

The uniqueness of Jesus

Thomas C. Fox | Dec. 28, 2010



Fr. Peter Phan (CNS/Catholic San Francisco/Rick DeVecchio)

Fr. Peter C. Phan is professor of theology and the inaugural holder of the Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. Chair of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University. Last June the Catholic Theological Society of America bestowed on Phan its highest honor, the John Courtney Murray Award, in recognition of outstanding and distinguished achievement in theology.

As reported by *NCR* in 2007, Phan's book *Being Religious Interreligiously* (Orbis 2004) was investigated by both the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Subsequently, the Committee on Doctrine published a series of observations on Phan's book, especially on his views on Jesus, the church and the church's mission. Phan was then notified that the action of the bishops' conference did not necessarily terminate the doctrinal congregation's investigation, which might still be ongoing. So far Phan has not responded to the concerns and observations of either the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and the U.S. bishops' committee. Phan informed *NCR* that he is currently working on a book in which some of these concerns and observations are taken into account and hopes to have it in print in 2011.

Recently *NCR* spoke to Phan about some of the issues raised by the Vatican congregation and the bishops' committee. He insisted however that the following statements do not represent, in full or in part, his responses to the questions and concerns of church authorities regarding his book but only to the questions raised by *NCR*.

An edited version of this exchange appeared in the Dec. 24, 2010, issue of *NCR*.

***NCR:* The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (2000), strongly insists on the uniqueness of Jesus as the savior of all humankind. This uniqueness is said to be rooted in his being the Son of God.**

Phan: The four gospels consistently use the title "Son of God" or "the Son" to describe who Jesus is. This expression is used in the Old Testament to refer to angels, the king, and the people of Israel as a whole. The Synoptic Gospels relates that Jesus refers to himself as the Son (Mark 13:32; 12:6 and Matthew 11:27/Luke 10:22). It is also reported that in his prayer to God Jesus addresses God as "Abba" (*my Father*). According to the German scholar Joachim Jeremias, Jesus was the first Jew to use this term of familiarity and intimacy with

which children call their fathers to address God (Mark 14:36), in contrast to the more formal term *Abbi* used in public Jewish prayers. This practice of Jesus has subsequently been invoked to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus' relationship to God, exclusive to him and not available to anyone else, and indicative of his divine nature.

This argument for the uniqueness of Jesus' filial relation to God based on his use of 'Abba' should not however be overplayed. That Jesus' relationship to God and his naming God as his 'Abba' is unique can hardly be denied. However, even granted the truth of Jeremias's claim, it does not follow that no other Jew, before Jesus and during his lifetime, has never used this familiar term to address God in his or her private prayer. The fact that Jesus is *recorded* to have used this term in his prayer to God does not by itself eliminate the possibility of others having used that term in their private but *unrecorded* prayers as well. Indeed, given the unavoidable practice of applying to God our common language about human realities, it is quite likely that words such as 'Abba' have been used by Jews to refer to God. Furthermore, the occasion in which Jesus is reported to have used this expression is his *private* prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane which no one witnessed, and therefore Jesus' use of 'Abba' in this instance is a historical reconstruction by Mark or his informers from sources other than personal knowledge based on their actual witness of the event.

Furthermore, it is to be noted that the way each person relates to and names God is inescapably 'unique' and 'exclusive' to her or him, even when the same words are used. God as infinite and loving Mystery cannot but be experienced in diverse and unique ways by each individual. In other words, my way of experiencing God is just as 'unique' and 'exclusive' as Jesus'. The point here is not to deny the originality and uniqueness of Jesus' filial relationship with God but to put it within the context of human experiences of God and to relate ('relativize') it to this larger context.

In what does the uniqueness of Jesus' filial intimacy with God consist?

According to the gospels, the intimacy of this relationship lies in Jesus' total obedience to God's will. Jesus is the 'Son of God' because he obeyed his Father's will by taking up the role of the 'Suffering Servant.' As I mentioned above, the title 'Son of God' is given in the Old Testament to angels the king, and the people of Israel. In the case of Jesus, this title is connected with his role as the Suffering Servant to carry out God's plan of establishing God's reign and to save humanity. In other words, Jesus' divine sonship -- his filial relationship to the Father -- is defined in terms of his obedience to God and his role as the Suffering Servant, and not in terms of his eternal pre-existence in God as the Logos. This point is made clear especially in the gospel of Mark, though it is also present in Matthew and Luke.

It is only in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus' divine sonship is explicitly made to consist in his eternal co-existence with and generation by the Father. Jesus is said to be the *only* (*monogenēs*) Son (Jn 1:14,18; 3:16) and to have made a clear distinction (Jn 20:17) between God as his Father ('my Father') and God as our Father ('your Father').

