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Peter Knauer SJ

THE UNITY AND UNICITY OF FAITH AS A HERMENEUTICAL CRITERION ACCORDING TO IRENAEUS

Summary

"Faith being one and the same, neither has the one who is able to say much about it more, nor the one who can say little, less." (Adv. haer. I, 10, 2)

Christian faith is not composed in an additive manner. Therefore, it is not possible to have an incomplete faith. All propositions of Christian faith are contained in each proposition of faith. And propositions of faith cannot be surpassed by any other proposition. Heresy means, according to Irenaeus, to use Christian concepts in a totally different meaning and context (Cf. Adv. haer. I, 8, 1).

Nothing can be believed in the sense of Christian faith that can come otherwise to our knowledge than through a word received from others, and finally the Apostles and Jesus (cf. Rom 10:17). But a word of faith can only be a word, whose truth is not accessible otherwise than in faith alone. This is essential to the "regula fidei" (cf. Adv. haer. I, 22, 1). Faith cannot be reduced to reason nor be based on reason, but objections of reason have always to be answered in the field of reason itself. In this sense Christian faith is open to public investigation.

I. The Unity and Unicity of Faith (Adv. haer. I, 10, 2)

Μιᾶς γὰρ καὶ τῆς αὐτῆς πίστεως οὔσης, οὔτε ὁ πολὺ περὶ αὐτῆς δυνάμενος εἰπεῖν ἐπλεόνασεν, οὔτε ὁ τὸ ὀλίγον, ἠλαττόνησε.¹

For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little diminish it.²

1 <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/images/ah1p050.jpg> (25. 1. 2018)

2 <http://www.textexcavation.com/irenaeusah1.html#chapter10> (25. 1. 2018)

“Faith being one and the same, neither has the one who is able to say much about it more, nor the one who can say little, less.”³

- 1 It might be hermeneutically helpful to seek some implications of the truth of this sentence. The following is a meditation about these implications.
- 1.1 Faith is not composed in an additive way. Therefore it is not possible to have only a part of faith. Faith is indivisible. Otherwise, one person could have more of faith and the other less.
- 1.2 Every proposition of faith must virtually contain all other possible propositions of faith (*“reductio in unum mysterium”*). There are no other “mysteries of faith” than God’s self-communication. Otherwise it would be possible and even necessary to add these other propositions.
- 1.3 An example of this inclusion would be the Trinity of God. It is not possible to refer to the Trinity of God otherwise than referring at the same time to the incarnation of the Son whose word reveals to us the Trinity of God.
- 1.4 Concepts like “mercy of God”, “God’s grace”, “our redemption”, “supernatural” etc. refer always to one and the same reality.
- 1.5 No proposition of faith can be understood in its true sense without at least *implicitly* being understood as referring to all other propositions of faith. This is the criterion of the correct understanding of a proposition of faith. Otherwise it would not be possible to give the assent of *faith* to a proposition of faith, but the latter would be misunderstood in an ideological way.
- 1.6 It must be possible to sum up Christian faith in only one sentence which also *explicitly* contains all other possible propositions of faith. Otherwise no proposition of faith could be implicit in all other propositions of faith.
- 1.7 The content of faith must be such that it cannot be surpassed; and the content of faith must be such that that it cannot be diminished without losing its character of faith. Otherwise it would be possible to believe less than what is proposed in the Christian message.
- 1.8 The idea that heresy consists in accepting correctly some propositions of faith but not all may therefore just not be correct; and ecumenism should not build on such an idea.
- 1.9 If faith consists in being filled of the Holy Spirit (cf 1 Cor 12:3), there cannot be several different faiths; this does not exclude that even in other religions Christ is already present in a hidden way, because everything has been and is created in Christ.
- 1.10 Faith may be the only knowledge not depending on the perspective of the believer or of the degree of his or her intelligence. Otherwise it could not be one and the same faith for all.
- 1.11 At the same time faith must be personal in a way that cannot be surpassed. Nobody can speak of faith in an intelligible way otherwise than with concepts

3 My translation.

rooted in his own experience (for instance the concept of love is for everybody filled with his or her own experience of being loved by others) (cf. Apoc. 2:17).

