The Word in the World

Sandra Marie Schneiders
Jesuit School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union, sschneiders@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/jst
Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Good afternoon. I am honored to be part of this justly famous lecture series about which I have heard glowing praise for years. My thanks to Jim Bacik, Rick Gaillardetz, and the community here at Corpus Christi for inviting me, and to all of you for coming.

Introduction

The topic on which I am inviting all of us to reflect this evening, “The Word in the World,” especially as a way of talking about what it means for Christians to be disciples of Jesus in our contemporary situation, suffers from a double ambiguity, namely that of both of the nouns in the title. Does “Word” refer to the second person of the Trinity, the Word who entered our world incarnate in Jesus Christ, or to the Gospel as the word of God which Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach in his name to the whole creation? And does “world” refer to the enemy Jesus spoke of as the world which will persecute his disciples as it has persecuted him (Jn. 15:20) or to the world which God so loved as to give the only Son (Jn. 3:16)? I want to begin, then, by asking what is the world to which we are commissioned to bear the Word and what is the Word that is to be addressed to this world? The first question is the most difficult to answer; the second is the most difficult to live.

World

Not surprisingly, there is actually a great deal of material in the New Testament on the subject of “world.” Jesus, after all, is the Word of God who came into the world and at the end of
his earthly career, when he departed from this world, he missioned his disciples to go into the whole world to proclaim the Gospel to every creature.

But before examining what the New Testament says about “world,” I want to suggest that part of the problem of the Word in the world is that the New Testament understanding of “world” has not been particularly influential, or even functional, throughout most of the Church’s history of dealing with the world. Rather, it seems that the meaning of the term “world” has fluctuated depending on how the Christian community in any given period of history was experiencing itself in its historical, that is, its socio-cultural, economic, and religious context. Substantiating this thesis in detail would require an examination of the whole of Church history. So, I will restrict myself to a period in which most of us, if we are over 50, participated, at least briefly, namely, the period from the Reformation up to the eve of the second Vatican Council, the period from 1500 to 1950 which is usually called “the modern period.”

The historical process that would eventually end the medieval Church’s reign over most of the then-known world, namely, the Protestant Reformation, was well under way before the end of the Middle Ages. By the beginning of the Reformation the Church had already lost half of its religious empire in the east-west schism which began well before its conventional date of 1054. In the 1400s the eventually worldwide cultural tsunami later called the Renaissance began to undermine the unquestioned grip of the Church, in the name of faith, on the intellectual life of Europe.

The Protestant Reformation in the early 1500s definitively cracked the unifying ecclesiastical structure of western Christendom. It is ironically eloquent that the symbolic “cause” of the Reformation was the commodification of the infinite salvific riches of the paschal mystery for sale in small, medium, and large packets called “indulgences.” Although hardly the most serious theological or moral problem of the late medieval Church, few symbols speak so clearly of the Church’s secularization as its marketing of its spiritual goods. Medieval
“Christendom” was the apotheosis of the assimilation of the Church to the secular order which had begun in the fourth century under Constantine.

I hasten to add the obviously necessary disclaimer. The thousand years of the Church’s history that we call the Middle Ages was anything but a steady decline of faith and morals. The medieval Church produced glories of Christian art, music, architecture, and drama as well as the most powerful theological synthesis ever written, that of Aquinas, schools of spirituality which are still nourishing the Church’s faith life, and Religious Orders which re-civilized the Continent after the fall of the Roman Empire and carried the Gospel to every corner of the then-known world. There is good reason, from many points of view, to call the thirteenth the “greatest of centuries” and the Middle Ages as a whole the “Golden Age of the Church.”

My point, however, is that the meaning of “world,” as it emerged in the Middle Ages, was determined less by the Gospel material on this subject than by the relation of the institutional Church to its earthly context. Unlike the relation between the Church and its context in the first centuries after the Resurrection when it was a persecuted minority fighting for existence in the hostile world of the Roman Empire, the relation of Church to the world after the Theodosian Reform in the 5th century and throughout the medieval period was one of increasing dominance. The Church gradually subsumed its context. If it is true that we transform into ourselves what we consume, it is also true that we become what we eat. While the Church dominated the medieval world which became, at least culturally, universally Christian, the Church was also becoming profoundly secular. By the end of the Middle Ages the Church was functioning not so much in opposition to the secular order but as the dominant actor in that order. A very different era was brewing, however, as the Renaissance permeated Italy in the 1400s and spread rapidly across the continent and into the British Isles, with the Reformation hot on its heels.

The Council of Trent in the mid-1500s was the Catholic Church’s response to the Protestant Reformation which was, of course, a political as well as a spiritual movement. But the Reformation was seen by the Roman Church as primarily a challenge to its hegemony in
Europe, which was not only religious but also political, economic, cultural, social, and military. The Council of Trent, intending no doubt to reform the Church insofar as that was deemed necessary, was essentially defensive, a polemical and reactionary act of resistance to the Protestant challenge. It affirmed and clarified and in some cases created Catholic doctrine and practice in often unnecessarily extreme terms, forcefully repudiating and condemning the sometimes quite valid criticisms and innovations of the Reformers. The Church was, as it were, circling the wagons to protect itself from the challenges to its identity and authority represented by the Reformation.

