméneutique et l'herméneutique de la sécularisation" in Proceedings of the Colloquium organized by Istituto di Filosofia, edited by E. Castelli. Paris (Aubier) 1976.

(5) The cases of Africa and North America, with new and basically different 'christian' groups every year could offer us ample evidence of the futility of research along these lines. We have to look at the problem differently.

(6) Suffice to mention how differently the question of a hindu identity, for instance, presents itself. Cf. below (Va) and my chapter "Algunos aspectos fenomenológicos de la espiritualidad hindú actual" in Misterio y Revelación. Madrid (Marova), 1971.

an 'other', or simply to transcendence, and belief as the conceptualization (in each culture or religion or groups thereof) of our ultimate convictions, we can affirm that faith, by definition, cannot be lost, unless we lose our humanity (like losing one's reason (1)). So what makes a person christian? If faith is no privilege of the christian, what kind of belief makes him or her a christian? It <sup>all</sup> depends on where we draw the line at any given point in time and space. The thesis I am proposing affirms that from a doctrinal standpoint there is no absolute and everlasting criterion as to where to put the christian 'boundaries'.

We all know many people today -- but one could as well cite a C.G. Jung, a B. Russell, a B. Croce, an A. Gide or a J.

Ortega y Gasset and also Simone Weil and Heidegger (to draw from the european generation immediately preceding our own) who have declared themselves non-christians because they were unable to accept what they themselves considered essential to the christian tradition (2). Even so, we could easily adduce disciples of all the thinkers just mentioned who do declare themselves christians because they see no contradiction between their own beliefs, ~~and~~ (often even those of their masters) and the christian tradition. How to explain such a change?

In point of fact, there are today christians who believe in the divinity of Christ and there are those who do not. People declare themselves christian marxists, christian atheists, hindu-christians, and so on, a development unheard of only a few decades ago. Just where is this line to be drawn?

My own interpretation is not only that there is no doctrinal line to draw but, further, that we are beginning to witness in christianity something which is almost a commonplace in some other traditions, notably the hindu one. A hindu is not constituted by his or her views or beliefs ('orthodoxy'), but rather by that person's more or less explicit or implicit 'confession' by her practice to being a hindu, and the acceptance of this confession by the community. It is well known that a theist, a deist, an atheist, etc. can all be hindus without finding any conflict or contradiction therein. But then, it will be objected, <sup>c</sup>Christianity is not a religion like hinduism. <sup>3</sup> Nevertheless,

- (1) Cf. R. PANIKKAR, L'homme qui devient Dieu. Paris (Aubier) 1969.  
W.C. SMITH,

(2) Just a single example ~~which has the advantage that I will have not to translate~~. "Why I am not a Christian" was Bertrand Russell's lecture in 1927 (reprinted in a collection of his essays -- under the same title -- by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957. Russell there said that the word christian is used "in a very loose sense these days". It has not that "full-blooded meaning... as it had in the times of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas". Yet today it can be reduced to a minimum: "you must believe in God and immortality" and secondly "you must have at the very lowest the belief that Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest of men". Russell, then, goes on to prove that he does not believe in God criticizing the traditional arguments. Regarding Christ he candidly confesses that he agrees "with Christ a great deal more than the professing Christians do" and that he "could go with Him (sic) much further than most professing Christians can." Yet he finds "defects in Christ's teaching" and is outraged "that He believed in hell" while he does not feel "that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment." It is astonishing today and significant of the contemporary change, that a ~~m~~an of the moral and intellectual stature of Russell could have said such things only a few decades ago.

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there hardly remains a baptist, a presbyterian, an 'orthodox' or a 'catholic' who will today contest the propriety of calling christian those who do not happen to belong to their particular persuasion (1). Significantly enough, not only is the word hindu an external denomination made by muslims, christians and others in order to distinguish themselves from the autochthonous religiousness of India, but the word 'christian' also seems to have been the same sort of thing: a distinction made by outsiders in order to designate the followers of Christ. No 'christian' of those early times called himself or herself christian, just as Christ did not preach himself but the Kingdom of God (2). Religions are existential facts, not merely doctrinal systems. This does not ~~mean~~<sup>deny</sup>, I repeat, that at any given time christian existence 'incarnates' itself in particular doctrines, intellectual statements, dogmas.

Who then is a christian, if the name cannot be given any particular doctrinal content? To go back to a purely ontic, karmic or metaphysical reality totally independent of our consciousness will not do either. To say, for instance that every baptized person is a christian -- like anyone born of a hindu father is a hindu, or any person born of a jewish mother is a jew -- i.e. to reduce christian identity to a biological or material fact, even if the fact is deemed to be sacramental, is hardly convincing nowadays. To say this is not necessarily to dispute the efficacy of a sacramental act, the power of a metabiological karma, or the reality of blood relations. All these are valid issues, although perhaps debatable on other grounds. The reason such an opinion is unacceptable is, first of all, the bare fact that many undisputed christians today -- who will even quote Scripture in their favour (3) -- simply would not accept this opinion. Some may not go as far as affirming that the 'baptism of desire' is not (obviously) the desire for baptism, but rather the baptism of any authentic desire, but many christians since Peter and Paul would not stifle either the work or the freedom of the Spirit by imposing some sort of christian circumcision (4). Secondly -- and most importantly from our point of