- 1.12 If it is true that the message of faith cannot be augmented, it must equally be explained as directed to *everybody*; it cannot be restricted to a group of persons. (Cf. Adv. haer. I, 10, 3)
 - 1.13 The content of the Christian message explains the only way in which this message can be correctly understood as the last word about the entire reality of the world; correctly understood, this word cannot be relativized.
 - 1.14 The unity of faith is deeper than what we normally mean by unity. It is a unity that cannot be surpassed; in this it corresponds to the content of faith which is itself unsurpassable. There cannot be any Salvation greater than communion with God. "Progress in faith" can only be understood as understanding more deeply the emphatic meaning of its unity (cf. Luk 17:5.). Thus the convincing authority of the Christian message consists in its unsurpassable unity.
 - 1.15 There is no other human knowledge with the same characteristics. (Cf. Adv. haer. IV, 34, 1)
- 2 How is it possible to explain the Christian message in a way that truly corresponds to this unity of faith?
 - 2.1 This unity of faith cannot be explained otherwise than referring to God *creating everything out of nothing*, embracing everything and not being embraced by anything (Cf. Adv. haer. II, 25, 4; IV, 20, 2)⁴
 - 2.2 Being created out of nothing doesn't mean only the beginning of our existence but our existence as such. Our being and our being created are formally identical (\equiv). If it were possible to remove our being created (it is not possible), nothing of us would subsist. Thus being created out of nothing means always our actual dependence (including our past and our future) of God. (Cf. Adv. haer. II, 28, 1)
 - 2.3 We do not comprehend of God more than what is entirely distinct from him, but refers entirely to him. The entire universe and all within the universe is the reason why we can speak of God. God is "without whom nothing can exist". This concept of God can never enter into conflict with natural sciences. Neither any natural law nor even pure hazard could exist without God. Thus our being created is not an alternative to other explanations of the world but would encompass all of them as far as they are true.
 - 2.4 Because according to the Christian message God is greater than anything we can think, he in himself cannot be thought: There is no possibility of proving the existence of God; the world is not explained by God, but by its being created. These two expressions cannot be interchanged.

4 Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion 15: „Therefore, Lord, you are not only in comparison to what nothing greater can be thought (*quo nihil maius cogitari possit*) [= a statement about the world: God + world cannot be more than God; so the world is nothing but entire relation to God in total distinction from him], but you are something greater than can be thought [*quo nihil maius cogitari possit*]“[thus God cannot be thought in himself; one comprehends of him only what is entirely distinct of him, but refers entirely to him].

- 2.5 Although God in himself cannot be thought and we can only speak referring to him in unilateral analogy, we can never say something about him which would contradict our being created out of nothing.
- 2.6 Object of reason is the universe and its being created. Object of faith is our communion with God which is indivisible. Thus our being created is not an object of faith but of reason (cg. Rom 1,20) (Cf. Adv, haer. II, 6, 1). Faith begins when we say that we are “created in Christ”, created within the eternal love between the Father and the Son (cf. Col 1,20). (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 20, 1)
- 2.7 **To believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God means to trust in his word that we and the entire world have been created within the eternal love between the Father and the Son.** (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 4, 2; III, 11, 6; iii, 19, 11; IV, 6, 7) This proposition contains explicitly all propositions of Christian faith: The Trinity, the Incarnation of the Son (by whom we get to know through his human Word of our communion with God) and the Holy Spirit being sent into our hearts, uniting us with Christ and the Father and with each other. (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 6, 1; V, 1,1) God has no other love than that which is God, the Holy Spirit. This includes even the Church: The Church is the continuous transmission and reception in the Holy Spirit of the Word of God. (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 24, 1) And who trusts in being loved by God becomes aware and can give account of why he or she is able to be a loving person.
- 2.8 Even the proposition of faith, that Jesus is the Son of God cannot be understood correctly otherwise than in this sense. One cannot ask: “Was Jesus the Son of God, yes or no?” without having explained what is really meant by “Son of God”. And this cannot be explained without reference to ourselves partaking in his relation to the Father. (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 18, 4. 7)