Unlike the Church of the Middle Ages which was intimately entwined with the world, the Church from Trent in the mid-1500s to the First Vatican Council in the mid-1800s, became progressively insular in its relation to its surrounding European, and eventually worldwide, context. The Renaissance and the Reformation in the 15th and 16th centuries undermined the Church’s control of the intellectual spheres, both humanistic and theological. The Scientific Revolution in the 17th century inaugurated the tension between science and religion with which we are still dealing. The 18th century launched the Enlightenment in which reason undertook not only to challenge but to defeat the Church’s claim, on the basis of authority, to be the sole or even primary source and arbiter of truth. Not only was the Church, between the 1500s and the 1800s, dethroned in the religious and intellectual spheres but the two great political revolutions in the 18th century, the French and the American, called into question the very principles of political organization on which the Church’s divine right government, with its still universalist claims to sovereignty, rested.

Thus, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries the Church dug in not only in the political sphere against democracy and freedom of conscience on the one hand and against socialism and communism on the other, but also against the rapid and ongoing developments in the physical and social sciences, and against new movements in philosophy and theology. In the social sphere, it resisted the rising consciousness of women and other so-called “natural
inferiors” whose expanding expectations threatened the hierarchical aristocracy in society and Church.

To protect its faithful from what it increasingly considered the universally noxious atmosphere of the so-called modern world the Church took increasingly repressive measures. It regularly updated -- for the last time as recently as 1948 -- the Council of Trent’s Index of Forbidden Books first published in 1559. Pius IX published his “Syllabus of Errors” in 1864. Pius X in 1907 published the encyclical “Pascendi” and the apostolic constitution “Lamentabile,” listing and condemning the errors of modernism which he declared to be not just a heresy but the “synthesis of all heresies,” and in 1910 he made the “Oath Against Modernism” mandatory for all who held positions of authority in the Church.

Meanwhile, the papacy lost control of the Papal States and ceased to be a major political player in the new Italy of which it had once owned half and the Europe it had once virtually ruled. In 1870 Pius IX, dramatically and somewhat petulantly, styled himself the “prisoner of the Vatican.” The Vatican City State, a tiny land-locked bit of real estate from which the Pope now exercises the jurisdiction of the Holy See, was established in 1929. The Pope, shorn of territory and real political power, now wielded virtually exclusively moral authority, itself enforceable only among Catholics and even there no longer by temporal sanctions such as torture or death. In short, from the Protestant Reformation to the middle of the 20th century the relation between the Church and the world had become one of nearly total mutual estrangement and often bitter animosity. From being the most powerful secular agency in the world in the Middle Ages the Church was now defining itself as non-participant in the world except as a moral opponent to secular developments in almost every sphere: intellectual, political, economic, social, scientific, and religious.

The extensive self-alienation of the institutional Church from the mainstream of life in the modern world was reciprocated by the increasing secularization of western culture and was both reinforced and compensated for by the development of an extensive “parallel” institutional
and cultural world in which, as much as possible, Catholics lived separated from their dangerous non-Catholic contemporaries and the “worldly” culture in which these reprobates lived. The Catholic parish became a virtual ghetto, a world unto itself. Catholic schools, hospitals, social service agencies, and social organizations were designed to keep Catholics among their own, out of “mixed marriages” or association with “false religions” to say nothing of paganism, and, through such organs as Catholic publications and strategies such as media censorship, as much as possible untouched by the intellectual and cultural currents of the modern world. Again, it must be recognized that the Catholic Church during this modern period made significant contributions that reached well beyond its own borders. such as the development of a theory of social justice based on the rights of humans as made in the image and likeness of God that is still important in world affairs. It created educational and health care systems for the non-elites of society which not only cared for its own but stimulated the development of such systems in society at large. Catholic contributions to the world of letters and learning within the intellectually respectable, if highly restricted, framework of Thomistic philosophy and theology and the institutional context of its system of higher education remain significant.

But our interest here is in the way “the world” had come to be conceptualized and defined by the Church, namely, in social, cultural, and even geographical terms as well as religious ones. Non-Catholic denominations and people, other religious traditions, political, economic, educational, and social systems and institutions, were lumped together as “the world” or labeled “worldly.” “Secular” was at best a neutral term for something non-religious but more often a pejorative term for anything not blessed by the Church or conducive to Catholic faith. The meaning of “world” was constructed in largely objectivistic terms. It was a “something” distinct from the Church or the community of faith and “out there”: a place, a group of people, a regime, a religious institution, even an ideology or political party or the entire historical process itself. The world, over the past 500 years, has been increasingly understood as something that begins where the Church ends. And to the extent that the world has an impact on the Church it makes
the Church “worldly,” the way a noxious virus makes a person sick. I want to suggest that it is this way of conceiving of the world and of the relation of the Church to the world that is at least partially responsible for the sense many Christians have that in 2000 years Christianity has made virtually no progress in incarnating the Word in the world, that we are still more or less where we started on the first Pentecost, confronting a stubbornly resistant and unbelieving world with a message that it cannot hear and seems quite willing and quite able to do without.

For some Christians the only response to this discouraging scenario is to wait for God’s apocalyptic intervention which will ring down the curtain on world history by obliterating the world and its non-Catholic denizens and snatching the true Church up to vindication in heaven. For others it is dejected resignation to the fact that, while we certainly must keep trying, the best we can expect is a kind of stalemate between Gospel and world which is expressed in deepening ecological degradation, ever-expanding war of all against all, monumental greed of the wealthy impoverishing more and more of the earth’s population, and ever-declining social and personal morality. The Church must try to remain a beacon of hope, believing that salvation will come from God. But when and how becomes less and less conceivable. And certainly nothing in this world can be expected to contribute to that advent.