view -- once we have become aware of the problem, i.e. once we raise the very question of christian identity, a merely physical or flatly unproblematic answer will not suffice. If we are to say, continuing our example, that a christian is a baptized person, then in order to accept this answer we are obliged to interpret it. But in this very interpretation, the ontic fact becomes ~~an~~ ontological ~~fact~~ and thus subject to a variety of interpretations. In other words, once we ask about christian identity, this identity can no longer remain a mere fact of which the subject is unaware. Even if this were 'the' answer, consciousness of it has already crept into the supposedly bare fact -- for those who support this thesis and superimpose it on the others. Stretching -- even straining -- the meaning of words, we may speak of the identity of a stone, meaning by this its singularity, which may be determined irrespective of however the stone might (~~per~~ impossible) identify itself. 'Per impossible' because if there were the slightest possibility that the stone could identify itself, then it would be *illegitimate* to ignore that self-identification. ~~But~~ We cannot reduce human identity to such a merely objectifiable characteristic; the stone has singularity but not individuality, specificity but not identity. Identity here implies the individuality of that particular person who recognizes herself for what she believes to be (1).

If we take pluralism seriously, we are obliged to look for a possible answer not in 'objective' -- objectifiable -- facts but in the human self-understanding of a particular problem, that is, ultimately in the field of human consciousness itself. This is, on the other hand, no excuse to succumb to merely subjectivistic notions of truth <sup>and</sup> / reality. True pluralism is neither the one nor the other. Here then is the locus of my thesis, which we shall now have to examine.

(1) Cf. R. PANIKKAR, "Singularity and Individuality. The Double Principle of Individuation", Revue Internationale de Philosophie, 111/112 (1975), fasc. 1-2.

#### IV. Analysis of the Thesis

The two parts of our thesis mutually condition one another and are, properly speaking, not separable. I could hardly declare myself a christian if there were no community to make sense of my declaration. And, vice-versa, no sociological group could have any meaningful idea of what a christian might be if there were nobody declaring him or herself to be such. For the sake of analysis, however, we shall have to treat one aspect at a time.

##### a) The Christian Confession

Christian identity is a personal category. It is not primarily a tag applied to an idea, a culture, or anything else, but to a person. If the designation is applied to other things, this is done analogously, and subsequently, to the christian identity of a person. My thesis affirms that a christian is a person who confesses to being one and is recognized as such by a community.

We may leave aside, for irenic reasons, the issue of an anonymous christianity, because this depends utterly upon whether we understand by christianity an ontological, metahistorical fact or a historico-religious fact (1). I would submit that the category of anonymous christian cannot properly or meaningfully be applied to the problem of christian identity (2). Christian identity is not only a personal category, it is also a conscious one. Even in the case of the little children. It is the vow of the god-parents that is supposed to stand to for the community's guarantee of the infant's implied intention. It is the free confession of Christ, in whatever sense I may interpret it, that it is necessary for me to call myself -- and to be called -- a christian. The entire history of christianity would fall apart if the christian confession were not necessary to christian identity. Not only would martyrs and confessors, heretics and schismatics, persecutors and persecuted become meaningless, but the entire

(1) Cf. K. RAHNER, "Die anonymen Christen" in Schriften zur Theologie, Einsiedlen (Benziger) 1965, Vol. VI, pp. 545-554. The first time, to my knowledge, that Rahner spoke about it was in a Conference in 1961 (Cf. Schriften zur Theologie, 1962, Vol. V, pp. 136-158, especially 155 sq.). I made to him publicly at that time in substance the same remarks I am making here. Cf. also Rahner, "Atheismus und implizites Christentum", Schriften zur Theologie, 1967, Vol. VIII, pp. 187-212.

(2) Cf. as an example quoting only a single paragraph: "Unter diesen Voraussetzungen wird also der Christ von morgen die Kirche sehen und erfahren. Nicht als das Seltene und nur mühsam sich Behauptende, nicht als eines der vielen 'Sekten' in die die Menschheit aufgespalten ist, nicht als eines der vielen Momente einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft und eines pluralistischen Geisteslebens der Menschheit, sondern als die Greifbarkeit des innerlich schon Verbindenden, als die geschichtliche Verfasstheit des Allgemeinen und (trotz aller freien Gesetztheit durch Gott, aber eben durch Gott und nicht/ durch ein partikulares endliches Seiendes!) eigentlich Selbstverständlichen, als die reine Darstellung des von Gott geplanten Wesens des Menschen (des 'historischen' Wesens des Menschen, zu dem die übernatürliche Berufung gehört), als das Sakrament einer Gnade, die, gerade weil sie allen angeboten wird, auch dort, wo das Sakrament noch nicht gegeben ist, zu ihrer sakramentaler Geschichtlichkeit drängt, aber gerade so niemals einfach identisch ist mit dem wirksamen Zeichen ihrer selbst, sondern gerade durch das Zeichen, das sie gegenwärtig setzt und durch das sie gegenwärtig <sup>§</sup>gesetzt wird (beides ist auszusagen), verheißt, das sie überall mächtig ist." K. RAHNER, Schriften zur Theologie, VI, Einsiedlen (Benziger) 1965, pp. 487-488.

christian fact would be reduced to an amorphous and confused tangle caused by certain historical groups over the past twenty centuries.