II. The meaning of “Heresy” (Adv. haer. I, 8, 1)

Ὅνπερ τρόπον εἴ τις βασιλέως εἰκόνας καλῆς κατεσκευασμένης ἐπιμελῶς ὑπὸ σοφοῦ τεχνίτου ἐκ ψηφίδων ἐπισημάτων, λύσας τὴν ὑποκειμένην τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἰδέαν, καὶ ποιήσει μορφήν κυνὸς ἢ ἀλώπεκος, καὶ ταύτην φαύλως κατεσκευασμένην, ἔπειτα διορίζοιτο, καὶ λέγοι ταύτην εἶναι τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως εἰκόνα τὴν καλὴν, ἣν ὁ σοφὸς τεχνίτης κατεσκεύασε, δεικνὺς τὰς ψηφίδας τὰς καλῶς ὑπὸ τοῦ τεχνίτου τοῦ πρώτου εἰς τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως εἰκόνα συντεθείσας, κακῶς δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ ὑστέρου εἰς κυνὸς μορφήν μετενεχθείσας, καὶ διὰ τῆς τῶν ψηφίδων φαντασίας μεθοδεύοι τοὺς ἀπειροτέρους τοὺς κατάληψιν βασιλικῆς μορφῆς οὐκ ἔχουσας, καὶ πείθοι ὅτι αὕτη ἢ σαπρὰ τῆς ἀλώπεκος ἰδέα ἐστὶν ἐκείνη τοῦ βασιλέως εἰκῶν· τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ οὗτοι γραῶν μύθους συγκαττύσαντες, ῥήματα καὶ λέξεις καὶ παραβολὰς ὅτε καὶ πόθεν ἀποσπῶντες ἐφαρμόζειν βούλονται τοὺς μύθους αὐτῶν τὰ λόγια τοῦ Θεοῦ.⁵

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of

5 <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/images/ah1p036.jpg> and <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/images/ah1p037.jpg> (23. 01. 2018).

the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.⁶

The same way as if somebody, of the beautiful image of a king, having been carefully composed by a wise artist with outstanding stones, dissolves the underlying figure of the human being and will make the shape of a dog or a fox, and that badly composed. And he would then pretend and say that this is the beautiful image of the king which has been composed by the wise artist, and show the stones which by the first artist had been placed together, but by the latter have been transformed into the shape of a dog. And by means of the splendour of the stones he would cheat those who still have no experience of what a king looks like. He would persuade them that this ugly figure of the fox is that image of the king. Just the same way also those patch together gossip of old women, words and readings and parables which they have drawn away whenever and from anywhere. They want to harmonize their myths and Gods words.⁷

Adv. haer. I, 9, 4

Οὕτω δὲ καὶ ὁ τὸν κἀνονα τῆς ἀληθείας ἀκλινῆ ἐν ἑαυτῷ κατέχων, ὃν διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἴληφε, τὰ μὲν ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν δὲ ὀνόματα, καὶ τὰς λέξεις, καὶ τὰς παραβολὰς ἐπιγνώσεται, τὴν δὲ βλάσφημον ὑπόθεσιν ταύτην οὐκ ἐπιγνώσεται. Καὶ γὰρ εἰ τὰς ψηφίδας γνωρίσει, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἀλώπεκα ἀντὶ τῆς βασικτικῆς εἰκόνοσ οὐ παραδέξεται, ἐν ἑκάστον δὲ τῶν εἰρημένων ἀποδοὺς τῇ ἰδίᾳ τάξει, καὶ προσ-αρμόσας τῷ τῆς ἀληθείας σωματίῳ γυμνώσει καὶ ἀνυπόστατον δεῖξει τὸ πλάσμα αὐτῶν.⁸

He also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognise the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them. For, though he will acknowledge the gems, he will certainly not receive the fox instead of the likeness of the king. But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.⁹

In the same way will he, who retains inflexible in himself the canon of the truth, which he has received through baptism, acknowledge the names and the expressions and parables from the scriptures, but not acknowledge this blasphemous opinion. For, while he will know the precious stones, he will not accept the fox instead of

6 <http://www.textexcavation.com/irenaeusah1.html#chapter8> (23. 01. 2018).

