

The Fulfillment of Man in Christ according to Walter Kasper

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Introduction

Walter Kasper in his book *Jesus the Christ*¹ and in a later article *Christology and Anthropology*² speaks about the relationship between anthropology and Christology. The key principle of Kasper is that the fulfilment of man is in Christ. This article describes this statement of Kasper, analysing his writings. The first part of the article explains the relationship between anthropology and Christology according to Kasper and the following part deals with the meaning of the statement that the fulfilment of human existence is in Christ, as presented by Kasper.

1. Anthropology and Christology

Kasper deals with the question of the relationship between Christology and anthropology starting from the facts of the Scripture and tradition. He says that the two approaches in current Christology – Christology from above and Christology from below – cannot be separated. After making an evaluation of the position of Rahner, Kasper presents his own view regarding the relationship between Christology and anthropology.

1 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, New York, 1976.

2 W. KASPER, "Christology and Anthropology" in *Theology and Church*, London, 1989.

1.1. The Facts of Scripture and Tradition

Kasper observes that the basis of the connection between Christology and anthropology lies in the Scripture itself. "The New Testament brings out the connection between Christology and anthropology by taking up the Old Testament statement that every human being is created in the image of God (Gen.1:27), and by calling Jesus Christ the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col.1:15), the image in which all reality was created and towards which it tends (1Cor. 8:6; Col.1:16)."³

Kasper points out that the theme of Rom.5.12-21 is the mutual relationship between Christology and anthropology. Paul stresses both the difference between Adam and Christ, as well as the incomparable and surpassing nature of Christ compared with Adam. Paul says that God has accepted every human being in Christ. He understands Adam in the light of Jesus Christ and at the same time makes the importance of Jesus Christ clear in the light of Adam.⁴

According to Kasper, the ontological statements about Jesus in the New Testament bring out the soteriological interest. They are the substantiation of the soteriological statements. The development of Christological doctrine in the patristic Church was also soteriologically motivated. At the same time the dogmatic development in the patristic Church shows also that Christ's significance for salvation is to be found in his Being.⁵

Kasper observes that the Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* presents anthropology as a necessary presupposition and measure of any Christology in the context of modern thought. Though the document has an anthropological starting point, Christology is the criterion of all the anthropological statements in the document. It proclaims Jesus Christ as the origin and end of true humanity. The Council Fathers make it clear that the mystery of man is revealed only in the light of the mystery of the incarnate Word.⁶

3 W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, London 1989, 73.

4 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 82-83.

5 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 74.

6 Cf. W. KASPER, "The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*", *Communio* 23 (1996), 137-140.

1.2. The Relationship between Christology 'From Below' and Christology 'From Above'

Kasper points out that the traditional Christology is considered as Christology 'from above' because it was centred on God's descent into the world. But Christology 'from below' starts from the human figure of Jesus. The Christology 'from below', since it begins with statements about anthropology, is easier to communicate to the men of today. But it runs the risk of reducing Christology to anthropology. On the contrary, Christology 'from above' is able to express more clearly the newness of the Christ event.⁷

According to Kasper, a responsible Christology 'from below' cannot exclude itself from the traditional Christology. Christology 'from above' is essential to authentic Christology because humanity's movement to God is possible only through God's prior movement towards humanity.⁸ So also the Christology 'from above' has to include the concern of the Christology 'from below' because Jesus' humanity is the operative and definitive sign of salvation.⁹ Thus Kasper maintains that the Christology 'from above' and Christology 'from below' cannot be divorced. They are to be considered together.

1.3. The Anthropological Significance of Christology

Before explaining his own position, Kasper makes a critical evaluation of the transcendental Christology of Karl Rahner. Rahner presents Incarnation as the unique highest instance of the essential realization of human reality. For him, Christology is a self-transcendent anthropology and anthropology is deficient Christology. In other words, Christology is the unique fulfillment of anthropology. Hence everyone who fully accepts his life as a human being has thereby also implicitly accepted Christ.¹⁰

7 Cf. W. KASPER, "The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*", 136.

8 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 247.

9 Cf. W. KASPER, "Orientations in Current Christology", *Theology Digest* 31 (1984), 107-108.

10 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 48-49. According to Rahner, man's freedom belongs to his existence. Freedom is the capacity to do something final and definitive. It is the capacity of a subject to achieve his final and irrevocable self. In this sense, freedom is the capacity for the eternal. Cf. K. RAHNER, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, London 1978, 95-96.