I have inserted the word 'sincere' into the thesis for obvious reasons. I am assuming that there is no conscious fraud, no intention to lie, but rather the expression of one's deepest and most intimate conviction. I assume that if I confess myself to be a christian, I believe myself to be one. I assume further that we have to do here with a normal human being, so that I am excluding the extreme possibility that I might sincerely declare myself the king of El Dorado and be hailed as such by some group of mad fellows.

I am well aware of the ontological understanding of the christian fact, according to which sacramental power works even on the unconscious level. From St. Augustine's dispute with the <sup>d</sup>Donatists up to Graham Greene's recent description of the inner workings of an ontologically present and psychologically unconscious grace, an entire tradition stands for the relative independence of the 'opus operantis Christi' (which is the proper theological understanding of the 'opus operatum'). I personally believe that the christian fact, like an authentic religious belief, is grafted onto the meta-historical core of the person, but all this in no way contradicts the affirmation that christian identity implies a free consciousness of it. Otherwise we have christian character, christian culture, christian grace or something similar, but personal identity presupposes the consciousness that affirms and recognizes itself for what it claims to be. Can we identify human beings only from the exterior as we identify geological strata?

'Christian identity' if it is to have any meaning qua identity, means that in our self-consciousness the name 'christian' denotes an appropriate view of our self-understanding. In other words: the affirmation of christian identity cannot be separated from the consciousness which affirms it.

The christian confession is also of capital importance in recognizing and accepting the fundamentally reciprocal character of human communication; so that the declarations and opinions of the other must be treated on a par with our own (or our group's) opinion. The dialectical approach is inapplicable here. The dialectical method is too impersonal and it assumes from the ~~an~~<sup>start</sup> and adversary position. It recognizes only the principle of non-contradiction as its final court of appeal; it purports to solve the <sup>4</sup>Solomonic dilemma by really cutting the child in two. Here the dialogical method becomes imperative. Dialogue is based on confidence in the other qua other, and not only insofar as I can understand or co-opt him or her. We trust each other in the dialogical dialogue and not only the tertium quid of our impersonal rationality. We are now entering the second part of the thesis.

b) The Community's Recognition

I can scarcely be identified as a christian if I do not recognize myself as one. This first part of the thesis is a necessary part but not the whole of the situation. My confession must find an echo in an existing human group. The word 'christian' as I use it must have meaning for others besides me. A purely private interpretation, like any private language, not only defeats its purpose, which is to communicate, but destroys its very nature, which is relational. If I were to insist on calling myself christian in a way which nobody finds acceptable, I should be able to prove that the adjective 'christian' applies also to me even though it has not so far been used to designate other recognized christians. In other words, if I were to claim the name '<sup>c</sup>Christian' in a way that seems strange to others (Cf. Paul) then I will have to convince them that my understanding is not wrong and it is at least compatible with if not implied in theirs. In order to do this, I shall have to base my arguments on certain criteria acceptable at large by my fellow-beings. Pure equivocation would serve no

purpose, for in such a case my 'christian identity' would have a meaning totally different from any other use of the word, which amounts to declaring that I am not a christian in the sense in which the word is understood by all the others.

We ought to recall here the classical discussions on the nature of christianity which seems to be normative for the question of christian identity. Here is the place to discuss the different criteria which have existed down the ages, which still exist today, and which makes it possible for one to consider oneself a christian.

Ever since Romano Guardini's epoch-making study of 'The Essence of Christianity' (1), which could be considered as a certain climax in the problematic set in motion by Harack (2) at the very beginning of this century, the perennial search for self-understanding has been situated not on the doctrinal level, but on the existential. The 'person' of Jesus Christ (and not his teachings or any other idea) is the center of christianity. Or, avoiding the term person, we find the symbol Christ at the very center of christian identity (3). Hans Kung's recent book is nothing but a study of modern Man's criteria for 'being christian' along these lines, and the very success of the book demonstrates the vitality of the issue (4).

What we find following this line of research is the effort by thinkers and theologians to reformulate what they consider a christian to be, employing all the hermeneutical tools at their disposal at the given moment, in the given cultural setting. Today's answers must be clearly discerned and evaluated on their own merits. This is what we should expect from a present day theological institution. As for myself, instead of elaborating a hypothesis for the hic et nunc, I attempt a genuine 'fundamental-theological' consideration (5).

(1)

(2)

(3) Cf. my essay (1976)

(4) Christ Sein, Munchen/Zurich (Piper), 1974, passim and especially pp. 531 sq. Cf. the english translation

(5) Cf. my understanding of 'Fundamental Theology' as

I am not going to discuss the contemporary opinions on the matter. Valid and convincing as these may be, they are answers and -- legitimately -- christian answers within the cultural and religious field of the western plurality of views. But there yet remain christians who belong to other cultural and religious matrices, and a complete answer to the question will have to be rethought over against this more universal and global context of religious and cultural pluralism.