7 My translation.

8 <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/images/ah1p046.jpg> und [ah1p046.jpg](http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/images/ah1p046.jpg) (23. 01. 2018)

9 <http://www.textexcavation.com/irenaeusah1.html#chapter8> (23- 01. 2018)

*the image of the king. He will bring back each of the aforementioned objects to their proper order and harmonize them to the body of the truth; he will unmask their fiction and show that it is not consistent.*¹⁰

- 3 For Irenaeus, heresy means distorting the entire faith; with heresy in this meaning there can never be any sort of ecumenism. (Cf. Adv. haer. V, preface, 1).
- 3.1 A recent example of such a heresy occurred in Germany at the time of the Nazis: The so called “Deutsche Christen” who pretended, that Hitler was a sort of divine revelation and bestowed with divine authority.
- 3.2 All sorts of superstition can be called “heresy” in this sense. They want to add to faith and thus are incompatible with the entire Christian faith.
- 3.3 People believing in Christ as the Son of God in whose divine relation to the Father we are taken up (and this being something that cannot be surpassed), cannot be called heretics in the sense of Irenaeus.
- 3.4 Christians can refuse propositions of faith of other Christians only in a sense which isn’t their true sense.
- 3.5 Examples would be
 - a) “infallibility”, which doesn’t mean that one has to accept a proposition of faith without knowing its exact meaning. And a proposition cannot be infallible otherwise than by its content happening in the proposition itself (the world of God about his love is in itself the happening of his love to us). The Christian faith cannot be proclaimed without
 - b) the alleged opposition between “faith alone” and “faith and works”: “Faith alone” means that only a good tree (our being in communion with God) can give good fruits, but it is not by the fruits a tree becomes good. And “faith and works” means that a good tree will of necessity make good fruits possible and realized.
 - c) Yet another opposition is “scripture alone” and “scripture and tradition”. To the meaning in which scripture is the word of God, nothing can be added. But this meaning of scripture is just the transmission and reception of faith (tradition).
 - d) The catholic “*fiiioque*” just does not mean (DH 1331) that the Father and the Son are two principles of the Holy Spirit. He proceeds only from the Father, and also only from the Father through the Son, and is their one and indivisible mutual love. The Father is the only ἀρχή of the Holy Spirit also in catholic theology.
- 3.6 In order to overcome the misunderstandings, those who accuse other Christians of not accepting a proposition of faith may ask themselves if they could not formulate their proposition in a way which is less misleading. They must seek the reason why it is being misunderstood by other Christians. A dialogue on this basis will be very fruitful.

10 My translation.

III. The corresponding “Rule of Faith” (Adv. haer. I, 22, 1)

Cum teneamus autem nos regulam veritatis, id est quia sit unus Deus omnipotens, qui omnia condidit per Verbum suum, et aptavit, et fecit ex eo, ...¹¹

The rule of truth which we hold, is, that there is one God Almighty, who made all things by His Word, and fashioned and formed, out of that which had no existence, all things which exist. Thus saith the Scripture, to that effect “By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them, by the spirit of His mouth.” And again, “All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made.” There is no exception or deduction stated; but the Father made all things by Him, whether visible or invisible, objects of sense or of intelligence, temporal, on account of a certain character given them, or eternal; and these eternal things He did not make by angels, or by any powers separated from His Ennoea. For God needs none of all these things, but is He who, by His Word and Spirit, makes, and disposes, and governs all things, and commands all things into existence, -He who formed the world (for the world is of all), -He who fashioned man, -He [who] is the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, above whom there is no other God, nor initial principle, nor power, nor pleroma, -He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we shall prove. Holding, therefore, this rule, we shall easily show, notwithstanding the great variety and multitude of their opinions, that these men have deviated from the truth; for almost all the different sects of heretics admit that there is one God; but then, by their pernicious doctrines, they change [this truth into error], even as the Gentiles do through idolatry, -thus proving themselves ungrateful to Him that created them. Moreover, they despise the workmanship of God, speaking against their own salvation, becoming their own bitterest accusers, and being false witnesses [against themselves]. Yet, reluctant as they may be, these men shall one day rise again in the flesh, to confess the power of Him who raises them from the dead; but they shall not be numbered among the righteous on account of their unbelief.

