

PAUL'S "πίστις Χριστοῦ" AS A FUNDAMENTAL FACTOR FOR PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT:

Although religions teach peace, hope and love, massive acts of violence have been taking place in their names. Any religion can become a home of violence and fanaticism, and Christianity is no exception. The sacred texts of a religion influence and determine the views of an adherent on the world and other human beings. It is the sacred scripture that governs the life and world views of a Christian. This article treats the debates of the scholars on the Pauline usage of "πίστις Χριστοῦ" and proposes a relevant interpretation which will help the Church's peaceful co-existence in multi-religious societies.

Key words:

πίστις (*pistis*) = faith; πίστις Χριστοῦ (*pistis Christou*) = "faith in/of Christ"; τὸ σπέρμα = the seed

INTRODUCTION

Violent acts reported very often by the mass media give us the impression that "religion" and "violence" are very much interrelated. In the name of religion, people are ready to die through whatever means available, even by exerting violence towards people belonging to other religions. Although religion is seen as a medium of peace, hope and love, many scholars frequently argue that religion legitimizes violence or even plays the main role as the source of inspiration for violence.¹

Normally violence is defined in terms of its physical consequences and is often connected with abuse of power and force.² In reality, violence refers not only to a physical violence but also to a non-physical violence, because many now consider verbal abuse, making jokes at the expense of ethnic or religious groups and negative stereotyping, harmful and violent actions.³

Violence exercised in the name of religion is not a monopoly of a particular

religion. Any religion, whether monotheist or non-monotheist, can inspire its believers for violence.⁴ We have witnessed recently the constant growth of religious fanatical movements in countries like India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, where the majority adhere to non-monotheistic religions. Therefore, every religion can become a home of religious fanaticism, and Christianity is no exception.

Sadly, Christianity experiences inner splits and divisions into many different communities. In an effort to build separate identities and boundaries that results in the "exclusion of the others",⁵ these Christian communities create strong barriers between themselves and others, and cause scandals of divisions and hostilities. Johann-Albrecht Meylahn's statement rightly reflects the current situation of the Christian communities:

Many religious communities are extremely exclusive and hostile towards others, and this hostility is often founded, condoned,

and perpetuated by a specific reading of the sacred texts of these communities.⁶

Mouton sees different interpretations of the sacred scriptures as a cause of the divisions:

"Christian individual and collective identity, as well as praxis, is formed and shaped by Scriptures, as the Bible plays a vital role in shaping and influencing the contemporary audiences' understanding of God, their identities, and public ethos".⁷

This article discusses a Pauline phrase "*pistis Christou*" and shows how its understanding can influence and determine a Christian's attitude towards other religions. A scriptural passage can transform a person's life but sometimes it can also be a source of one's friendly or hostile mentality towards others. The right understanding of this phrase will certainly contribute for the Church's peaceful co-existence in multi-religious societies.

This article discusses a Pauline phrase "*pistis Christou*" and shows how its understanding can influence and determine a Christian's attitude towards other religions. "Faith" (*pistis*) is a very prominent theme in Paul's writing and for him it is an indispensable means of justification/salvation (Rom 3: 28; 5: 1; Gal 2: 16; 3: 8,11, 24; Phil 3:9 etc.). But sometimes there is ambiguity in its meaning and it is not clear whose "Faith" Paul means: faith of a believer or faith (faithfulness) of Christ? A one-sided understanding of it can be dangerous and lead to controversies. Thus a scriptural passage can help in transforming a person's life but sometimes it can also be a source of one's friendly or hostile mentality towards others. The right understanding of the phrase "*pistis Christou*" will certainly contribute for the Church's peaceful co-existence in multi-religious societies.

