Carlos H. Abesamis

SOME PARADIGMS IN RE-READING THE BIBLE IN A THIRD-WORLD SETTING

This biblical reading is (a) occasioned by the pastoral challenges of the Third World situation, (b) therefore relevant for our Third World situation today and (c) yet faithful to the original meaning of the biblical texts. All this is part of our theological effort in the Philippines today.

Paradigm One
A-Historical Christianity vs the History-Oriented Faith of the Bible

Much of average Christianity is a-historical. Its almost exclusive stress is the personal salvation of the individual for eternal life. The Lord Jesus is a personal Savior who died for my sins to bring me divine life here and eternal life in heaven later. This kind of Christianity is not concerned for history, i.e., that drama of humanity, including the social, economic, political realities of humankind collectively and individually.

And yet, the Bible is first and foremost about history. The Bible's most basic and over-arching "theme" is history.

The Bible is concerned with the history of the Israelite people; it is concerned with the history of humankind and of the world. This history stretches from the creation of heaven and earth in the beginning to the coming of a new heaven and a new earth at the end of this human history, and the center of this history is Jesus Christ, his works, his death, his resurrection and his "coming again" in glory.

There is no one author or set of authors who tell the whole story, but the cumulative message of the Bible adds up to a message about human history as seen through the eyes of biblical faith. The meaning of human history, from its beginning to its conclusion with Jesus Christ in its center – this is the most over-arching "theme" of the entire biblical literature.

The Bible, then, is not primarily a collection of a-historical truths to believe in, e.g., the Trinity, the divinity-humanity of Jesus, etc.
Nor is it primarily a collection of moral laws to follow in order to find personal salvation.

It is a history of the salvation of Israel, of humankind (personally and collectively), of the world. In effect, it speaks about the drama of salvation, from the perspective of faith, beginning with the creation of humankind and the world, and concluding with the coming of the final and definitive Kingdom of God at the close of our present history.

If we hope to understand anything that the Bible can ever tell us, we cannot afford to forget this one fundamental fact, that the Bible is largely about history and the meaning of history. And to forget this is the surest way to miss most of what the Bible can ever hope to tell us.

Age-to-Come: A Lesson in Historical Thinking

Biblical religion speaks in terms of an age-to-come. This biblical idea is one of the new and refreshing bits of learning I picked up in the course of my search through the Bible. It provides a whole new dimension to the understanding of ultimate salvation. It provides the dimension of history. Ultimate and definitive salvation is a new history! Whereas my old catechism looked forward to a place called heaven and whereas my advanced theology looked forward to a place called the new world, biblical religion looked forward also to a new history, a new era, a new epoch, a new age.

The Jews around the time of Jesus spoke of two ages. This referred to two epochs, eras or histories. There is this age. This referred to the present history of Israel and humanity; it is full of evil, sin, suffering, oppression. On the other hand, there will be an age-to-come, the object of their hope. This referred to the future era of definitive salvation which was to come at the close of the present age. It was an age in which people will participate in a new history and will experience justice, compassion, truth, peace. I am reminded of the Isaianic dream of a future history where people will plant their crops beside running waters and will pasture their oxen in safety (Is 32:20) and where the peasant will work and the same peasant (not someone else) will eat what he plants (Is 65:21-23)!

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and