If most people at Jesus' time and a large number of people in our time did not know or acknowledge Jesus' special relationship to God, why were they attracted to him ?

That Jesus has been attractive to all kinds of people for over the last two thousand years need no stressing. Currently over two out of six billion people on Earth declare themselves 'Christian' -- that is, followers of Jesus. The reasons why these two billion people have accepted Jesus as their 'Lord and Savior' are as varied and many as the people themselves. As different as these motivations are, we can reasonably certain that they do not lie in the appeal of the church as an institution with its structures of power and legal system. (The church has been the reason why some people refuse to become or remain Christian! Recent crimes of various kinds perpetrated by the hierarchy are more than proof for this.) But rather the appeal lies in the figure of Jesus himself.

What then is the attractiveness of Jesus? Rarely is it the Jesus as presented by the Christian dogmas in the

abstract Greco-Roman philosophical categories. It is rather the Jesus as narrated in the gospels, with his teachings on how to live a fully and truly human life, the example of his life dedicated to the service of the poor and the marginalized until death, and his deep and unconditional love for and obedience to God. In other words, people are attracted to Jesus because in him they find a full flourishing of human life. Let's note that it is not 'happiness' as defined by modernity -- the self-centered satisfaction of material, psychological and even spiritual needs -- that Jesus refers to when he says he gives 'abundant life.' Many of Jesus' teachings are indeed 'hard sayings' that require a total renunciation of the self to be his disciples. In spite of this highly demanding ethical ideal, many people are attracted to Jesus, precisely because they find in him the concrete way to live a fully and truly human life.

So, who is Jesus, and how to explain his identity to people of today?

If we want to furnish a full and definitive answer to this question, we would have to penetrate into the secret recesses of Jesus' heart and soul. Such a task is not only impossible but also idolatrous. This is true of Jesus as it is of any human person. We can never 'define' a person since in so doing we inevitably reduce that person to the status of an object.

It is interesting that Jesus himself once asked his disciples to tell him who people and they themselves said he was. When Peter told him that he is 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt 16:16), Jesus added that he had to suffer and die and rise again. Peter rebuked him, upon which Jesus told him: 'Get behind me, Satan' (Matt 16:23). So, in saying who Jesus is, we must be very aware of the inadequacy our own answers, including that of the church, lest we be called 'Satan' by Jesus!

Traditionally there are two ways of explaining who Jesus is, one by saying what Jesus is by nature and the other by saying what he does. Many of us are familiar with the way the official teaching of the church, especially at the ecumenical council of Chalcedon (451), uses to explain the identity of Jesus, and that is, by employing the philosophical categories of 'person' and 'nature.' So Jesus is said to be one person (that is, the Logos or Word of God, one of the 'persons' of the Trinity) in two natures, divine and human, the two natures being united in the

person of the Logos, in the words of Chalcedon, 'without confusion or change, without division or separation.' Thus, as 'person' Jesus is the Son of God, born of the Father and 'consubstantial' with him; in his 'natures' Jesus is fully divine and fully human.

There is of course nothing wrong in making use of metaphysical categories to state who Jesus is; indeed, they help us obtain a more precise and orthodox understanding of Jesus. However, these categories exact a heavy price, especially for evangelization. For one thing, they are limited to a particular culture that is, Greek, and therefore are not readily intelligible in other cultures with different philosophical systems. There are other philosophies than Greek philosophy, for example, Indian and Chinese. They are also abstract and ahistorical and hence do not move hearts to follow Jesus. Lastly, they are not the way the gospels use to tell us who Jesus is.

The gospels tell us who Jesus is not by means of philosophy nor even by means of 'history' as we understand it today, that is, as an objective reconstruction of what really happened. Rather they do it by telling us *stories* about Jesus, that is, what he did and said and how he lived and died so that we may believe in him and follow him. In other words, if we want to find out about the identity of Jesus, we have to look at what Jesus said and did during his ministry, the center of which is the rule or *kingdom of God*. We can say then that Jesus is the person who lived and died for the kingdom of God, and that he invited us to join him in this way of living and dying. To tell who and what Jesus is (Christology) is for the sake of making disciples. What this discipleship entails here and now, and for this individual, cannot be decided beforehand but must be discovered by listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Of course these two ways of describing the identity of Jesus, technically called 'ontological Christology' and

?functional Christology? respectively, do not contradict each other; it is not a matter of one being false and the other true. Rather it is the question of which one of the two is more faithful to the gospels and more appropriate to preaching the Good News about Jesus, and on this score, there is no doubt that functional Christology has the upper hand.