"πίστις Χριστοῦ" IN PAULINE LETTERS AND ITS DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Arland J. Hultgren⁸ enumerates the seven occasions where the apostle Paul uses the term "*pistis*" followed by the genitive form of "Jesus" or a Christological title, "Christ" or "Son of God", or both (Rom. 3:26

"Jesus"; Gal. 2:16b, Phil. 3:9 "Christ"; Rom. 3:22, Gal. 3:22 "Jesus Christ"; Gal. 2:16a "Christ Jesus" and Gal. 2:20 "the son of God").⁹

This phrase lies at the heart of Paul's theology of "justification by faith" and it is a very ambiguous phrase understood differently by various Christian traditions. Literally it can be translated into "faith of Christ" but linguistically it is open to different interpretations. There are mainly two different arguments in its interpretation: Some commentators¹⁰ argue for an objective genitive, rendered "Faith in Christ", i.e., the faith of the believer in Christ, while others¹¹ argue for the subjective genitive, rendered "Faith of Christ" or "Christ's faithfulness". Terminologically speaking, the objective genitive can also be called the "anthropological" reading and the subjective genitive the "Christological" reading; the objective genitive generally emphasizes human belief, while the subjective genitive generally emphasizes Christ's faithfulness.¹²

Anthropological Reading of "πίστις Χριστοῦ"

In this reading, the genitive "Χριστοῦ" is read as an objective genitive, which implies that "justification" comes through a believer's faith in Jesus Christ. The supporters of this reading argues that when Paul uses the "*pistis Christou*" formulation, the center of his interest is the faith of the believer, and the "faith which is in and of Christ," i.e., the faith of the believer which comes forth as Christ is proclaimed in the gospel (cf. Rom. 10:8, 17; Gal. 3:2, 5).¹³ For them, the presence or absence of the definite article in the phrase is decisive. Hultgren says that Paul never uses an article before the nouns in "*pistis Christou*" formulation, but in two instances¹⁴ he uses it before "*pistis*" followed by a genitive which is clearly to be understood as subjective.¹⁵ If "*pistis*" has a definite article, then the following genitive is subjective, otherwise the genitive is objective. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts conclude:

"The use of *pistis* as a head term with a prepositional specifier, without an intervening article and followed by an element in the genitive, provides further

evidence that, at least from a linguistic standpoint, when Paul used the phrase *pistis Christou* he was indicating that Christ was the proper object of faith".¹⁶

Another explanation for this reading centers on the relationship between "works of law" and "*pistis Christou*". Since these two terms are often paired (cf. Rom 3:28, 4:5.13-16, 9:32, 10:4; Gal 2:16, 3:2.5.11-12.23-26; Phil 3:9), "works of law" is seen as antagonist and "*pistis Christou*" as protagonist. It is maintained that "the works of law" is a human work, and so "*pistis Christou*" must also entail a human response. As such, "*pistis Christou*" must be a person's faith in Christ.¹⁷

Matlock¹⁸ attests to the anthropological reading by providing a rhetorical analysis based on antithesis, parallelism, and repetition of the four "*pistis Christou*" verses in Gal 2:16, 3:22; Rom 3:22 and Phil 3:9, where there is an additional verb or noun phrase employing "believe" or "faith". As an example I give below Matlock's structural analysis of Gal 2:16;¹⁹

- Ia a person is justified *not by works of law* but through faith in Jesus Christ (16a)
- Ib We have come to believe in Jesus Christ (16b)
- IIa so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, *not by works of law* (16c)
- IIb because all flesh will *not* be justified *by works of law* (16d)

This structure is built around two antithesis: Ia and IIa. These are simply inverse formulations of the same antithesis: not by works of law, but faith in Jesus Christ (Ia); faith in Christ, not works of law (IIa). In each case, the final element of the antithesis is reiterated in an amplifying clause in Ib and IIb. Matlock claims that this parallel structure supports the objective genitive reading of "*pistis Christou*".

