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Oscar Cullmann: Scholar of Early Christianity, Doctor of the Contemporary Church. The Significance of His Contribution¹

For Professor Cullmann on His 90th Birthday

Born in Strasbourg on February 25, 1902, *O. Cullmann* studied theology and classics at the University where, among others, W. Baldensperger (e.g., *Der Prolog des vierten Evangeliums*, 1898) was to prove influential in C.'s interest in relating early Christianity to "non-conformist" Judaism. Lectures by A. Loisy and M. Goguel and a dissertation on the Pseudo-Clementines (1930) climaxed studies at the University of Paris before C. became Professor of NT and Church History at University Strasbourg (1930–38), Basel (1938–72), and simultaneously from 1948 Professor of early Christianity at Paris (Ecole des Hautes Etudes-Faculté des Lettres, Sorbonne and Faculté Libre de Théologie Protestante). Among many honors and honorary degrees: Commandeur Legion d'honneur; Commandeur Palmes académiques; and membership in the Dutch, British, French, and Acad. sc. lit. Mainz Academies.

1. Of the many significant contributions to biblical studies preeminent is C.'s conception of *Heilsgeschichte* which encompasses the entire biblical revelation and is viewed as the norm of its coherence and meaning. Growing out of the more pervasive "liberal" soil of his university training in which the quest for the "essence" of a historical movement was itself the essence of critical method, C. nevertheless welcomed form criticism as a more objective method of viewing the Gospels, as against the more subjective tendencies of the "liberal" Jesus. With this new tool C. struck upon what he was convinced was the essence of early Christian belief: "Jesus is Lord" (see *Works*). This early confession encapsulated the inescapable historicalness of the Jesus of Nazareth who had also transcended history and was worshipped as its Lord. This dialectic led C. to formulate the essential core of the NT writers' understanding of history in light of the Jesus events (*Christus und die Zeit*, 1946). Endeavoring in this seminal work to steer a path free of philosophical and moral-theological presuppositions/systems in biblical exegesis, C. acknowledged at the same time the importance of the current problematics, esp. the eschatological, as posed in the systems/schools of "consistent"

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eschatology (A. Schweitzer), “existential demythologizing” (R. Bultmann), and “theological” exegesis (K. Barth). The Christ event forms the “center” of God’s revelation to the world through Israel in two basic ways: i) Christ is the “mid-point” of history in that his life, death, and resurrection already fulfill God’s purposes for creation in defeating evil and establishing the re-creation of all things in a way in which the future “not yet” consummation of the world is decisively determined and assured. This “already-not yet” tension becomes characteristic of the present age in which Jesus is recognized in the church as Lord of the entire universe including the invisible “principalities and powers” that exert control over nations and systems (see also *Königsherrschaft Christi*). That this view of history is not an attempt to elucidate philosophical notions of “time” per se is evident in the second principle; ii) Universal history proceeds from its mythically perceived origins and end by means of “soteriological representation” through the events of Israel narrowing to a “remnant” and eventually to the one, Jesus Christ, widening again through the apostles to the church and to the whole world. In his *magnum opus*, *Heil als Geschichte* (1965), the relation between revelation and “events” or “history” is refined: salvation is not an event or history per se but history is an indispensable medium of God’s saving presence/action for the world. Salvation history, then, entails particular events within history that are experienced, interpreted, re-interpreted in light of later events and developing tradition(s), and themselves interpret history as a whole, preeminently as all history is summed up in Jesus Christ. “Saving events” in this sense thus give rise to faith (and not vice-versa) and the Christ events are ultimately responsible for the Gospels and indeed the whole of the NT. C.’s version of Heilsgeschichte thus stresses the essential character of history for biblical revelation vis-à-vis other ancient religions, guards against primarily experiential hermeneutics, and with its theocentricity ensures the fundamental and ongoing importance of Israel while highlighting the functions of Messiah with respect to past, present, and future of God’s saving history (see *Christologie des NTs*, 1957).

2. C.’s early interest in Jewish Christianity (see *Pseudoklementinen*) received a fruitful impulse from the publication of the Qumran scrolls (1949 →), for it now appeared that a line of development/influence could be drawn from a pre-Christian, Palestinian-based cultic-critical Judaism through other such “baptist” groups as John the Baptizer and on through early Christianity in the anti-Temple oriented Hellenists of Acts and to Johannine Christianity and beyond. With this “non-conformist” often esoterically and gnostically oriented Judaism as a second major type of Palestinian Judaism, the “orthodox” (e.g., Tübingen School) view of the linear development of Christianity

from a Palestinian to a Jewish-Hellenistic to a Gentile church now had to be discarded. In *Der johanneische Kreis* (1975) C. develops a triangular relation among the Hellenists, Johannine Christianity, and the book of Hebrews in consolidating his pioneering and enduring insight that much of the earliest Christianity can only be properly understood as taking root from this non-conformist soil.

3. C.'s *Petrus* (1952) provided an important opening in the Protestant-Catholic dialogue and led to his invitation to the Second Vatican Council. His *Einheit durch Vielfalt* (1986) represents his most mature thinking about the ways and probabilities of church unity by showing that a Heilsgeschichte approach illuminates the unity of the church universal in the singular events of the Christ precisely through the various charismata and diverging structures bestowed to and elicited from the church by the Holy Spirit from the very beginning. It may well prove to be another important impetus in the ecumenical discussion proceeding into the twenty-first century.

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