By way of example, let us recall two historical cases: Keshub Chunder Sen, the great leader of the Brahma Samaj as an exponent of the bengali renaissance of the last century had written movingly about Christ and a man like Max Muller could assure him that there was nothing non-christian in the movement so that he even encouraged Sen's successor Protap Chunder Mozoomdar to declare the entire Samaj as <sup>C</sup>Christian without caring for affiliation to any established christian church (1). Yet "Why is it that, though I do not take the name of Christian, I still persevere in offering my hearty thanksgiving to Jesus Christ?" asked Sen in 1875. "A wholesale acceptance of the Christian name by the Brahma Samaj -- wrote Mozoomdar to Muller -- is neither possible nor desirable, within measurable time; (...)"

They 'were' christians for Max Muller, ~~for~~ and in a way for some ~~at least of themselves~~. Yet the spirit of the times made it impossible for both the confession of being a christian and the acceptance as such by the consciousness of the world less than a hundred years ago. None of the parties were <sup>ready</sup> / for it. It would have been a mere *lie* and not a genuine name, a real word. Neither the confession nor the acceptance is left to the whims of somebody. They would not have been accepted; they could not make such a claim (of being <sup>C</sup>Christians).

It is just this which has led me to formulate this thesis, and it is with this pluralism (<sup>C</sup>Christian and cultural) in

(1) Cf. for a brief summary of the correspondence and the problem,  
Nirad C. Chaudury, Extraordinary. Delhi (Orient Paperbacks), 1974,  
pp. 330, sq.

(2)

mind that I should like to add the two following chapters.

#### V. Philosophical Reflections

Let us imagine that a certain christian group or individual has the criterion m for judging who is a christian, and another group or individual has the criterion n, and similarly o, q and p are other such criteria held by different groups. A criterion of criteria is not ascertainable if there are mutual contradictions among the particular criteria. In other words, if m, n, o, q and p are mutually incompatible, there can be no common denominator. We could still think of a purely formal common denominator z, and say, for instance, that the criterion underlying all criteria is the bare reference of one kind or another to Christ as the central ~~symbol~~<sup>word</sup>, without ever specifying what that ~~symbol~~<sup>word</sup> means of how its centrality is envisaged. But that z would satisfy nobody, and such a criterion would be no criterion at all. In so many words, z is not a criterion for being a christian because unlike m, n, etc. it has no content of its own, nor is it recognized as a sufficient criterion by anybody. We do not even know where the limits of such a criterion would lie. In fact, z could be common not only to m, n, etc. but also to other groups which do not even claim to be christian. Hence it is not a criterion.

It may clarify the issue a little if instead of casting about for criteria, we try to understand what identity might possibly mean.

#### a) The Two Ways to Think Identity

As I have ~~elaborated~~<sup>elaborated</sup> elsewhere, the identity of a thing can be determined in two different ways according to the bent of one's thinking (1). If we apply a kind of thinking based on the primacy of the principle of non-contradiction, we shall reach the notion of the identity of an object by defining the differences between that particular thing and the

(1) Cf. my book Le mystère du culte dans l'hindouisme et le christianisme.  
Paris (Les Éditions du Cerf) 1970., especially pp.37 sq.

rest of the world (1). Entity a is the more what it is the more it is not non-a. This is the active mode of defining identity (2). Here identity leads to, and is reached through, differentiation (3). Christian identity will accordingly be seen in terms of its specific difference over against a generalized 'non-christian' identity. Every attempt at defining christian identity will be geared to discovering those features which are different, separate, and allegedly 'unique' in the christian tradition or in the christian self-understanding. Christian mysticism will thus be labeled 'supernatural' in contradistinction to 'natural' mysticisms, christian grace unique, only christians will possess the fullness of revelation, and so forth. Nowadays, when the 'supernatural' is in crisis and the humanum (as a more qualified successor to the waning 'humanisms' (4) takes precedence, christian identity will strive to distinguish itself from any and all other ways to understand the human and attain full humanity (5). And since we are today also under the sway of the democratic-egalitarian myth, the point will be in finding something specifically christian which need not necessarily offend others by calling itself better or superior. It will only be 'distinctive'. Typical of this enterprise are the present-day theological reflections which try to sort out christian identity in the field of world religions (6). If an 'Absolutheitsanspruch' cannot be defended, where does christian identity lie? (7) What kind of uniqueness?

If the difference is not one of exclusivity or superiority, it has to be a historical difference (8). The Western christian myth of history provides the horizon for almost all the answers focused along this line of thought. The christian belongs to a particular historical period, with all this implies: historical mission, historical consciousness, historical identity. Jesus Christ becomes then fundamentally a historical symbol (9).

(1)

(2) Cf. S. A. Nevins, "Mystical Consciousness and the Problem of Personal Identity", Philosophy Today, XX, 2/4 (Summer 1976), pp. 149-156 elaborating on A. Deikman's "Bimodal Consciousness: the 'active mode' and the 'receptive mode'".

(3)

(4) Cf. my chapter "La superación del humanismo" in my work Humanismo y Cruz, Madrid (Rialp) 1963, pp. 178-253 especially.

(5) Cf. H. KUNG, op. cit., pp. 520 sq. for a careful dialectic between "Menschsein" and "Christsein".