Kasper says that Rahner made the universality of belief in Christ and the salvation offered by Jesus Christ theologically comprehensible in a new way. But if we adopt so anthropologically orientated Christology, we are cancelling the specific reference of Christianity by philosophical speculation.¹¹ Kasper criticizes Rahner for not taking into account history sufficiently. He says: "The constitutive tension between historical reality and transcendental possibility discloses the basic problem of Rahner's approach."¹²

According to Kasper, we cannot abandon the substantial underivability of the Christ-event. We should not relativize the fact that the idea of the absolute Redeemer has been realized in Jesus of Nazareth and nowhere else. We have to acknowledge the fact that what we hope for in the deepest part of our being and nature has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ in a way which surpasses all expectation.¹³

The anthropological significance of Christology is Christ's being for others. Christ's being for others is founded on his being in itself. His pro-existence presupposes his pre-existence. The Trinitarian being of God revealed in Christ's pro-existence leads to a metaphysics of love. The centre of this metaphysics is not substance, but the category of person. This metaphysics based on the person can take up the anthropological concerns.¹⁴

1.4. The Relationship between Anthropology and Christology

According to Kasper, Christology is a substantial determination of anthropology, which as such must remain open. However great be the similarity between anthropology and Christology, the dissimilarity is still greater. Anthropology is the grammar, which God uses to express himself. But the grammar as such is available for a great number of pronouncements. It is concretely decided only through the actual life of Jesus. The idea of the absolute Redeemer is made actual in Jesus of Nazareth, and nowhere else.¹⁵

Kasper gives three points of reflection on the relationship between Christology and Anthropology.

11 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 50.

12 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 50.

13 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 51.

14 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 92.

15 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 51.

1. Christology presupposes anthropology. The Christian faith stands up for the liberty of the human beings. It advocates for the protection of the transcendence of the human person. Christology presupposes the human being as the free determining subject and tries to convince him by virtue of truth of his conscience. The Christological definition is not, therefore, a definition from outside. It is the fulfilment of the undefined openness of human beings.¹⁶
2. Christology presupposes that men and women are open beings capable of growth and advancement. Christology presupposes that what is undeducibly new belongs intrinsically to their nature. Christology is the undeducible and surpassing fulfillment of the hope of men and women. Faith opens human beings for God, who is the only possible determination and fulfillment of the human being's infinite openness. So human beings find their fulfillment by recognizing God as God.¹⁷
3. The Christological determination and completion of human beings is at the same time the crisis of the definition which human beings as sinners have given themselves. The Christian message of grace is indissolubly linked with the message of judgement.¹⁸

Kasper sums up by saying that theology has an anthropological dimension and it should adopt a positive attitude to anthropology. But theology must remain theology and should not be reduced into anthropology.¹⁹ He says: "Christology calls attention to the fundamental problem to which the anthropological approach leads. Anthropology is therefore surpassed by Christology, which defines man's purpose and goal as his humanization through a divinisation which man himself cannot realize."²⁰

2. The Fulfillment of Man in Christ

Kasper points out that Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man. He says that the determination and fulfilment of man is in Jesus Christ and speaks of the basic features of the human existence as determined by Jesus Christ. He also describes the relationship between the

16 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 83-84.

17 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 84.

18 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 84.

19 Cf. W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, 92-93.

20 W. KASPER, "The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*", 140

uniqueness and the universality of Jesus Christ through a pneumatologically orientated Christology.

2.1. Jesus Christ – The Mediator between God and Man

Kasper explains in the following way that Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man. It is the testimony of the scripture that Jesus speaks and acts as one who stands in God's place. He is God's reign and God's self-communicating love in person. In Jesus Christ we find an actual example of being human, that of living a human life for God and for others.²¹

Jesus has a universal significance through his representation. He says: "His transcendence to his fellow man is the expression of his transcendence to God. As in relation to God he is wholly existence in receptivity (obedience), so in relation to us he is wholly existence in devotion and representation. In this dual transcendence he is mediator between God and men."²²

Kasper argues that the mediation of Jesus Christ is not contradictory to man's nature because man is essentially mediation. A human being only exists in relationships, both horizontal and vertical levels. Man is the being in the centre and he is realized only in relationships. The mediation of Jesus Christ is the deepest fulfilment of man's nature. Man as person is the indeterminate mediation between God and man. But in Jesus Christ this receives from God its specific form, plenitude and perfection.²³

2.2. Jesus Christ- The Fulfilment of Humanity

According to Kasper, Jesus Christ is not only the final self-definition of God, but also the final definition of the world and man. The eschatological fullness of time is attained in Christ. Therefore the meaning of reality as a whole comes to light in him.²⁴ He says: "We know man and God only in and from history, ultimately in fact from the history and fate of Jesus of Nazareth... In Jesus Christ we are faced with a new possibility and actual example of being human, that of living a human life for God and for others."²⁵

21 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 216-217.

22 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 217.

23 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 246-247.

24 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 185.

25 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 245.