Vatican Council Two

Against this historical background of Catholicism’s increasing isolation from the world we can appreciate that something truly amazing happened at the second Vatican Council which affected not only the Catholic Church but the whole Christian world. Pope John XXIII, with extraordinary prophetic insight, realized that the progressive alienation of the Church from the modern world was a ruinous path that was blocking the fulfillment of Christ’s commission, to go into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature (see Mk. 16:15). The Church, he declared, had to change.
The bishops who arrived in Rome in 1962 for the opening of the Council, however, came intending to change, or at least update, the Church from within -- its liturgy, ecclesiastical organization, clerical formation, discipline, and so on -- not with the idea that they were going to change the relationship of the Church to the world. However, the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” entitled Gaudium et Spes, the last conciliar document to be promulgated, the first conciliar document ever addressed not solely to the Catholic Church but to all humanity, a document not foreseen or prepared for before the Council but born in the Pentecostal energy on the Council floor, passed overwhelmingly by over 2300 bishops, and greeted enthusiastically by non-Catholics worldwide, may turn out to be the most important achievement of the Council.

Gaudium et Spes represented, in a sense, a 180 degree turn in the relation of the Church to the world. It declared the Church’s solidarity with the very world that it had rejected for four hundred years. It affirmed the legitimate autonomy of the secular order on which it had sat in negative judgment since the dawn of modernity and declared that the Church desired not only to abandon its isolation from, condemnation of, and animosity toward the modern world but indeed that it saw itself intimately involved in the concerns and destiny of the world. In its now famous prologue it recognized that the Church and the world were not two separate realities in endless contention but one reality struggling forward in history under the salvific energy of the Spirit of God:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time...are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ....Nothing that is genuinely human fails to

------------------------


2. For a masterful and fascinating story of the Council by one of the best historians of the Church of our time, see John W. O’Malley, What Happened at Vatican II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. He provides background, insight into the characters who most influenced the Council, analyses of the documents, and page-turning accounts of the struggles in the Council through which the final documents finally emerged.
find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of [people]...who, united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit, press onwards toward the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all [people]. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.3

The magnitude of this reversal of position on the character of the world itself and the Church’s relationship to it has certainly not yet been fully appreciated by the Church at large. And a powerful restorationist element and movement in the Church at the present time would gladly declare it null and void. Nevertheless, the history of world-rejection by the Church was officially repudiated by the Council in favor of a really new stance of solidarity.

It is important to realize that this dramatic reversal was not simply a change of policy or even the adjustment of a theological position. It was a Gospel-inspired imaginative conversion, a new way of seeing, a reorientation of ecclesial being, life, and action, that had radical and profound implications for the Church.

“World” is a term like “God” or “self.” It is a limit concept, or more exactly an image, which cannot be fully articulated thematically but is constantly developing and changing, kaleidoscopically affected by virtually every experience we undergo. Just as we cannot answer comprehensively, even at any given moment, the question, “Who are you?” we cannot answer the question “What is the world?”

This is another way of saying that world is not a planet, a piece of real estate, a group or type of people, a thing, an institution, an ideology, or a program. The objectification of the world as an “it” which is “other” in relationship to the community of faith is a category mistake. “World” is not an object but an imaginative construction of reality as a whole. That image, that reality construction, includes everything in the universe of which I am actually or even

potentially aware as that totality is experienced from the standpoint of my subjectivity. I myself am part of the world, of the totality of reality of which I am subject.

In a very real sense, every person lives in her or his "own world" which is not exactly identical to that of anyone else even though our worlds overlap extensively. We express this uniqueness and totality when we say something like, "The Smiths' world disintegrated when their child was killed." It is not that some physical or material or even psychological alteration occurred that demanded new attitudes or behaviors but that reality itself had been so radically unhinged that everything in their experience has to be re-negotiated, re-interpreted, in a sense re-invented or re-created. They are, quite literally, not living in the same world that they inhabited before the death of their child. Often a relationship even as deep as a marriage cannot survive such a world-shattering event because the relationship was part of a world, a reality construction, that no longer exists.

I would suggest that part of the problem of the Word in the world today is that we have not yet fully realized that world and Church are not two separate realities. It is no more realistic to speak of the Church relating to the world as to a relatively stable "other" than to speak of relating to our self as an "other." At Vatican II, in Gaudium et Spes, the Church recognized, perhaps for the first time in its history, that the believing community is not a self-contained subject relating to an external object, the Church trying to bring salvation to an unreceptive world. Rather we are trying to comprehend ourselves as "world" and what it means for that world to become more and more fully Church. Like the realization that my "self" is not a transcendent spiritual soul inhabiting a rebellious material body but that I am an inspired body-person, the Council was proclaiming that the Church is not a good spiritual agent trying to deal with a sinful material opponent but that the world is that inspired reality, that beloved creation, which God so loved as to give the only Son that all might be saved. But just as we recognize the complexity of the self, its internal contradictions, and the lack of symmetry among its various components, so we recognize the complexity of the world which we both are, and in which we
participate. The new challenge is for the Church to understand itself as integral to the world, as in, with, and for the world and at the same time, in some sense, not “of the world” but of God.

