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Christological Issues In The New Testament

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After a historical survey of the christological debate in New Testament scholarship, we shall examine the main issues underlying the debate.

I. Historical Survey

'Each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus: that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus'.¹

Such was A. Schweitzer's observation at the outset of his survey of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* that ran through the 18th and the 19th century. Under its austere scientific garb, this quest reflects the various ideological currents that succeeded each other or overlapped each other at that time. Thus there was the revolutionary Jesus of Reimarus, the romantic Jesus of Renan, the dialectic Jesus of the Tübingen School, the rational Jesus of Paules and Venturini, the liberal Jesus of Harnack, and also, at a less scholarly level, various reconstitutions of Jesus on the socialist, marxist, national-socialist, pietistic, activist or ascetic type.

All these attempts, which span the whole of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, have 3 points in common:

1. a historical optimism that presumes that it is possible to reach the historical Jesus beyond 'mythological' or tendentious accretions.
2. a historicism that presumes that the historical Jesus is the only and real ground of the Christian faith.
3. a positivism that looked at the historical Jesus for a way to steer clear of the Chalcedonian dogma, or contradiction.

The quest for the historical Jesus corresponds, more or less consciously, to a de-ontologizing of faith.² History was supposed to take over from christology, to provide the modern man with the new foundations of Christian thinking and life. This is possibly why the

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¹ A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, London, 1954, p. 4.

² Cf. the explicit statement of A. Schweitzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

'quest' had less appeal in cultural areas where confidence was kept in ontological christology, i.e., in Catholic, Anglican or Orthodox circles. On account of their background, theologians like Rosmini, C. Gore, Bulgakov, Teilhard de Chardin could not be so preoccupied with the historical Jesus as A. Schweitzer.

This historical optimism had already been seriously shaken by the mythological interpretation of D. F. Strauss (1835). The value of a historical reconstitution of Jesus had also been undermined by Schweitzer's portrait of a Jesus very much conditioned by the 'eschatological', or rather apocalyptic, outlook of his times. This Jesus deluded by intense apocalyptic expectations could not simply be modernised and cut to the size of our ideologies. Schweitzer did not put it that way; yet his work paved the way for hermeneutic, for a search for meaning beyond the historical data. From Schweitzer to K. Barth, there is but one step and from there on to Bultmann. History had been dethroned as the ultimate criterion. One was now brought

'beyond the well known "awe in the presence of history", which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation had been surrendered'³

Bultmann gave a strong scientific basis to this new orientation. Form criticism led him paradoxically to show the limitations of the historical approach through the use of the historico-critical method. He gave also the new approach theological vigour by expressing it in the framework of an articulated reflection on the relationship between faith and history. In a way, it is regrettable that theological popularisation has identified the name of Bultmann with 'demythologizing' only. Bultmann's contribution was much more positive. He restored the 'dignity of interpretation' and opened exegesis to the hermeneutic prospects. He re-emphasized the faith dimension of the Christian understanding, a dimension which had been obliterated in the historicism of the previous age. As a consequence, he brought again to biblical criticism the depth of theological insight.⁴

Important as he was, Bultmann did not cover the whole field. The Quest for the historical Jesus continued. J. Jeremias brought to it sharper tools of analysis and a greater humility as regards the possibilities of history. In a way, C. H. Dodd and his disciples may be considered as continuators of Schweitzer; but they converted his thoroughgoing eschatologism into realized or self-realizing eschatology. Also C. H. Dodd saw beyond the 'historical Jesus'. His important little book on *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development*⁵ particularly was an interesting attempt to relate the Christ of faith and the Jesus of History by studying how the Early Church had viewed this relation-

³ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford, 1968, p. 9.

⁴ In *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961*, London 1966, S. Neill is right to situate Bultmann at the end of a chapter entitled 'Re-enter Theology', pp. 222-235.

⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development*, London, 1936.

ship. *The Apostolic Preaching* was followed shortly by *History and the Gospel*⁶, another short but important work that stressed both the essentially historical character of the Gospel and its eschatological import.

In a different style, O. Cullmann shared the same concern, especially in *Christ and Time*⁷ and *Salvation in History*⁸. Cullmann's thesis is that history is essential to the core of Christian revelation; revelation is given in and through a history of salvation of which Jesus Christ is the central point. Applying his method to christology in *Christology of the New Testament*⁹, Cullmann makes an analysis of Jesus' titles and concludes that the New Testament authors understood christology in terms of redemptive history and not of mythology or metaphysics.