Does this way of explaining the identity of Jesus not reduce him to being simply a ?man? and a ?man for others,? to the detriment of his divinity?

To say that Jesus is the man who lived and died for the kingdom of God by no means is equivalent to saying that he is merely and only a man, to the detriment of his divinity. As mentioned above, Jesus demonstrates that he is the ?Son of God? precisely in being perfectly obedient to God?s will and in fulfilling his role as the Suffering Servant. That is *how* he is divine. And he is human not by taking up a human nature in the abstract, an ?essence? called humanity, but by living out his obedience to God?s will, that is, performing his service to the kingdom of God, by means of a particular body and soul and spirit, and within a circumscribed time and space, within a limited history. That is *what* Jesus? humanity as well as ours means.

Again, to say that Jesus is a ?man for others? is by no means tantamount to denying his divinity. On the contrary, it serves to make his divinity concrete. ?Others? here refers not only to humans

but also to God. Being absolutely obedient to God?s will, or ?being for God,? was for Jesus to be the ?Son of God.?

How can we know this Jesus, the ?man for others?? What are the resources must we take into account in order to know him today?

For most Catholics, the traditional answer to this question has been that we know Jesus through the teachings of the official magisterium of the church, that is, of councils, popes, and bishops, which have been summarized in the catechism, for example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Other sources for knowing Jesus include the liturgy, devotions and prayers, the *magisterium* of theologians, sacred music and songs, sacred art and architecture and so on. In general, Catholics would say that we know Jesus through the Tradition.

Moreover, for all Christians the normative sources for knowing Jesus is the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, and in particular the four gospels. Biblical scholars have applied various methods to determine with reasonable certainty what Jesus said and did. While literary and historical methods are both necessary and helpful in studying the Bible, they can only furnish information on the ?historical Jesus,? or more precisely, the Jesus as remembered and recorded by the four gospels, and not the ?Jesus of history,? that is, the actual Jesus who lived in Palestine over two thousand years ago and about whom the gospels give us but a partial and incomplete account. These methods can reveal only the world *behind* and *in* the biblical text but cannot disclose the world *in front of* the text which beckons us to enter in order to become disciples of Jesus.

To discover Jesus and his meaning as the ?man for others? for our lives today we need to combine Scripture and Tradition with a third source for knowing Jesus. Some Asian theologians call it ?the magisterium of the poor.? By ?the poor? they mean first of all the economically poor but also those who are marginalized for whatever reasons such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, culture, religious tradition, and so on. All these ?poor? are the recipients of God?s preferential love, with whom Jesus stood in solidarity during his ministry. They teach us what Jesus would say and do today, or what would be the real meaning of what Jesus once said and did. In their poverty they teach us about God and Jesus what popes, bishops, priests, and theologians do not and cannot teach because these teachers are not by any standard poor but often live in luxury.

How does this way of knowing Jesus clarify the meaning of Jesus? last cry on the cross?

In this context we can understand better the cry of Jesus on the cross: ?My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?? (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). There is no need to speculate, as some Western theologians have

done, about how on the cross the Father and the Son within the inner life of the Trinity are estranged from each other and are reconciled by the Holy Spirit. While this theory can satisfy our curiosity about how God is one and yet three (the Trinity), it misses the concrete and historical situation of Jesus' death. Jesus' final cry, desperate and yet trustful in God, gave voice to both the darkest despair of billions of human beings living in poverty and oppression and the deepest trust that God will remain faithful to God's promise of liberation and salvation.

In our time, thanks to globalization and migration, people of different religions increasingly come into contact with one another, and as a result, interreligious dialogue has become a necessity. Does the dialogue with other religions contribute anything to our understanding of who Jesus is?

In addition to the three above-mentioned resources for knowing Jesus I would add a fourth: the experiences of non-Christian believers (and non-believers). Since the question is about interreligious dialogue I will restrict myself to non-Christian believers. The reason for the need to enter in dialogue with non-Christian believers is that *to be religious today is to be interreligious*. To be Christian today requires living with, working with, theologizing with, and sharing spiritual experiences with non-Christians. In terms of Christology, we can discover the real identity of Jesus today only through interreligious dialogue in the fourfold modality just mentioned. Who Jesus is for us living in the context of religious pluralism still remains to be discovered, and consequently Christology still remains an unfinished and ongoing theological project.

This interreligious dialogue does not lead to the 'dictatorship of relativism.' Because of this fear of relativism it has been suggested that interreligious dialogue should be limited to intercultural dialogue, that is, dialogue about the cultural and social impact of various religions. However, partners in interreligious dialogue need not and must not bracket their faith in their religious traditions (in the case of Christians, their faith in God, Jesus, and the Spirit, for instance). In interreligious dialogue, our faith remains firm and is even intensified, but our understanding and practice of our faith will be challenged, corrected, complemented, and enriched by learning from the understanding and practice of the believers of other religions (and hopefully vice versa).