The Meaning of “World” in the New Testament

We return now to Scripture, which the Council called the “soul of theology,”\(^4\) as the non-negotiable starting point for a renewed and genuinely theological reflection on the world. Although the New Testament itself is the source of much of the ambiguity about the meaning of the world and of the ambivalence of Christian attitudes toward it, when we attend to the New Testament data on “world” it does not support an imaginative objectification of the world as a neutral or evil “other” nor an attitude of implacable world-rejection.

The New Testament image of “world” is morally realistic, quite nuanced, and I think ultimately hopeful. But it is also complex. For resources for thinking about “world” I want to look, to an unequal extent, at three bodies of New Testament material: the Gospel of John which is a primary theological resource; the Synoptics which are a primary imaginative resource; and Paul who supplies some powerful linguistic resources for articulating the intrinsic ambivalence of the human self-understanding in relation to the world.

The Gospel of John uses the Greek word \textit{kosmos} 78 times in comparison with only 14 uses of the term in Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined and 47 occurrences in Paul’s writing. The fourth evangelist is obviously deeply concerned with this reality.

“World” in John is a highly polyvalent term. It is used with four distinct meanings running from the divine to the demonic, and since John usually does not indicate, except by context, which meaning is in play, it is all too easy to read these texts equivalently or to let one meaning control the others. This perhaps helps explain why the term “world,” which is most often, though not most importantly, used negatively in the Fourth Gospel has tended to be

understood univocally to mean evil or whatever is opposed to God, the Gospel, or the Church. And because John uses the term so much more often than any other part of the New Testament we tend to make his usage normative. But John’s Gospel does not justify a univocally negative means for “world.”

First, John uses “world” to refer to the whole of creation, e.g., in the Prologue (Jn. 1:1-18) which begins with, “In the beginning was the Word,” clearly evoking the opening verse of Genesis, “In the beginning God created….” (Gen. 1:1). And God created by speaking, “Let there be….and there was.” The Genesis creation account tells us that all things proceed from a loving Creator God who views creation as “good,” indeed “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Humans, far from being appointed dominators of creation which they are to subjugate, are to share in God’s benevolent care for creation. In the Prologue John specifies that God created all things in and through the Word which became flesh, human, in Jesus. In short, the world, which means the whole universe no matter how restricted or how expansive our notion of the universe has been, is now, or will become, is entirely good. It is related to God by creation, incarnation, and destiny and is entrusted to humanity not as an alien “it” to be used solely for our good but as that in which we participate for the good of creation as a whole which is groaning for participation in the divinization to which all are called (see Rom. 8:20-22). This fundamentally positive and all-inclusive meaning of “world” precedes and undergirds all other meanings.

Second, the world in John is the theater of human history. Jesus comes into the world as Light to save all and then departs from the world to his Father leaving his work to be carried on in this world by his disciples (see Jn. 12:46; 16:28). In his final prayer at the Last Supper Jesus is explicit, that he does not pray that God take his disciples out of the world but that God guard them from evil (Jn. 17:15) as they continue his work in the world. The world is humanity’s natural home, our only context. Just as we are not prisoners in our own body, empowered to dominate it for the good of our soul, so we are not in exile in the world. We are in this world,
indeed part of this world, as Jesus was to participate in the cosmic process and the human enterprise whose ultimate end is divinization. This world, the theater of human history, is good.

Third, and most importantly, “world” in John refers to the human race. “God so loved the world as to give the only Son so that all those believing in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). If God loves all that God has created there is no creature of whom this is more true than of humans, made in God’s own image and likeness and called to conscious and free relationship with God in time and beyond. This “world,” humanity, is not only not God’s enemy but is that for which God in Jesus gave God’s very life. Again, this meaning of the term “world” is entirely positive.

Fourth, there is a negative meaning of “world” in John. Indeed, John sometimes uses “world” as a synonym for evil. The world, Jesus says, is in the grip of a personal agent whom he calls “the devil” (8:44), “Satan” (13:27), the “prince of this world” (14:30). This agent, Jesus says, is the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning. Jesus and his disciples are not of this world and are, therefore, the object of this world’s deadly hatred and persecution (see Jn. 17:14). But this evil world, the sphere of influence of this evil agent, is already judged by Jesus and has been overcome by him through his death and resurrection (Jn. 16:33) -- not, it must be noted, by the obliteration of the physical or human world. His disciples are called to be confident in this already accomplished victory and to participate in it by their willingness to share Jesus’ own fate because of their commitment to fostering his ongoing victory over evil throughout the whole of human history.

This brief inventory of the meanings of “world” in John, three of which are positive and enduring and one negative and already bound over to destruction, leads to several conclusions. Obviously, Jesus is not speaking of four different universes or even planets, of four places, or four groups of people, or four projects. Rather, these are four “takes” on one reality. The first three are fairly easy to integrate: God’s good creation is the theater in which humans, made in God’s image and likeness and saved by Christ, live and act toward the fulfillment to which all
creation, including humanity, is being drawn by God’s Spirit. The problem arises with the fourth meaning. How does evil fit into this picture? John is not discussing physical or natural evil, hurricanes or earthquakes or even natural death, but moral evil freely chosen by humans under the influence of Satan. How are we to explain this infection of God’s good creation by evil? And how are we to act in relation to it? This is where the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are particularly helpful.