In the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Cullmann is classified as a representative of the 'reaction of Conservative German Theology' to Bultmann¹⁰. This is inaccurate since Cullmann is Swiss and not German. It is also unfair since there is much more to Cullmann than 'reaction' to Bultmann. Cullmann's concern for history is no return to historicism. Like Bultmann, Cullmann is concerned with interpretation and faith. He does not view history as a substitute to faith. His interest is for *salvation* history, the divine *oikonomia*. His basic problem is the relationship between *sarx* and *logos*, the historical and the eschatological. This endeavour deserves more than the two casual mentions and the two footnotes which S. Neill has attributed to him in his survey¹¹.

It could even be said in a way that Cullmann won the day in the sense that Bultmann's disciples have returned to the historical Jesus. But the New Quest of the Historical Jesus¹² is really new. It is post-Bultmanian. It remains very much concerned with hermeneutics and theological interpretation. It is also post-Cullmanian since it raises again the question of the connection between the Christ of the Christian Kerygma and the Jesus of Nazareth; unlike Bultmann and like Cullmann, they refuse to answer the question by a non-pertinet.

As an example of the post-Bultmanian approach, we may quote the views of W. Marxsen. In his studies on *Mark the Evangelist*¹³, he showed that for Mark the Gospel (in the pauline sense of the term, derived from Isaiah) is Jesus, i.e. the Good News of God's saving action is spelt out in the preaching and the actions of Jesus of

⁶ C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel*, London, 1938.

⁷ O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, London, 1951 (German original ed. 1946).

⁸ O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, London, 1967, (German or. ed. 1965).

⁹ O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, London, 1959, (German or. ed. 1957).

¹⁰ J. S. Kselman, *Modern New Testament Criticism*, in JBC, London, 1968, Vol. II, p. 16.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, pp. 175 and 309.

¹² Cf. J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, SBT, 25, London, 1959.

¹³ W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist*, Nashville, 1959, p. 148.

Nazareth; to Mk goes back the very idea of writing a Gospel, i.e., of announcing the Good News in terms of the kind of material provided in the Synoptic Tradition.

Marxsen's interpretation of the Resurrection reflects the same preoccupation to link up the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. The Resurrection means that 'the cause of Jesus continues'¹⁴. This is why he entitled another series of studies: *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*. . . "The designation "of Nazareth" is intended to bring out the fact that after Easter faith (in the risen Jesus) was no different in substance from the faith to which Jesus had already called men before Easter'¹⁵. The Resurrection is the X that makes the kerygma of Jesus of Nazareth still alive today.

Marxsen's study of Mark is at the same time a typical example of Redaction Criticism, another line of development of present day New Testament studies. Marxsen goes back to Jesus of Nazareth because Mark takes him there. This means that it is through the *interpretation* of Mark that we reach the Jesus of *history*. The claim of New Testament theology is no longer to reach history beyond theology, the event beyond the interpretation. The event is perceived in the interpretation. We go to Jesus through a faith witness adapted to a new situation. This raises new problems which we shall soon consider.

When we come to the present day situation, we notice that the pendulum has swung back towards the historical Jesus, in two groups which would not like to be accused of conservatism and yet show sometimes a startling naiveté as regards Gospel criticism.

On the one hand, there is the whole trend of thinking connected with the political Jesus. In connection with the Theology of Revolution the enquiry into Jesus' political attitude has been resumed: Eisler has been plagiarised by J. Carmichael: Brandon and Hengel have done more solid research. The studies of the 'freedom of Jesus' flourish¹⁶. On the other hand, the secular interpretation of the Gospel claims to return to the pure humanity of Jesus reinterpreted in terms of his relationship with men. One wonders whether we are not back at the old Quest for the historical Jesus refurbished for a new ideology. Of Van Buren particularly, it has been said that his is a 'neo-positivistic approach'¹⁷.

Finally mention should be made of the Jewish scholarship on Jesus: 'we owe much to the Jewish scholars, C. G. Montefiore, Martin Buber and others, who have written on the New Testament'¹⁸. The 'others' would be J. Klausner and especially now D. Flusser. Naturally they are more interested in Jehoshua of Nazareth than in the faith of the Church, and so lean spontaneously towards the side

¹⁴ W. Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, in *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection*, ed. C.F.D. Moule, SBTSS 8, London, 1968, p. 40.