Another point of their argument is Paul's quotation of Gen 15:6 where Abraham is said to be remembered as a model of faith for believing in God rather than being faithful to God (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). Following the example of Abraham's faith, humans must have faith in Christ.²⁰

Christological Reading of "πίστις Χριστοῦ"

The arguments that favor the anthropological reading are one way or another challenged by the supporters of the Christological reading. For instance, their view on the juxtaposition of "*works of law*" and "*pistis Christou*" as a contrast between "human faith" and "human work" is seen by the Christological supporters as a contrast between "divine action" and "human action". Markus Barth writes as follows:

If Christ's own counted nothing, and if men were totally delivered to the sincerity, depth, certainty of their own faith, how could any man ever be saved? Doubts about himself and his own honesty would trouble him without end. But there is no doubt about the perfect faith of Jesus Christ.²¹

In the Christological reading, "Χριστοῦ" is taken as subjective genitive, which means that justification comes through the faith-(fulness) of Christ.

The supporters of this reading argue that in a Pauline construction when "*pistis*" is followed by a person in the genitive case, it never refers to faith in that person.²² Therefore "*pistis Christou*" implies the faith or faithfulness of Jesus himself.

Another argument centers on Rom 3:21-22, which speaks about "*the disclosure of the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe*". This verse suggests human faith as the means of the revelation of God's righteousness. But contrary to this, Campbell argues:

Human "faith" cannot function instrumentally within a process of divine disclosure. This is semantically impossible. "Faith" does not function actually to disclose information; it does not make something that is invisible visible. This is not what it means or denotes. Yet these texts speak of disclosure, and from the divine realm to the human. Something is progressing from God to the world, and this is by means of "faith". Hence Christ, again, is the most obvious reading of this data.²³

Under the Christological reading, therefore, the righteousness of God has been revealed in the faithfulness of Christ.²⁴

The Christological interpreters find another support in Gal 3:23 where St. Paul speaks about the arrival and revelation of faith "*pistis*". According to many commentators,²⁵ the "*pistis*" with the definite articles in 3:23 refers back to the phrase of "*pistis Jesou Christou*" in 3:22. Here "*pistis*" is the subject of "coming" (Gal 3:23a, 25a). Betz said: "*pistis* describes the occurrence of a historical phenomenon, not the act of believing of an individual".²⁶ "*Pistis*" is objectified as an eschatological element that intrudes into the world to set free those who are under the enslaving power of the law (3:23-25).²⁷ Moreover, Paul equates the coming of "*pistis*" with the coming of "τὸ σπέρμα", that is, Christ (3:19).²⁸ It is concluded, therefore, that Paul has in mind with the phrase "*pistis Christou*" the faithfulness of Christ understood as an eschatological event.²⁹

Every argument from the Christological side also attracts criticism from their counterparts. For example, as a rebuttal against the Christological reading on Gal 3:23, Dunn claims that the coming of "*pistis*" is the coming of the era of faith, which is the human response that is the necessary complement to the coming of the seed (τὸ σπέρμα).³⁰

Against the Christological reading of the "*pistis Christou*" that connects salvation of mankind and Christ's faithfulness, Fee writes: "Nowhere else does Paul in Plain speech (rather than in a prepositional phrase with a usual meaning) say something about our salvation resting on Christ's faithfulness."³¹

COMPLEMENTARITIES OF THE TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF "πίστις Χριστοῦ"

As we have seen, there is no consensus in the interpretations of this phrase and therefore, we have to be content with what Jewett said:

Both the subjective or objective theories as currently presented have loopholes, and therefore a high degree of certainty should not be claimed in deciding between them.³²

Choi also admitted the notoriously difficulty of this Pauline expression to interpret.³³ Having noticed the weakness of reading Paul only grammatically and syntactically without a wider theological lens, Easter encourages both groups to move beyond the immediate context of the "*pistis Christou*" passages to the whole of Paul's theology.³⁴

Both interpretations offered by the scholars have their own right and authority. However, Hooker advises that "*pistis Christou*" is best understood not in terms of *either* a subjective *or* an objective genitive, as if they were opposed, but rather 'concentrically':

We should think of it [the phrase *pistis Christou*] not as a polarised expression, which suggests antithesis, but as a concentric expression, which begins, always, from the faith of Christ himself, but which includes, necessarily, the answering faith of believers, who claim that faith as their own.³⁵

We cannot stress one interpretation of the phrase in order to reject the other. For both interpretations, "faith in Christ" and "Christ's faith(fullness)" are complementary. Through the anthropological reading, a believer will grow in his/her personal relationship with Christ through faith and this growth will make him/her a good follower of Christ. Through the Christological reading, a believer will respect other religious traditions because he/she knows that the saving works of Christ, accomplished in faithful obedience to the will of God the Father, through his suffering, death and resurrection has a universal aspect, i.e., for all mankind.