(6) Cf. as a recent example: B.A. Sizemore, Jr., "Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World", Journal of Ecumenical Studies, XIII, 3 (Summer 1976), pp. 405-419. D. G. Dawe and J. B. Carman (eds.) Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World, Maryknoll, N.Y. (Orbis) 1978.

(7) I have collected a list of 50 pages of recent bibliography dealing with this question.

(8) Cf. CHETTIMATHAM,  
Jeevadhara, 65

(9) Insist on the importance of this (Nolan)

Basically different is the way of thinking which relies on the principle of identity to identify an entity. In this case a is the more a (the identity is the more perfect) the more it is a. Linguistic analysis will take exception to speaking of 'more' identical, but linguistic analysis is also familiar with the logical paradox that if we do not recognize degrees of identity, any analysis is either contradictory or banal. If the analysandum is identical to the analysans there is no new information conveyed, no gain in knowledge, and thus the analysis is banal. But if they are not identical, the analysis is false, for then the analysans would not express the analysandum. All this has led me on other occasions to speak of ontological principles as qualified tautologies.

In any event, identity in this view is not based on difference but on unity. Thus christian identity does not need to be seen in contrast with non-christian identity, though it is ~~the~~ absurd to speak of a <sup>n</sup>Non-christian identity. The identity of the non-christian lies not in his not being <sup>c</sup>Christian but in his being something else. A christian can be christian without having to distinguish him or herself from non-christians simply because the core of his or her identity does not lie in any external criterion. To the contrary, it lies in the internal consciousness of one's own being, which is not threatened by communion or even 'fusion' with 'others' (1).

This being the case, the question of christian identity cannot be appropriately approached on the merely doctrinal level, which would imprison it within one particular mode of thinking or one particular culture. We have to look for something more basic than doctrinal differences, important and inescapable as these are, given a particular field of intelligibility.

(1) I could personally feel the difficulty of such an approach when over twenty five years ago, I would express my identity as both a christian and a hindu without eclectic or syncretistic confusion.

b) The Non-Objectifiable Nature of Self-Identity

Christian identity, I have been saying, cannot be segregated from christian self-identity, i.e. from the self-identity of the christian. To do otherwise would imply that some of us -- our group -- takes upon itself the prerogative of defining and deciding for everyone who is a christian or what <sup>c</sup>Christian means. Even this would not obviate the difficulty, for in order that our 'magisterial' dictum be intelligible to others, it would have to pass through the others' understanding and interpretation of it (1). This is but one special case of a more general problematic affecting all human self-affirmations, and bound up precisely with pluralism. In order to be brief I shall restrict myself to our example.

If I affirm 'this is a stone', you may not agree because you may not see it as a stone, but we can easily reach agreement by appealing to the (qualified and critically checked) testimony of our senses. One thing, however, is clear about our discussion: at no point has the stone anything to say for itself. The affirmation 'This is a christian', by contrast, does not allow the same ultimate recourse to such independent critical empiric because the self-understanding of the one 'who is a christian' belongs constitutively to the problem. I say 'independent' because asking the person in question could also constitute 'empirical' evidence. The judgement about who is a christian does not depend only on our examination of some objectifiable 'thing', as is the case with the stone, it depends as well on the one who is being examined. And the examination of a conscious being entails also asking what and how it examines itself.

We may agree that the word has meaning, even that it has for both of us the same referent, yet this is patently not enough. Let us assume that according to my understanding 'you' are not a christian because, say, you do not believe in the basic trinitarian structure of the <sup>n</sup>Nicean creed, while according to you this belief is not at all necessary

(1) Cf. my study on "Le sujet de l'infailibilité. Solipsisme et vérification", in L'infailibilité, son aspect philosophique et théologique. Proceedings of the Colloquium organized by Istituto di Filosofia, edited by E. Castelli. Paris (Aubier) 1970, pp. 121-134, where I have tried to prove that human statements have meaning in closed systems only; otherwise they can neither be proved nor can we have any certainty that they are understood in the sense in which they are meant.

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to a christian and you claim for yourself the right to affirm that a christian is simply one for whom the symbol Christ has a life-transforming power. We may go on ad nauseam debating where to draw the dividing line, but there is no real contradiction in drawing it at one place instead of another, nor is there any superior reason -- if you and I do not accept it -- that could decide the question for us. In short, when a human reality is in question, the self-understanding of the object of inquiry belongs to the very nature of whatever is to be understood. I have to treat you as a source of self-understanding, and with the same respect I accord myself, even if I can neither agree with you nor understand why you take the stand you take. This is the case with pluralism, as I have pointed out earlier. The acceptance of the other's opinion (as issuing from <sup>another</sup> a source of understanding) which is not only irreducible to but incompatible with my own.

In overcondensed philosophical parlance: my self-understanding belongs to me as me and not only as mine -- so that in order to understand me, you have somehow to grasp my self-understanding.