¹⁵ W. Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, London, 1970, pp. 125f.

¹⁶ See for instance the special issue of *Concilium* 10/3, March, 1974.

¹⁷ B. Mondin, *New Trends in Christology*, in *Bib. ThB.* 4, 1974, p. 57.

¹⁸ S. Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

of the historical Jesus. Theirs is a respectful and even devotional attitude from without the Christian tradition. In this respect, they can be of special interest in our dialogue on Jesus with Hinduism.

II. The Issues

From this historical survey, the following issues appear to have been the main points of concern to the New Testament scholars.

1. *The historical Jesus*

As a historian the NT scholar is concerned about the possibility of knowing the Jesus of history from the available documents.

But, behind this factual question, looms the other question of the value of this knowledge if it is available. This knowledge is basic for scholars with horizons as widely different as J. Jeremias and J. B. Metz. For Bultmann on the contrary it amounts to a rejection of faith. For the proponents of the new Quest, the underlying issue is that which was already raised by the docetism and gnosticism of the New Testament times, the question of whether Jesus is a symbol, or the living and ultimate embodiment of God's dialogue with man.

This is a question that concerns us in India today, possibly on account of the deep affinities between Greece and India. The Indian tradition views history as bondage. In our dialogue with this tradition, what is the significance of the historical Jesus? The value of the historical coordinates of the Incarnation? Of its 'once-for-all-ness' in a time-less conception of salvation?

It is worth noting in this connection that the debate on the 'Unknown Christ of Hinduism'¹⁹ has led to further discussions on the relationship between Jesus of Palestine and this unknown Christ of India. Views have been expressed which are not unlike those of a 'leftist' critic of Bultmann, Ogden, for whom the point of the Christian claim

is not that the Christ is manifest only in Jesus and nowhere else but that the Word addressed to men everywhere in all events of their lives is none other than the word spoken in Jesus and in the preaching and sacraments of the Church. . . The love of God is indeed decisively revealed in Jesus the Christ but is by no means simply to be identified with him²⁰.

2. *The Continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.*

The distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is not specifically Bultmanian. It was already made by M. Kähler in a book published in 1892²¹. Kähler was a systematic theologian and he considered it 'the task of the dogmatic theologian to enter the list against the papacy of biblical scholars'. In a way, the distinction between Jesus and Christ is a basic Christian view. It goes back to the NT itself: 'God has made him both Lord and Christ (Christ of faith), this Jesus whom you crucified (Jesus of history)'

¹⁹ R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London, 1964.

²⁰ S. M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth*, New York, 1961, p. 156 and 173.

²¹ M. Kähler, *Der Sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus*, Leipzig, 1892, The English Translation was published only in 1964.

(Acts 2:36). Durrwell's book on the Resurrection²², though written from the standpoint of Catholic orthodoxy, makes the same point as Kähler and Bultmann. Now the question is of the value and legitimacy of this 'Christian' transposition of Jesus into Christ. Is 'Christ' the legitimate and only interpretation of the Jesus event?

There are nowadays interpretations that challenge the traditional Christian view. In the line of the old and of the new Quest, in explicit agreement or disagreement with Christian faith formulations, they attempt to go beyond the 'Christ' of the New Testament and of Christian faith. Such are for instance the political interpretations: Jesus the defender of the proletariat or the freedom fighter. India would view Jesus as the Guru, the Jīvanmukta, the Chit, the supreme Satyagrahi²³.

It is not just the question of another image. The 'acknowledged Christ' of neo-Hinduism proposes a return to Jesus beyond the Christ of the Church. In a more elaborate way, they represent an attitude which is frequent among non-Christians (and even among Christians!) in India: 'Yes to Jesus. No to the Church'. How should we assess this challenge of the non-Christian Jesus versus the Christ of Christian and New Testament faith?

A less doctrinal and more concrete way to put the same question is often found nowadays; in India should we preach Christ or should we preach like Christ? Jesus did not preach himself but announced the Kingdom. Is India expecting the Christ of Christian interpretation or is it looking at Jesus himself and at people who stand for what Jesus stood for: justice, freedom, love, knowledge of enlightenment and filial relationship with God? The Christian theologian may be inclined to consider this as return to romanticism. Yet the question is there facing us. It has been there too long to be false.