In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus’ primary mode of teaching is parables, imaginative world-subverting narratives. Jesus tells stories which seem to be (because, in fact, they are) about this world of human experience, farmers and bakers and parents and children, taxes and gifts and weddings and funerals. But once his hearers have comfortably settled into this familiar place in his narrative Jesus pulls the rug from under them by re-describing this familiar world in terms of God’s creative design which so often conflicts with the human construction of reality. In other words, the parables are imaginative reconstructions of “world” as a very unfamiliar place into which Jesus invites his hearers to enter. The hearers are challenged to imaginatively reconstruct their own reality so that they begin to live “world” differently, not as collaborators, willingly or not, in the kingdom of Satan but as children in the household Jesus calls the Reign of God.

All of the parables of the Reign of God function this way but let me concentrate on one of them, one which was so important that Jesus himself interpreted it for his disciples lest they fail to grasp the radicality of what he was saying. It is the parable of the “weeds and the wheat” in Mat. 13:24-30 which Jesus interprets allegorically in 13:36b-42. You remember the story of the owner who sowed good seed in his field. But his servants bring him word that the field is laced with weeds. They want to pull up the weeds but the owner forbids this saying that pulling up the weeds will uproot also the wheat. Rather, both must grow together till the harvest when the definitive separation will take place.

Jesus interprets the parable this way: the field is the world; the sower of the good seed is the Son of Man and the wheat are the children of God’s reign. The sower of the bad seed is the
Evil One; his crop, the weeds, are the children of the devil. The harvest is the eschaton, the close of the age; the reapers are the angels of God who will gather the weeds for the fire. But note, Jesus says that the harvesters will “collect out of his [that is, the Son of Man’s] kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers” (13:41). Clearly, it is not the world which is evil. Rather the world is the kingdom of the Son of Man. It was always God’s, at the beginning in creation, during the divine sowing of the Gospel by Jesus, while the season of growth unfolds in the history of the Church, and at the harvest at the endtime. The devil is at work, as an interloper, an evil agent, in the world but the world is never Satan’s. As Jesus says in Luke (22:53), darkness has its hour but it is not the victor. The world is God’s good creation in which the Son of Man has sown God’s good crop, the human race which God so loves.

The point of the parable is that it is not possible in the context of history to simply pull up the weeds. Good and evil are not two separate realities, two clearly distinct realms, two groups of people, or even two human projects distinct enough to allow the neat delineation and clean eradication of the negative. The absolute Church-world dichotomy is an illusion. This world is one reality, one field, in which good and evil are pervasively and intimately intertwined. Every person, every institution, every system whether intellectual, political, economic, educational or even religious, is a complex reality in which good and evil struggle for dominance. And that struggle goes on from the time of planting till the time of harvesting, throughout the whole of history. There is no place we can go, no social system we can create, no group with which we can affiliate which will once and for all put us on the side of the angels. That is the point of the baptismal dialogue: Do you renounce Satan and all his works and align yourself with Christ and the dynamics of his reign? And will you commit yourself to that program until, at death, you bring the candle of your faith, still burning brightly as you have walked through the darkness, to the judgment seat of God? Jesus went before us, into the desert of temptation where he had to discern between God’s word and the seductive and lying interpretation of that word by Satan. Jesus chose God over Satan, but Jesus did not obliterate Satan. Jesus was victorious but the war
is not over. Satan will return at “an opportune time”, again and again. The follower of Christ is not called “out of this world,” into a field for the elect where there is only wheat, or to simply pull up the weeds and be done with it. We are called to live in a world, the world which is in us as we are in it, which is always God’s and all God’s but which, until the harvest, will struggle with a kingdom-destroying power to generate evil that is somehow intrinsic to that world.

As the New Testament scholar Walter Wink has so well described in his trilogy on “The Powers” it is Paul who supplies a kind of mythological language for talking about this reality of one world in contention rather than two separate worlds at war. Paul talks about “the principalities and powers” (see Eph. 6:12) which are not to be imagined as some army of separate extra-terrestrial beings buzzing around in the atmosphere, but rather as the principles and dynamics which animate, or interfere with the animation of, the systems -- familial, social, intellectual, economic, political, educational, religious -- and so on, which are the world in operation. We experience this evil, says Wink, as the “inside” of systems, the way family spirit is the “inside” of the life of a group of relatives, or the corporate culture is the “inside” of a company or school. It is a kind of institutional or collective analogue of what we experience in ourselves that Paul talked about in Romans 7:17-23

But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me....For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Paul is not talking about something separate from himself, something foreign, something attacking him from without, but about an influence, a force, a dynamism that makes his very self a contested territory, a field of wheat being choked by weeds. He experiences not himself against the world but himself as a contested world.

In other words, the world which is God’s good creation and remains God’s is one world and we are participants in it, not strangers or adversaries outside of it. There is no way to leave the world, or defeat it, or suppress it. Rather, as Wink puts it, we must “engage the powers,” the destructive dynamics that are at work in God’s good world, including ourselves. This is the fundamental insight of all those who choose non-violent resistance as the only effective strategy for overcoming the principalities and powers without becoming one of them. It is why they are convinced that waging war to end war, killing criminals to stop crime, and so on are self-defeating approaches to the task Jesus assigned his followers, namely, to preach the Gospel to every creature. Using violence to end violence is to take up Satan’s weapons and strategies, which simply makes us part of the problem. This brings us to the more important topic namely, what is the “Word” which Christians express in and to the world?