I cannot bypass this first step of respecting and accepting what I can neither understand nor agree upon. To do so I have to make the assumption that you are an independent source of intelligibility and intelligence, as I am, and thus that you are equally entitled to your opinion, although I may find it wrong and try to convince you of your 'error' -- or even fight you as 'evil'. But meanwhile we shall have to trust in something other than and greater than our personal insights -- greater even than the faint hope that I may one day convince you, for such an expectation may easily prove to be in vain, but true pluralistic tolerance would still endure between us (1). My point here is that to rely only in my own criterion for deciding such an issue implies an abuse of power unwarranted by the nature of the problem itself. For centuries christian identity has been a political

(1) Cf. R. PANIKKAR, "The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel - A Meditation on Non-Violence", Cross Currents Vol. XXIX, Nr. 2 (Summer 1979) "Panikkar in Santa Barbara", pp. 197-230. [ Volume dedicated to the Symposium in honor of Raimundo Panikkar ]

problem. Tolerance is not just a lesser evil, but a mystical virtue (1). The problems loom large. Why the modern <sup>w</sup>West is more inclined to tolerate 'error' than 'evil'? (2).

What we are bound to do is to pursue our search and our common quest as far as possible. The question is constitutively open. Although we two may reach some conclusion for 'the time being', as long as 'being' is in 'time', the problem cannot be considered closed -- a third opinion might well shatter all our past agreements.

It is also this reflection which leads me to formulate the question of identity in terms of function and not of content.

## VI. Theological Considerations

### a) The Categorical and the Transcendental Christian Identity

<sup>c</sup>Christian thought has since its inception approached christian affirmations or, traditionally speaking, christian revelation, in two divergent moods: the one focuses on the cognitive meaning or the intellectual content of the affirmation, and the other concentrates on its referent, its intentionality<sup>li</sup> or intentional function (3). The first is a theoretical or doctrinal mood; the second a pastoral or practical mood. The former is proper to councils and schools, the latter to the parish and ordinary life, to life 'tout court'. The first is sensitive to the essence of truth, the second to its existence (4).

To say that the word 'christian' has many meanings (according to different groups) but only one referent does not resolve the question but only shifts it. Who then is this referent to which people refer with different meanings? If what a christian is seems polysemous, who

(1) Cf. my essay "Pluralismus, Toleranz und Christenheit" in Pluralismus, Toleranz und Christenheit, Nürnberg, Abenländische Akademie (1961), pp. 117-142. (Revised as a chapter of my book Die vielen Götter und der eine Herr, Weilheim (O.W. Barth), 1963.

(2)

(3) I use a generic language on purpose so as not to tie this reflection to particular hypothesis like 'intentionalitas', 'fondo y forma'. 'Sinn und Bedeutung', etc.

(4) This tension is especially visible nowadays between the 'Basic Communities' in Latin America and elsewhere and the more theoretical approach seen from a Chancery or the Vatican -- in the Roman Catholic Context.

a christian is must remain an unanswered question as long as we take a solely doctrinal approach to it.

We may call the two moods the categorical and the transcendental. We shall describe them briefly.

### 1. Categorical Identity

I may, again for the sake of brevity and clarity, be allowed to revert to sociological rather than to theological experience. We all know many christians who have decided to cease calling themselves christian because they do not agree with either the doctrines or the praxis of certain christian groups. They considered their own identity incompatible with such teachings or practices and made it 'a question of conscience' to clear out from such company. They believed that christian tenets were supposed to embody the truth. Once they discovered that they could no longer accept these tenets, they felt duty-bound, out of loyalty, honesty and truthfulness to themselves and others, to take their leave of the christian community in one way or another. The gamut of reasons is immense, from ceasing to believe in the Trinity to disagreement over the economics or politics of the Vatican, from marxist leanings to disgust over the birth-control interdict, etc.

To be sure, many of the rather well-known cases will claim that they disown "churchianity" but not 'christianity', 'roman-catholicism' or 'greek-orthodoxy' and the like, but not 'true christianity'. They would shed the denominational or ecclesial element of the christian fact. The problem would then amount to a particular case of christian identity.

In this first case christian identity is supposedly detectable sociologically and historically. A christian is somebody

appertaining to a particular and univocally recognizable group of people. The problem of identity seen from the outside, would then lie in the membership, which is an empirically recognizable fact. But what of the <sup>c</sup>Christian identity of each individual member? Would that not depend on the interpretation each one gives or the understanding each one has, of the denominational tenets?

The interpretations could be many and that would lead one to ask the legitimate question whether there might possibly be a connection between them. This is linked with the much-vexed question concerning the evolution of christian doctrine.

Now, within the categorical framework the problem is not solved by reverting to the evolution of christian self-understanding, for this evolution is detectable only a posteriori. This is to say that at any given time we cannot foresee, much less predict, what evolutionary path christian self-consciousness is going to take. We may, certainly pay attention to the signs of the times and (perhaps sociologically) predict a few trends of thought, but only because the seeds of these future tendencies are already stirring in our present situation. We can envision what american christians are going to say, or what stand they are going to take in the coming decade, but we cannot possibly yet know what impact african christians may one day have on the entire christian self-understanding or whether hindu-christians are going to succeed in breaking the semitic and Old Testament paradigm within the christian community itself. The point I am making is that no Laplacean spirit or theoretically perfect computer can ever predict the dynamism of the human spirit in its quest forward. By the same token, no one can have an exhaustive understanding of christian identity.

We are dealing here with the christian fact as a case in point of an issue that is central with regard to the very nature of reality itself: the problem of what 'in fact' a fact is. Facts are not merely actualization of (aristotelian) potentialities. They are, first of all, events.