Does interreligious dialogue affect our understanding of Jesus' identity, his 'uniqueness' and 'universality'?

It may be well to remember that Christians are not the only ones to claim 'uniqueness' and 'universality' for their founder Jesus. The Hindu book *Bhagavad Gita* also claims that Krishna is the only revealer of divine wisdom and is worshiped whenever other gods are worshiped and that his teaching is the best and only way to achieve liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Buddhists are convinced that the Buddha has showed them the best and only way to achieve enlightenment and nirvana, and though the Buddha himself does not claim to be the 'way' but only a finger pointing to the way, and does not claim to be divine, he does not thereby become any less attractive to billions of human beings, in the past as well as in the foreseeable future, as a sure guide to full human flourishing. Confucius rarely speaks about God or Heaven and never claims a divine status for himself, but his teaching has nourished the spiritual life of billions of human beings in their quest to achieve full and perfect humanity. Muslims believe that the Word of God has been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'an and therefore the Qur'an is the only true and absolute norm of belief and behavior for all human beings.

In interreligious dialogue these claims to exclusivity, uniqueness, and universality for the founder of one's religion and for one's religious tradition collide with each other. Genuine and fruitful interfaith dialogue does and must not require the abandonment of these claims. On the contrary, partners in dialogue must state and explain these claims as clearly and truthfully as they can. What frequently happens is that in the frank and careful exchange of views one's understanding of these claims will be reassessed, refined, and modified in light of the questions and objections of those who do not share one's faith convictions and who make the same claims for their religious founders and traditions. Most often, words such as 'universality,' 'uniqueness,' and 'exclusivity,' because of their historical connections with Western colonialism and imperialism, will be perceived to be no longer appropriate and useful for expressing one's faith in Jesus, Krishna, the Buddha,

Confucius, or the Qur'an. In this way, an 'interreligious Christology,' or 'interreligious Buddhology' is still to be done and will emerge, never fully and definitively articulated, only in the purifying fire of interreligious dialogue.

Does interreligious dialogue render mission and evangelization redundant? Must Christians still proclaim Jesus and convert non-Christians to the church?

Jesus' command to his disciples 'to make disciples,' 'baptize,' and 'teach' -- the so-called 'Great Commission' as recorded in Matthew 28:16-20 -- still remains in force. But three things must be noted. First, the Matthean text, though often invoked to justify Christian missionary activities, is not the only text about the church's mission, nor are the three activities mentioned there the only activities to be carried out by the church. It must be read together with, for example, Luke 4:18-19, which mentions different activities of Jesus which the church must also perform. Secondly, the mission of the church must be in the service of the reign of God and not the church itself. The goal of making disciples, baptizing, and teaching is not to enlarge the church's organization and power, which is a perpetual temptation to which the church has not rarely fallen, but to bear witness to and promote the reign of God which is already present everywhere, in places and among peoples outside the church. Thirdly, there are many different ways to carry out the church's mission -- proclamation by verbal preaching and teaching is only one of them and not necessarily the most effective. Today, mission must be characterized by dialogue as the essential modality, one in which Christians must first attentively and humbly listen to and learn from other believers and even unbelievers to discern the presence and voices of God among them. This is particularly true in the case of the Jews since God's covenant with them has never been revoked (Romans 11:29). Indeed, there are reputable theologians who have argued -- convincingly to my mind -- that Christian mission must not be directed to the Jews. In sum, Christian mission remains as an indispensable task of the church. It is not replaced by dialogue but today it must be done in a radically different way. It is certainly not to be done for fear that non-Christians will be condemned to hell for not believing in Jesus but in order to bear witness to the great things God has done in and through Jesus of Nazareth as well as in non-Christian religions and people. Christian evangelizers will not be effective unless they let themselves be 'evangelized' by non-Christians. The evangelizers become the evangelized, and vice versa. Faith witness becomes mutual witness.

Editor's Note: The substance of Phan's statements has been expressed in an earlier interview with Moisés Sbardelotto and published in Portuguese as 'Conoscer Jesus a partir dos não cristãos: uma proposta e um desafio teológico' in *Revista do Instituto Humanitas Unisinos* (August 8, 2010).

[Thomas C. Fox is NCR editor. His e-mail address is tfox@ncronline.org .]

Source URL (retrieved on 07/23/2014 - 16:04): <http://ncronline.org/news/uniqueness-jesus>