The Word

The Fourth Gospel’s formulation of Jesus’ commission to his disciples is strikingly different from the great commission in other New Testament texts. In John, Jesus prays proleptically on the eve of his Passion, “As you [Father] have sent (ἀποστέλλω) me into the world, so I have sent (ἀποστέλλω) them into the world” (Jn. 17:18). On Easter night he says to his disciples, “As the Father has sent (ἀποστέλλω) me, so I send (πέμπω) you” (Jn. 20:21).

The commission in John is not to go into the whole world and preach (κηρύσσω) the word as it is in Mark 16:15 or Luke 24:47. It is not to teach (διδάσκω) the word as in Matthew 28:19-20. It is not even to be witnesses (μάρτυρες) to Jesus as in Acts 1:8. Jesus commissions his disciples to be in the world as he was, to be the “word in the world.” The Word of God sent into the world is not in the first instance a message. It is Jesus, the Word of God incarnate and risen, and this is the linchpin of the particular Christian take on mission. The world’s other great religious traditions emphasize other aspects and modes of salvation but the Christian tradition
has something specific, unique, indispensable, and life-giving to contribute to the human quest for meaning that offers a realistic hope that the goodness and truth of God will ultimately prevail.

As we have seen, the creation narrative in the Old Testament informs the positive New Testament theology of the Incarnation, the becoming flesh of God’s salvific Word in the world. The Resurrection, the bursting forth in Jesus, executed by the forces of evil, of the fullness of divine life and his return to his own as living and active, is the revelatory event that supplies the specifically different Christian “take” on all of salvation in history. Evil, exhausting its destructive power in its assault on the Word of God incarnate, is defeated in the Resurrection, not by a divine exercise of annihilating violence -- that is, of a violence more violent than that which killed him -- but by the power of God’s invincible love at work in the world. Death cannot finally hold, constrain, or abolish life.

Through their experience of the risen Jesus the first Christians came to believe that in him the fullness of divinity was present and manifest in their midst and fully accessible to them in his glorified humanity. One of the most striking expressions of this conviction is Thomas’s response to the risen Jesus’ invitation to touch him, “My Lord and my God” (Jn. 20:28). Jesus is, for Christians, what God is and means. This faith in the Incarnation of God in Jesus fully manifest in his Resurrection which is at the heart of Christian faith, has profound significance for the theology of world and the spirituality of world engagement. Two aspects of this significance substantively distinguish the Christian faith perspective from that of other religious traditions and are directly relevant to our present concern: Christian discipleship in the world today.

First, the mystery of the Incarnation reveals that divinity is not something exclusively transcendent, utterly different from and outside creation. Divinity is both one with us and, indeed, one of us. The Word is not in the world like some divine content in a cosmic container. The Word is in the world as the transformation of the world itself. Second, and as a consequence, our humanity, personal and corporate, divinized in Christ, is the locus, the instrument, and the focus of God’s salvific and liberating work in this world. Each of these needs to be explored in
some depth because both directly affect what it means to be a Christian today, to be salvifically
in the world as Jesus was, that is, to be word in the world.

A. God in Jesus is One of Us

The first overarching significance of the Incarnation is that the fullness of divinity is
encountered in Jesus (see Col. 2:9). The foundational revelation event, the breakthrough of
divine life in the Resurrection, is not primarily revelation to human beings but in a human being.
The Incarnation means that God in Jesus has become human to give the power to become
children of God to those who believe in him (cf. Jn 1:12-13). God became human that humans
might become divine. At no point before, in, or after his death is Jesus anything other than
human. He is the human in whom God comes to us, but he was, is, and remains truly human.
This has profound implications for Christianity as a religious worldview and for its spirituality.

The first implication of the Christian affirmation that God is one of us in Jesus has to do
with the meaning of history, the world in narrative form, in religious experience. In Jesus God
entered human history, not as an extra-terrestrial visitor but as a real historical subject. Human
history, as we have already seen, is the locus and context of salvation. Therefore, it is not the aim
of the Christian to escape from history through nirvana or contemplative transcendence or flight
from the world. Incarnation, even though it has been badly understood at times by Christians in
general, means not escape from or an alternative to, but involvement in human history, in its
process, its challenges, its successes and disasters, its destiny. Human history is not the inert
container, the prison, or the nemesis of the Reign of God but its raw material and the “place” of
its emergence. Vatican II correctly refocused our vision on the world and on our historical task
of world transformation. The Incarnation-rooted affirmation of the significance of history and the
finality of creation’s process as transformation in Christ is one of the features which
distinguishes authentic Christianity from some other religious perspectives in which history is
viewed as a temporary stage through which humans pass on their way to timeless perfection, or
as a tissue of illusions which must be dispelled to encounter atemporal being, or as a distraction
from concentration on the eternal essential. Involvement in history is not simply one option among others for Christians. It is intrinsic to our spirituality. It is what it means to carry on Jesus’ commission from God to be word in the world.

A second implication of our faith in the Incarnation is that matter, including our own materiality as body-persons, is not a prison from which the truly spiritual person must escape or a hindrance which must be ruthlessly subordinated to spirit. As Teilhard de Chardin so eloquently articulated, matter is not opaque and inert, a weight on the spirit, but a luminous medium, shot through with divinity. In the Resurrection the humanity of Jesus, his body-person, was glorified, not dissolved. And that glorification reveals the potential, the destiny of the whole material universe, including our own very material humanity, which with all creation is groaning toward fulfillment (cf. Rom. 8:19-23).