They present a radical novelty in no way foreseeable or even thinkable (as *actual* possibilities) for human consciousness at any given point in time and space. To stay with recognized christian 'facts': What a Paul, a Constantine, a Palamas, a Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Luther or John XXIII have made possible in christian consciousness results not from the mere unfolding of possibilities already latent, but rather these 'facts' presented themselves as radical novelties in <sup>the</sup> time. They were events before they became 'facts'. Only a posteriori can it be seen that they maintain a certain continuity with previous christian self-interpretations. This continuity, as our thesis coherently affirms, is only a historical continuity, an existential succession, but neither a logical nor necessarily rational one. The Spirit blows where and how it will; its ways are not our ways.

In other words, if even the most elementary movements of matter itself show a radical indeterminacy, I am assuming that the movement of the Spirit will never be quite reducible to rational laws. The expansion of the real universe is more than just an unfolding from a given point -- material, logical, or spiritual; the radical novelty of creation does not belong only to the past. Christian identity can no more be fixed or guaranteed immutability once and for all than anything else in our relative universe.

Categorical identity goes as far as it goes; and it serves a purpose as long as nobody challenges the given and accepted notion: A christian is one who believes in the nicean creed, or in the <sup>a</sup> Augsburgian confession, the divinity of Christ, or the like. But the christian identity crisis arises the moment that the particular myth is for one reason or another no longer accepted -- or found acceptable.

## 2. Transcendental Identity

In the second case, we have the conviction of a transcendental identity, that is, the constant awareness that any categorical formulation is nothing but a crystallization of an ever elusive and never exhaustive manifestation of a reality which transcends every human attempt to pinpoint it.

This other mood reacts to conflict in exactly the opposite manner. ~~The following~~ It clings to christian identity because what is primary ~~is~~ is not some theoretical content or any contingent practical attitude, but rather the trust that the whole truth is expressed in christian tenets and not that christian tenets are true, so that if truth proves to be elsewhere then, by definition, the christian tenets will be there. The oldest formulation of this attitude may be that of St. Justin in the second century when he affirms that "whatever sublime things have been said by anyone belong to christians" (1), probably echoing the words of Paul: "everything is yours" (2). We find the same mood in St. Ambrose of Milán, quoted and endorsed by Thomas Aquinas when he affirms that whatever truth is ever uttered comes from the Holy Spirit (3).

Modern writers will sympathize, of course, with the apparent broader idea of standing for truth, wherever it may be (4). But the problem is not to be so easily solved, for two reasons: first, no truth is totally independent of our understanding of it and thus of our formulation, so that we cannot really disentangle the one from the other. Secondly, if every truth is a christian truth, i.e. if the adjective 'christian' really is no adjective because it does not add anything, then, christian identity means merely genuine human identity. I confess myself a christian because I acknowledge myself as truly human.

In this case christian identity is either devoid of any specific meaning, for it coalesces with humanness, or it can have any meaning whatsoever, without restriction, for anybody could say that his understanding of the transcendent christian reality is best expressed by

ἅσα οὖν παρὰ πάνσι καλῶς εἶρηται, ἡμῶν Χριστιανῶν<sup>23a</sup> ἐστίν.

(1) ("Quaecumque igitur apud omnes praeclare dicta sunt, nostra christianorum sunt") Apologia, II, 13 (P.G. 6, 465)

(2) I Cor., III, 22.

(3) "Amamos a España porque no nos gusta" (We love Spain because we do not like it). It was a famous slogan of José-Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the spanish Falange during the thirties and is a better example than the too often quoted "My country, right or wrong, but my country!"

(4) Cf. David Tracy's recent statement of "the truth that Christianity taught", namely, "that one's fundamental Christian and human commitment is to the value of truth wherever it may lead and to that limit transformation of all values signalized by the Christian demand for agapic love", Blessed Rage for Order, op. cit., p. 135.

his particular formulation. If there is truth in buddhism, the buddhists are thus bound to be anonymous christians.

In either case, the remedy seems worse than the malady, since it creates more problems than it solves. Our thesis, on the contrary, says that christian identity is neither fixed once and for all, nor left to the private interpretation of the individual. Christian identity consists rather in the dialogical interaction between a sincere confession and a collective recognition, according to criteria considered valid at each particular juncture. It then falls to the thinker to seek an underlying intelligibility in the series of statements affirming christian identity, and my suspicion is that there is no other one than existential continuity which I would like to call apostolic succession, *or historical consistency.*

#### b) The Nature of Christian Identity

With all the provisos deriving from the foregoing, we should be able to formulate a relatively satisfactory answer to this question for our time and place. This is what I would still to attempt, by combining the categorical with the transcendental interpretations of christian identity.