RELEVANT INTERPRETATION OF "πίστις Χριστοῦ" IN THE CONTEXT OF A MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

This phrase occurs within theologically crucial sections of both Romans and Galatians, in passages that have provided the foundation for the Reformation understanding of "justification by grace through faith".³⁶ This understanding compels the supporters of the anthropological reading to give so much importance on the need of human response in faith because, they said,

only this will affect the total transformation of the self which Paul wants (Rom 12:2).³⁷

But questions arise from the anthropological reading alone: Is "faith" in Christ the only possible means of justification? Will only believers in Christ be justified? Is Christ's accomplishment for the salvation of mankind not so efficacious as a believer's faith? If it is so, "faith" becomes a condition to attain salvation and is reduced to a mere human achievement.

If we understand human faith in Christ as the only means for justification, we will not appreciate others' religion. Considering one's own religion the best or absolute reality while regarding other religions as miserable or contemptible, will not help one grow in his/her own belief nor live harmoniously in a multi-religious society.

There were, in fact, many people who had died without having heard of Jesus Christ or Christianity. They are many people, who are born in a situation, where there is not a single possibility to hear about Christ. There are many people who, though they are not Christians, live the virtues that we Christians value as God's commandments. Shall we condemn these people to hell just because they do not have "faith" in Christ? In this context, the anthropological reading of the "*pistis Christou*" is inconclusive.

The reading of the "*pistis Christou*" from the Christological position also is not without difficulties. This reading implies that Christ has won salvation for all and so justification comes through the faith/faithfulness of Christ regardless of human response. This understanding may discourage the missionary zeal and underestimate the adherence to the moral and theological teachings of the Church. This is another extreme which Paul himself tries to rebut in almost all his letters.

The commission of Jesus Christ to go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel is still valid (cf. Mt 28:19-20). His of the world is still binding (Mt 5:13-14). Paul himself was a zealous missionary among the Gentiles after encountering the risen Lord (cf. Gal 1:16, 23) and he constantly called

the Christians to live according to the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Gal 5:16-26).

Therefore, the interpretation of "*pistis Christou*" in a combined Christological and anthropological readings will be more helpful, relevant and applicable to the life of an individual Christian and of the whole Church that finds herself in multiethnic and multi-religious societies.

This combined Christological and anthropological understanding of "*pistis Christou*" is in conformity to the teachings of the second Vatican council in "*Nostra Aetate*"³⁸ and "*Unitatis Redintegratio*".³⁹ The Church is convinced of her mission of proclaiming Jesus as Savior of the world, but at the same time she acknowledges and respects everything that is true and holy in other religions. For every human being is created in the image of God and the cross of Christ is the sign of God's allembacing love and a fountain of every grace.

CONCLUSION

The world desperately needs the peaceful co-existence of her inhabitants in spite of differences in their culture, religion and race. The sacred scripture invites us to be peacemakers⁴⁰ and the Church continues to reiterate this invitation. In order to achieve this goal, the sound understanding of the scripture is very important. Sometimes a scriptural passage may be ambiguous in its meaning and implications as is the case with the Pauline phrase "*pistis Christou*". In this article the two different interpretations of "*pistis Christou*" are reviewed and the inadequacy of interpreting a biblical text solely on the basis of lexical, grammatical or linguistic level is proved. Then a combined understanding of the two different interpretations is proposed. If "*pistis Christou*" is understood and lived as it is proposed in this article, it will not only enhance the Church's peaceful co-existence in multiethnic and multi-religious societies but also help her to live and bear witness to the Gospel of Christ peacefully but convincingly.