While speaking about the hypostatic union in Jesus, Kasper starts from the history and fate of Jesus of Nazareth. His starting point is Jesus' obedience to 'his father' and in his service 'for us'. Jesus' obedience to the Father is a response to God's love. He interprets the hypostatic union as an ontological expression of the biblical statement that God has manifested and communicated himself in Jesus Christ as love. God has showed himself as man's God and as a God who radically gives and communicates himself in Jesus Christ. Jesus' radical unity with the Father is shown in that he is the Father's incarnate love.²⁶

The resurrection of Jesus, according to Kasper, is a redemptive event and has a universal perspective. It is an event open to the future. It implies the eschatological fulfilment of man in his wholeness, a new humanity and a new world. In the Resurrection of Jesus, God accepted Jesus' existence for others and finally established peace with the world.²⁷

Kasper says that Jesus Christ is the key, the centre and the goal of human history. He is the measure and criterion of all history. Jesus Christ is the final destination of mankind and of every individual. The New Testament testifies to this fact.²⁸ "Man has to acknowledge that in Jesus Christ everything which he hopes for is indeed fulfilled, but in an ultimately underivable way."²⁹ Jesus Christ is God's final word. That means in Jesus Christ God has given himself wholly and without reservation. "With Jesus Christ, history has not come to an end in a temporal sense, but it has indeed attained its completion (*Voll-endung*)"³⁰

Kasper further maintains that Jesus Christ is the universal word. All things have been created for Christ and in him (Jn 1:3, 1Cor 8:6, Col 1:15) and he is the recapitulation of all things (Eph 1:10). Since all creation has its foundation and its final goal in Jesus Christ, he is not only the fulfilment of the salvation history, but also brings the history of the Gentiles' and cultures to completion. Jesus Christ is not only God's final word; he is the universal word.³¹

26 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 245-247.

27 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 154-155.

28 Cf. W. KASPER, "Hope in the Final Coming of Jesus Christ in Glory", *Communio* 12 (1985), 376.

29 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 51.

30 W. KASPER, "Jesus Christ: God's Final Word", *Communio* 28 (2001), 62.

31 Cf. W. KASPER, "Jesus Christ: God's Final Word", 62-63.

2.3. The Basic Features of the Human Existence as Determined by Jesus Christ

Kasper speaks of four features of human existence as determined by Jesus Christ.

1. Human existence is existence in receptivity and therefore existence in thanksgiving. Man cannot himself get away from the essential structures of his existence. Man longs for the unconditional, definitive and the absolute in his freedom. Man can receive the fulfilment of his existence only as a gift. Therefore grace and salvation are the gifts of human existence.³²
2. Human freedom is freedom liberated and set free. Human freedom is conditioned freedom and it is to a large extent wasted freedom. As long as man is conditioned by finite values and finite goods, he is not truly free. Only the relation with the infinite and absolute freedom of God can make man free. God does not oppress man, but sets his creative forces free.³³
3. Human freedom is perfected in obedience. As existence in receptivity, man is wholly and entirely response. He exists in the act of listening. This reception is at the same time the commitment to accept demands, making oneself available and being ready to serve. In the light of Christ human freedom does not mean despotism. Despotism is not freedom but un-freedom. Christian freedom consists not in control, but in being available. Availability is unreserved openness and constant readiness. That means a person is truly free when he is also free of himself so that he can be free for others. What Jesus teaches us about human existence is this: human existence is availability for love.³⁴
4. Faith is itself the quintessence of man's salvation. The reality of salvation as it came in Jesus Christ consists in the fact that in Jesus God has entered into the human realm and in doing so has opened up a new beginning. That happened through the obedience of Jesus who laid himself open completely to the coming of the reign of God. Jesus' obedience is the actual way in which salvation exists in history.³⁵

32 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 213.

33 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 213-214.

34 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 214.

35 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 214.

2.4. The Uniqueness and the Universality of Jesus Christ

Kasper affirms the universality of Jesus Christ without diminishing his uniqueness. He does this by presenting the relation between the Spirit of Jesus Christ and the human spirit that is operative in the history of humanity.

We can find in the Bible statements about the universal operation of God's Spirit throughout the history of mankind. These statements are to be seen in connection with the anthropological statements about man's self-transcendence. Man has the capacity for going beyond himself. He can find the meaning and fulfilment of his existence only where he opens himself to the Spirit of God. Therefore, everywhere where man abandons self and opens himself in love to God and to his neighbour, the Spirit of God is at work. But at the same time we can find in the history where man refuses to the Spirit of God. The influence of God's Spirit appears in the history of mankind only in a disfigured and disguised way.³⁶

Kasper points out that there is only one instance in the human history where the Spirit is found in an undistorted and unique way. That is Jesus Christ. The universal activity of the Spirit reached its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Therefore the share in the complete fullness of the Spirit is possible only through Jesus Christ. God has wholly, definitively and unreservedly poured himself into the concrete person and history of Jesus Christ.³⁷

Conclusion

Kasper presents Jesus Christ as the new possibility and actual example of being human, as the determination and fulfilment of humanity. Kasper does this without detriment to the uniqueness of Jesus. Jesus is not only a human being in whom all the human potentialities and capacities are seen in its perfection, but also he is the unique mediator between God and man and in whom God has made his specific form, plenitude and perfection. Thus we can say that Kasper has succeeded in presenting the fact that "in Jesus Christ alone the hopes of mankind have been fulfilled in a unique and unsurpassable way".³⁸

36 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 266-267.

37 Cf. W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 267.

38 W. KASPER, *Jesus the Christ*, 267.