Unless we are to fall to mere semantics a christian, according to an understanding which would encompass every self declared christian today, is a person who meaningfully (for herself and her community) confesses herself to be such. This confession and recognition may, I assume, hic et nunc take approximately the following form:

A christian is someone for whom the Christ symbol discloses or illumines or in one way or another touches the central mystery of his or her existence. A christian believes that the Christ symbol -- with all the polysemy and polymorphy proper to a symbol, as distinct from a concept -- reveals or expresses or manifests something appertaining to the very core of the real in general, and of his or her existence in particular. Of this

belief the christians find an echo and confirmation in a community. Individual christians and <sup>c</sup>Christian community imply each other. The individual's confession presupposes an understanding of what a <sup>c</sup>Christian is. The individual perceives 'what is <sup>c</sup>Christian' in a community. What he perceives is not doctrine but a life, a practice, liturgical or communitary. The community is the keeper of the symbols and gestures which give meaning to the name christian. It is not doctrinal accuracy but the individual's adhesion to the life and symbols of the community which constitutes his or her christian identity. Today, when there are not only many communities but their number keeps increasing and when the very idea of a universally valid and necessary doctrinal content has become problematic, this traditional truth, that the <sup>c</sup>Christian's identity depends on his or her witness, marturia, acquires greater clarity and relevance.

The assumption I am making is that the nature of being a christian is not verifiable as a physical reality, but only knowable as a human fact. In other terms, as <sup>c</sup>Indian logicians have known since ancient times, fool's gold is an illusion precisely because it is not gold; it only appears to be gold. But there are objective means to assay the worth of true gold. Just so, in assaying christian identity we cannot bypass the testimony of the alleged christian himself.

History past and present shows us that some christian groups will not recognize as christian other individuals or communities. We are not referring to the concepts of heresy, apostasy or schism, which are venerable and traditional as we have already noted. The issue here is whether the fact that different communities hold to different criteria contradicts our thesis or, on the contrary, illumines it from an unsuspected angle.

If we have different groups proclaiming certain minimal conditions for being a christian and thus if we find several human units considered 'christian' according to one criterion

and 'non-christians' according to another, this means that unless we share the opinion of one of the parties, our thesis only uses the word christian as it is in fact used, namely to denote different understandings of what is christian, <sup>or</sup> who may be called a christian. From a phenomenological point of view we may be in a quandary when we try to ascertain the noema proper to being a christian. We may not find it unless we introduce the concept of pistema, the belief of the believer as part and parcel of the phenomenon itself (1). But from a descriptive point of view, it may be that our thesis alone offers any basis for a meaningful use of the word christian, even if there are many ways to understand it.

But there is still more to this apparent proliferation of meanings for one and the same symbol. It shows the continuing vitality of the symbol and betrays something about its very nature, namely that it is an important symbol which cannot easily be discarded since so many different groups claim to have the correct understanding of it, instead of just giving it up and using another name if need be. This makes obvious the power of the symbol itself and suggests that christian identity is not the same as belonging to some arbitrary social group, like membership in a club. Why such a coveted symbol? Why do people with such divergent opinions insist on their right to use this name?

Is a merely cultural answer enough? Why are christians the anti-liberals of one era, and the liberals of the next? Why do some marxists nowadays want to be christian or, for that matter some christians (who do not wish to cease being christian) want to be marxists or atheists or the like? What kind of dynamism is detectable here? Christian identity in a time of pluralism seems to reveal another, hidden, facet of the problem. It seems to illumine a peculiar aspect of reality -- call it a need

(1) Cf. my "The Internal Dialogue. The Insufficiency of the so-called Phenomenological 'Epoché' in the Religious Encounter", Religion and Society, Vol. IV, Nr. 3, Bangalore (1968), pp. 55-66. Revised as a chapter of my book, The Intra-Religious Dialogue, New York (Paulist Press) 1978, pp. 39-52.

of the human being, a feature of human history, or a moment in the divine economy: that need of continuity, of rootedness for Man, which is not merely cultural or biological or ethnic, but uniquely religious.

To conclude, let me make a double gloss on the motto of this paper.

Modern western culture by and large, christian philosophers and theologians being no exception, has almost panic to lose one's own singularity. The fear for <sup>P</sup>antheism, 'oriental' confusion, intellectual chaos and ultimately of individual death are very heterogeneous names for a rather homogeneous attitude -- right as the <sup>w</sup>West is in shunning the negative connotations of all those words (1). The will to preserve identity is also tied with the will to power and the concern for both certainty on the intellectual level and security on the political sphere.

No wonder that the words of Christ of losing one's own life have always been interpreted cum grano salis: an oriental exaggeration, obviously!

This would be my gloss: to take more seriously and more literally that our life is not our private property, that our main task is not to be concern<sup>ed</sup> with ourselves (2), and, on the contrary, to be carefree (3) and without worries (4), not only regarding how we shall eat and clothe ourselves (5), but also concerning our own identity (6). I would, paradoxically, submit, that the only christian identity is the discovery of the existential christian contradiction of such as identity. "Why do you call me good? Only One is good!" (7). why to worry about christian identity? Only letting it go <sup>it</sup> ~~we~~ may be bestowed upon us.

(1) Cf. R. PANIKKAR, "L'eau et la mort. Réflexion interculturelle sur une métaphore" in Filosofia e Religione di fronte alla Morte. (Edited by Marco Olivetti). Padova (CELAM), 1981, pp. 481-502, for a cross-cultural analysis of the problem of losing one's<sub>own</sub> existence at the time of death.

(2) Cf. Matth. VI, 19-34

(3) Cf. I Cor. VII, 32.

(4) Cf. Matth. VI, 25.

(5)

(6)

(7) Cf. Matth. XIX, 17.