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ENDNOTE

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- ² Ibid., 5.
- ³ Ibid., 6.
- ⁴ Ibid., 15.
- ⁵ Ibid., 21.
- ⁶ J. A. Meylahn, 2014, "Responsibility, God, and Society: The Cry of the Other in the Sacred Texts as a Challenge towards Responsible Global Citizenship", in: Jakobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth & Christopher M. Hays (eds.), *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck), 624.
- ⁷ E. Mouton, "The reorienting potential of biblical narrative as resource for Christian ethos, with reference to Luke 7:36-50", paper present at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting San Antonio, TX, 20-23rd Nov. 2004, 3.
- ⁸ A. J. Hultgren, "The Pistis Christou Formulation in Paul", *NovT* 22 (1980), 248.
- ⁹ In this article, I will use "*pistis Christou*" for all the variations.
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- ¹¹ Richard Longenecker, 1990, *Galatians* (Word, Dallas), 87-8; F. J. Matera, 1983, *Galatians* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville), 93-4; L. T. Johnson, 1997, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Crossroad, New York), 58-61.
- ¹² M. C. Easter, "The Pistis Christou Debate: Main Arguments and Responses in Summary", *CBR* 9 (2010), 33-34.
- ¹³ Hultgren, 257.
- ¹⁴ τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ "the faithfulness of God" (Rom 3:3); τῆς ... πίστεως τοῦ ... Ἀβραάμ "the faith of our Father Abraham" (Rom 4:12).
- ¹⁵ Hultgren, 253.
- ¹⁶ Stanley E. Porter - Andrew W. Pitts, "πίστις with a Preposition and Genitive Modifier: Lexical, Semantic, and Syntactic Considerations in the πίστις Χριστοῦ Discussion", in: M. F. Bird - P. M. Sprinkle (eds.), 2009, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Paternoster, Milton Keynes), 53.
- ¹⁷ Easter, 37.
- ¹⁸ R. Barry Matlock, "Saving Faith: The Rhetoric and Semantic of πίστις in Paul": in Bird - Sprinkle (eds.), 73-89.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 84.
- ²⁰ Easter, 37-8.
- ²¹ M. Barth, "The Faith of the Messiah", *HeyJ* 10 (1969), 368-69.
- ²² Easter, 39.
- ²³ D. A. Campbell, 2005, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (T & T Clark, London) 197.
- ²⁴ Easter, 39.
- ²⁵ F. F. Bruce, 1982, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 181; James D. G. Dunn, 1993, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Hendrickson, Peabody), 197; R. Y. Fung, 1994, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich.), 168.
- ²⁶ Betz, *Galatians*, 176 n. 120.
- ²⁷ J. L. Martyn, 1997, *Galatians* (Doubleday, New York) 362.
- ²⁸ R. B. Hays, 2002, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Structure of Galatians 3: 1-4:11* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids), 231; I. G. Wallis, 1995, *The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Traditions* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), 131.
- ²⁹ H. Choi, "ΠΙΣΤΙΣ in Galatians 5:5-6: Neglected Evidence for the Faithfulness of Christ", *JBL* 124 (2005), 476.
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- ³¹ G. Fee, 2007, *Pauline Theology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Hendrickson, Peabody), 225.
- ³² Jewett, *Romans*, 277.
- ³³ Choi, 467.
- ³⁴ Easter, 44.
- ³⁵ M. D. Hooker, "ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ", *NTS* 35 (1989) 341.
- ³⁶ D. L. Stubb, "The Shape of Soteriology and the Pistis Christou Debate", *SJT* 61 (2008), 138.
- ³⁷ R. A. Harrisville, "Before πίστις Χριστοῦ: The Objective Genitive as Good Greek", *NovT* 48 (2006), 357.

- ³⁸ In this document, the Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.
- ³⁹ In this document, the Church exhorts the Catholic faithful to be concerned for their separated brethren with respect and affection and to avoid negative expressions, judgments or actions against them.
- ⁴⁰ Mt. 5:9.

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