- 4 The “rule of faith” is the criterion for understanding Christian propositions in their real sense. It contains:
 - 4.1 The word “God” means such a reality that nothing greater can be thought, and which is greater than everything that can be thought. God is without whom nothing can exist. (Cf. Adv. Haer. I, 16,3)
 - 4.2 About God we can only speak in a unilateral analogy; we comprehend of him only what is entirely distinct of him and entirely remitting to him. (Cf. Adv. haer. II, 10, 3-4)
 - 4.3 All heresies begin by falsifying the meaning of the word “God”. (Cf. Adv. haeres II, 1, 1; IV, 32, 1)
 - 4.4 Irenaeus refutes heresies already with the argument that they contradict reason and even are self-contradictory. For nothing can be believed which is against reason operating within the realm of its autonomy (within its natural rules). So heresies must be fought against by arguments of reason and not of faith; the latter would amount to a vicious circle. (Cf. Adv. haer. II, 24 4; II, 27, 1)

11 <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/images/ah1p097.jpg> (23. 01. 2018)

- 4.5 But faith itself never can be reduced to reason. Therefore nothing can be believed unless its truth cannot be known otherwise than by faith.
- 4.6 Nevertheless each proposition of faith can be “controlled” by reason and in public investigation that it does not contradict reason
- .
- 4.7 Nothing other can be believed than that which can only be received by the word of earlier believers. But no word of others can be believed in the sense of Christian faith, if its truth can be known otherwise than by the word. So faith as such is apostolic. Only what because of its very content must come from historical transmission can be believed in the sense of Christian faith. (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 3, 1)
- 4.8 Nothing can be believed which can be surpassed. Therefore also nothing less can be believed in the meaning of Christian faith than that which cannot be surpassed.
- 4.9 Nothing can be believed which does not concern mankind as such or which would not be understandable as the last word over everything. (Cf. Adv. haer. II, 27, 2; IV, 22, 2)

In the end of this meditation I only want to repeat the sentence of Irenaeus we have tried to understand in its implications:

Faith being one and the same, nor who is able to say much about it, is having more, nor who little, is having less.

[On the next page follows an abstract:]

THE UNITY AND UNICITY OF FAITH AS A HERMENEUTICAL CRITERION ACCORDING TO IRENAEUS

(Adv. haer. I, 10, 2) Μιᾶς γὰρ καὶ τῆς αὐτῆς πίστεως οὔσης, οὔτε ὁ πολὺ περὶ αὐτῆς δυνάμενος εἰπεῖν ἐπλεόνασεν, οὔτε ὁ τὸ ὀλίγον, ἡλαττόνησε.

“Faith being one and the same, neither has the one who is able to say much about it more, nor the one who can say the little, less.”

- 2.1 Faith is not composed in an additive way. Therefore it is not possible to have only a part of faith. Faith is indivisible.
- 3 Every proposition of faith must virtually contain all other possible propositions of faith (“*reductio in unum mysterium*”). There are no other “mysteries of faith” than God’s self-communication.
- 4 No proposition of faith can be understood in its true sense without at least *implicitly* being understood as referring to all other propositions of faith.
- 5 It must be possible to sum up Christian faith in only one sentence which also *explicitly* contains all other possible propositions of faith:
- 6 **To believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God means to trust in his word that we and the entire world have been created within the eternal love between the Father and the Son.** (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 4, 2; III, 11, 6; iii, 19, 11; IV, 6, 7) The Church is the continuous transmission and reception in the Holy Spirit of the Word of God. (Cf. Adv. haer. III, 24, 1). And who trusts in being loved by God becomes aware and can give account of why he or she is able to be a loving person.
- 7 If faith consists in being filled of the Holy Spirit (cf 1 Cor 12:3), there cannot be several different faiths; this does not exclude that even in other religions Christ is already present in a hidden way, because everything has been and is created in Christ. This faith must be explained as directed to *everybody*. (Cf. Adv. haer. I, 10, 3)
- 8 This unity of faith cannot be explained otherwise than referring to God *creating everything out of nothing*, embracing everything and not being embraced by anything (Cf. Adv. haer. II, 25, 4; IV, 20, 2)

Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion 15: „Therefore, Lord, you are not only in comparison to what nothing greater can be thought (*quo nihil maius cogitari possit*) [= a statement about the world: God + world cannot be more than God; so the world is nothing but entire relation to God in total distinction from him], but you are something greater than can be thought [*quo nihil maius cogitari possit*]“[thus God cannot be thought in himself; one comprehends of him only what is entirely distinct of him, but remits entirely to him].