A third implication of the revelation of the humanity of God in Jesus, and the effect most important for our present question, is that particularity is infinitely precious. In the Christian worldview, the particular in not an illusion or even a mere instance of the universal. Christians do not seek God by abstracting from the concrete and the particular. Every pebble, every butterfly, every individual person with her or his absolutely unique fingerprint, every ethnic group and race, every religious tradition in all its specificity and distinctiveness is, like the particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth, a locus of revelation. Differentiation neither divides nor fuses, said de Chardin; it unites. The Incarnation reveals that unity is not achieved by the loss of individuality through an homogenization of everything in undifferentiated uniformity, but precisely through the unique validation of particularity in the genuine union of relationship. Friendship, i.e., particular subjects in intimate relationship, not absorption, is the human ideal proposed by Jesus in his metaphor of mutual indwelling -- God in Jesus, Jesus in us and we in him, us in one another, and all of us in God -- which is modeled on the differentiated unity of the Triune God.
The Incarnation, with its affirmation of irreducible particularity, has sometimes been a cause of scandal for Christians as well as incomprehension for participants in other religious traditions which view particularity as a kind of restriction or limitation, a worldly imprisonment from which, finally, the purified will be liberated. This “scandal of particularity” has taken on a heightened importance in the context of post-Newtonian science. The “new cosmology” understands the earth and its denizens (human beings and other beings) within the context of an expanding universe whose history originated in the “big bang” which pre-dated by billions of years the emergence of our galaxy, solar system, and planet (to say nothing of humans and their religious traditions). This understanding of the universe has significantly broadened our horizons. But for many people, the Christian metanarrative, the “Jesus story” which centers history in the person of a unique, individual, particular human being, suddenly appears too small, too narrow, too anthropocentric in the face of this awesome and immense “universe story” which seems to provide a much more comprehensive framework for our self-understanding.

The suspicion that the Christian story is too limited to be ultimately meaningful in light of contemporary science is exacerbated by the evidence of religious pluralism. If there is more than one path of salvation Christianity appears as not only temporally but also substantively limited. Indeed, one can be tempted to suspect that all particular religions are little more than minor “blips” on local cultural screens and that the only “religion” worthy of the name is awe-struck reverence for the immensity of the universe itself which can probably be explained, as some scientific theories do, without reference to the so-called “god hypothesis.”

The implications of the new cosmology and religious pluralism for Christology and the theology of religions are serious and are beyond the scope of our considerations here, but I would like to suggest that there are essentially two ways, relevant to our concerns, of understanding the particularity of Jesus. One way, which leads inexorably to the conclusion that the Jesus story is substantively irrelevant for the scientifically and interreligiously enlightened contemporary person, is to reduce Jesus to his particularity as a first century Jewish male who lived a short life
in one small country, was executed, and is now a figure of history whom we admire and even imitate but with whom we cannot relate personally and whom we must not universalize. If this is our vision of Jesus, one unaffected by the role of the Incarnation and the Resurrection in Christian revelation, then Jesus, the particular human being, is plainly too limited to be the object of genuine religious faith. He differs in no ontological way from other moral paragons and charismatic religious leaders in human history.

But a second way of understanding the particularity of Jesus is to take utterly seriously the faith of the Church that the incarnation and resurrection reveal Jesus not just as a particular human being but *as the Wisdom of God incarnate*. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament presents Holy Wisdom as the immanence of the transcendent God present (hidden or manifest) and active in all creation. Wisdom is the transcendent God creating, sustaining, indwelling, governing, and luring the universe in every infinitesimal part and in its magnificent totality to completion and wholeness. Christian faith holds that God’s Word, Wisdom, Holy Sophia became incarnate in Jesus in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily (see Col. 2:9). Jesus does not imprison or restrict, exhaust or constrain God but focuses the infinity of Ultimate Reality, enabling us in our finitude to see, encounter, and relate to the invisible and transcendent absolute mystery we call God. The God whom Jesus mediates is not only transcendent but also immanent in all reality, but not one being alongside other beings or outside or inside the universe. God as Holy Wisdom is she who “reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well” (Wis. 8:1). In her we, along with all that is, the entire universe, live and move and have our being.

To say that Jesus focuses the reality of God as Holy Wisdom is somewhat analogous -- and all analogies limp, this one very badly -- to saying that Mozart focuses the transcendent reality of music so that, in listening to this particular piece of music, composed by this particular (male, western, young, white, 18th century, European) artist, and played by this particular (Cleveland) orchestra, on these particular modern instruments, we can actually experience real music in the concrete rather than fantasizing about the possibility of universal music in the
abstract. It is somewhat analogous to saying that the relationship with one's particular, gendered, actual spouse focuses the unbounded reality of love which is universal in its being but can only be experienced by us in the concrete and particular. So, Jesus gives specific form, particularity, to divinity. In him we know through our own human experience that God is Life and Love against whom death and hatred cannot prevail. We know that gender, ours like his, is not a defect or limitation in our humanity but rather a privileged way of being totally human. We know that community beyond the boundaries of family and ethnicity, race and class is possible. In Jesus, who was both a faithful Jew and a free Jew, we learn that fidelity within a particular religious tradition can open us to the infinite mystery of God which is mediated by all religious traditions, even as the encounter with the infinite God in our own limited tradition can relativize the tyranny of religious institutions. The Christian experiences in Jesus not just the theoretical possibility that there could be a god present and active in the whole universe but the reality of divine Wisdom at work in the world. Jesus in his resurrection is the Word still in the world.