3. *The continuity of the convergence of the various christological interpretations in the New Testament.*

We know better now that the composition of the NT was historically conditioned. It does not give us an organised christology but various interpretations given by different Christian groups concerning the Christ-event. Fuller and Hahn distinguish three basic patterns of christological understanding: the Earliest Palestinian Church, the Hellenistic—Jewish mission and the Gentile mission²⁴. In 1957, Cullmann could still venture to write a *Christology of the New Testament*. Such a project would now appear as obsolete as an attempt to write a Life of Jesus: there is now acute awareness of the plurality of theologies and christologies in the New Testament. This is why Fuller wrote only about *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, leaving it to theology to work out a christology for today²⁵.

²² F. X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection*, London, 1960, (French or. ed. 1954).

²³ Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Bangalore, 1970.

²⁴ R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, Fontana pb., 1969.

²⁵ R. H. Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-259.

But even the distinction of the three basic patterns may be too simplistic. The studies of Danielou and others on Judeo-Christian Theology²⁶ have revealed a rich variety of images and thought-patterns which are not, or are hardly, represented in the New Testament. They may have been specifically eliminated as heterodox in the process of formation of the Canon in the 2nd cent. But it may be also that, for fortuitous historical reasons, they failed to be recorded in the present canonical collections.

Similarly the present research on the Gnosis suggests that its relationship with and impact on the Church of the New Testament may have been more complex than imagined. The NT is the top of an iceberg which hides more under the water than it shows above. Or rather it is the ice-pack pushed into all forms and shapes by all kinds of currents.

If such is the case, what is *the* criterion of faith, of *the* true Gospel? What is the Gospel within the Gospel that marks out the message from the historically-conditioned garb? And in so far as India is concerned, what is the regulative standpoint from which one can assess the Indian interpretations? Are we to look for a point of convergence and value the christological interpretations on their convergence towards this point? or are we to say that there is no point of convergence, that the only christological norm of the NT is not a norm but the freedom of the Spirit inspiring new echoes of the message of Jesus and of the Jesus event? 'Do not quench the Spirit. . .but test everything' (I Thess. 5: 19-20). Apparently Paul could see clearly how to reconcile the two. The NT scholar of today envies this clarity which he does not have.

4. *The completeness of the New Testament christological witness.* Fuller remarks that, among the various aspects of the complex NT christological patterns, only two have been developed by subsequent Christian tradition: the eternal relation of the pre-existing Son to the Father and his Incarnation. It has left out 'the ontological implications of the Son's work in Creation, in general revelation, in Israel's salvation history, of his incarnate work, and of his work as the Exalted One (to say nothing of his parousia!)'²⁷. This, adds Fuller, 'is a reminder which the NT scholar must pass on to the systematic theologian'.

But at the same time, the NT scholar is left wondering whether his own map is complete. Has the NT recorded all the interpretations of the early Church? And would all the interpretations of the early Church cover the ground of all the possibilities of insight into the Christ event?

That the answer is no to both questions appears from a simple example which is particularly striking in the context of India. The NT does not tell us much about Christ's spiritual experience. Mk speaks only twice of Jesus' prayer. What he says is important, particularly the Abba prayer of the Agony. Yet we are left guessing about Jesus' prayer. If the guru is mainly an initiator in prayer, the guru image of Jesus in the NT remains strangely faint and blurred. It is

²⁶ J. Danielou, *Theologie du Judeo-Christianisme*, Tournai, 1957.

²⁷ R. H. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

true that Luke and John felt the need to be more explicit about Jesus' spiritual experience. But they were so by a process of hermeneutical interpretation of the traditions they had received rather than by having access to more explicit traditions.

We see in this instance how the Scriptures themselves put us in front of the basic issue: where is the plenitude of Christ to be found? In the tradition of the Scriptures or in the living interpretations of the Spirit?

As any dilemma, this may be a false one and the answer need not be an either/or. At least it helps us to determine the coordinates of our christological reflexion in India, in the light of present day New Testament research.

Though I have been too long, I have not exhausted my topic. Many other issues would deserve consideration. For Fuller, one of the basic problems facing dogmatics is to work out an ontological Christology for today. The kenotic approach revived by Moltmann raises also ontological questions. There are also the questions raised by the political and secularizing approach and the question of the meaning of the Resurrection in terms of both the Indian tradition and the desperate condition of our brothers.

These questions will be the explicit object of our discussions during these days. My task was to give an 'orientation' paper. I think I have more or less fulfilled it by describing the orientations, and also the disorientations, of the NT student today.