B. Our Humanity is the Locus of God’s Presence in the World

The second overarching significance of the Incarnation, i.e., that the fullness of divinity is encountered in Jesus, is that for Christian faith our humanity, divinized by the Spirit of the risen Jesus, is the locus of God’s presence and liberating work in the world. The traditional theological language for this astounding affirmation is that the baptized are “the body of Christ.” This is not a decorative figure of speech. It is a powerful metaphor by which the Church expresses its faith that the baptized are the real, sensible, effective presence of Christ in this world. They are word in the world. As J. A. T. Robinson put it:

Paul uses the analogy of the human body to elucidate his teaching that Christians form Christ’s body. But the analogy holds because they are in literal fact the risen organism of Christ’s person in all its concrete reality.⁶

---

As Jesus’ own historical body was his real symbolic personal presence in first century Palestine, so his glorified body, which we are, is his real symbolic personal presence in the twenty-first century. In other words, this understanding of the “body of Christ” is not primarily an evocation of Paul’s teaching on the interdependence of the baptized in the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-13). It is, rather, the theology evoked in 1 Cor. 6:15, 19: “Do you not know that your bodies [that is, you yourselves] are members of Christ?....Or do you not know that your body [that is, you] is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God and that you are not your own?” It is John’s theology of the new temple, not a building but the community itself as the new dwelling place of divine Wisdom,7 raised up in this world in the Resurrection (cf. Jn. 2:19-22). It is the theology of the Branches (cf. Jn. 15:1-11) which bear the fruit of salvation through their participation in the life-giving Vine.

Christians, who really believe this and take seriously their identity as the body of Christ who is Wisdom Incarnate and by his Resurrection alive and present in them and through them in the world, know that they are always acting “in persona Christi.” This is not pious “acting as if” to motivate one to the practice of virtue. It is a reality which arises from baptismal union with the risen Jesus who indwells them as Spirit.8 Christian faith in the Incarnation and the Resurrection does not necessarily make Christians do different things from non-Christians but it makes everything they do different because they live not as mere human individuals but Christ lives in them (cf. Gal. 2:20). They, personally and communally, are the ongoing presence of the Word in the world.

Conclusion

8. For a powerful statement of what this means in the contemporary Church, especially in the local parish, see the book by Father Jim Hogan, Yes We Are! The Living Body of Christ (Missoula, MT: 2009). Available from Father Jim Hogan, 901 S. Higgins Ave. #301, Missoula, MT 59801.
In summary, then, we are not delegated agents trying to make a strange message comprehensible in an alien and unreceptive milieu. Our mission is not first of all to deliver a message but to be the Word of God sounding in our world, to be the living organism of the Risen Jesus in the particularity of our historical time and place. As we are ourselves transformed by the reality that we are by baptism and as we progressively inhabit and become that reality by our participation in the Paschal Mystery, we are infusing the world with the transforming power of the Word made flesh whose members we are. This is no guarantee that evil will have no purchase on us. The field of this world is still laced with weeds. It is only if we die with Christ that we will live with him (see Rom. 6:8). But it is a guarantee that, no matter how meager the results of our ministerial efforts might appear, or how overwhelming the power of evil massed against us might seem, the salvific success of the Word in the World is already assured. In the end the Sower will claim his field and it will finally be all wheat.
THE WORD IN THE WORLD
Discipleship in the 21st Century
Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM

I. Introduction: the ambiguity of the terms “world” and “word” in Christian understanding

II. World

A. How the understanding of “world” has developed in Christian history

1. Prior to the modern period

2. In the “modern period”: from Protestant Reformation to Vatican II (mid-1500s to mid 1900s)

B. Vatican II: the great reversal

1. “Gaudium et Spes” - “The Church in the Modern World”

2. Re-imagining “world” not as “thing” or “object” but as reality construction

3. Result: Church (and Christians) understanding themselves not as subject in relation to object but as one subject called to divinization by God who so loved the world as to give the only Son.

C. The meaning of “world” in the New Testament

1. Theological resource: Gospel of John

   a. World as creation

   b. World as history

   c. World as humanity

   d. World as Satan and Satan’s reality construction

2. Imaginative resource: the Synoptic parables, especially Mt. 13 on wheat and weeds

   a. How parables work
b. The terms in the parable: field, Sower, good seed, children of the Kingdom vs. Evil One, bad seed, children of the devil

c. The world is one, is God’s, is complex; hence the struggle

3. Linguistic resources: Paul

a. Law of Spirit and Law of Flesh

b. Principalities and Powers; spirits of this world

c. Complexity of world, self - and implications for discipleship and ministry

D. Conclusions on the world

III. Word

A. The Christian “take” on the world, discipleship, ministry is rooted in the Incarnation (God is one of us) as it was understood through the Resurrection (Jesus continues to be the presence of God among us)

B. The significance of the Incarnation: God is one with us and one of us

1. First implication: The significance and salvific potential of history

2. Second implication: The significance of matter

3. Third implication: The significance of particularity: in relation to Jesus as a particular human and Christianity as a particular religious tradition

C. The significance of Incarnation: Our humanity is the locus of God’s presence in the world

IV. Conclusion

A. We (the baptized) are always acting “in persona Christi”

B. We do not just speak the word in the world but are called to be the word in the world

C. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” “Have confidence for I have overcome the world”