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WHAT THERE IS TO READ
I. CHRISTOLOGY

Colin Gunton and Graham Stanton

The first of a series of articles in which we offer to readers an attempted outline and classification of some of the bewildering variety of approaches to theology available today.

A. Systematic Theology

To understand the complexity of contemporary thinking about Christ, some brief account of its context is indispensable. That context is provided largely by the atmosphere of rational, if not rationalistic, criticism that has developed around all aspects of theological thinking. The modern critical movement has generated at once liberation from past stereotypes and constriction into new ones. For christology, the chief impact has been upon our belief in the historical veracity of the documents; the traditional belief in the uniqueness of Christ; and the availability for contemporary belief and worship of what sometimes seem like documents and beliefs belonging to a long past era. Perhaps it is this impression of a gulf between us and our foundation documents that is the most forcible. This (real or supposed) gulf has led to two phenomena in particular: an intensification of critical studies of the gospels in an attempt to unearth the 'historical' Jesus, and an increasing criticism of the credal formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Thus Anthony Hanson in *Grace and Truth: a Study in the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (SPCK, 1975) makes an attack on Chalcedon's aridity in the name of a more biblical Christology, echoing and developing the radical critiques of Chalcedonian categories in Schleiermacher and Ritschl last century. The ancient creeds are attacked for various reasons, but in particular for their starting point in eternity. In contrast to this is the popular contemporary proposal to begin Christology 'from below'. What 'below' means here is very varied. Some of the proposals are as follows.

I

An obvious place to begin a search for the especial or supreme significance of Jesus is the record of his life on earth. The problem of this approach is that it appears to ground faith merely in some past event, quite apart from the fact that it has long been suspected of producing a picture of Jesus strongly reflecting the presuppositions of contemporary culture (Tyrrell's famous 'Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well'). The advantage is of tying doctrine firmly to the concrete: to what happened in human time and history. One famous recent approach was to begin from Jesus' moral qualities, as 'the man for others' (John Robinson, *Honest to God*, SCM, 1972). Similarly, a beginning might be made from the reality of Jesus' experience of God and his capacity to draw to himself human loyalty and striving. Variations on this approach are to be found in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Ed. J. Hick, SCM, 1977); notice particularly the title of one of the papers 'Jesus, the Man of Universal Destiny'.

Christology from below is not only a phenomenon of the Anglican and Protestant traditions. A number of recent Roman Catholic works share the approach. Thus P. Schoonenberg, *The Christ* (Sheed & Ward, 1974) presents a 'Christology of Jesus' transcendence as a man', reversing the usual direction of doctrine by attributing personhood and the rest primarily to the man Jesus, and seeing his divinity only in its terms. Similarly, E. Schillebeeckx's *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (Collins, 1979) is for the most part a long and detailed historical-critical investigation of the New Testament evidence about Jesus. Schillebeeckx concludes that Jesus was essentially an eschatological (but not messianic) prophet, whose experience of God was of one 'cherishing people and making them free'. It is on this basis that he goes on to elaborate his faith in Jesus as also somewhat more than this.

In some studies, the approach to Christology from below is placed in the context of a philosophical scheme. A fairly frequent phenomenon is the appeal to philosophies which attempt to understand the world according to some notion of evolution. The discovery that human life evolved rather than arrived on earth fully

fledged, so to speak, must necessarily be one of the influences on our thinking about Christ, especially if we are to take seriously the full reality of his humanity. The drawback to an over-reliance on these categories is also obvious. If we see Jesus as the crown of evolution, we run the risk of lifting him so far above our ordinary human condition that he is no longer 'one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning' (Heb. 4.15). Christologies linked to evolutionary or 'process' ways of seeing things come from both Protestant and Catholic directions. J.A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (SCM, 1973) sees in Jesus 'the clue to the mystery of . . . what the divine process is about and the meaning of human existence is'. Like Robinson, W.N. Pittenger, well known as an exponent of Process Theology, adopts in *The Word Incarnate* (Nisbet, 1959) a version of degree Christology to account for the difference 'from below' of Jesus from ourselves. From the Catholic tradition, a comparable enterprise is that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin whose *The Phenomenon of Man* (Collins, 1959) continues to be influential.

Perhaps the essence of speculative philosophy since the end of the eighteenth century has been its tendency to see God, if any, within the world process rather than operating from without. This has influenced Christology in other ways than by the employment of evolutionary theologies. Theories deriving from Hegel of universal history underlie much work, especially, perhaps, that of Wolfhart Pannenberg whose *Jesus, God and Man* (SCM, 1968) remains one of the major works of Christology to be written since the war. Pannenberg argues that the meaning of history as a whole is the concern at once of modern man and of Christian theology. In the resurrection, whose historicity he defends at length, Pannenberg sees the key to the significance at once of Jesus and of history. Thus by examining the New Testament witness we can rise 'from below', from an apprehension of Jesus' fate, to a realisation of his oneness with God.

Often linked with Pannenberg is Jurgen Moltmann, whose *Theology of Hope* (SCM, 1967) was oriented to the themes of exodus and resurrection. His christology, *The Crucified God* (SCM, 1974) shares some of the concerns of christology from below, but in other respects reveals more traditional concerns. Though this book has received considerable criticism, its interest lies in its attempt to transform the Christian understanding of God by its emphasis on the reality of the Father's sharing in the Son's suffering on the cross. Moltmann rightly emphasises the political significance of such a transformation, and thus tends to be linked with the 'theologians of liberation'. The latter school, if it be such, has produced one attempt at a christology: Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: a Latin American Approach* (SCM, 1978). In some ways a disappointing book, it is interesting as an attempt to interpret christology through categories derived from politics rather than from science or philosophy.

II

Alongside the new directions, there are also books which try to wrestle with the inherited categories. Well known is D.M. Baillie's *God was In Christ* (Faber, 1961) with its attempt to understand the two-nature doctrine by analogy with the Christian experience of grace. David Jenkins, *The Glory of Man* (SCM, 1967) expounds the meaning of a Chalcedonian Christology for our understanding of God, man and the world, while John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology* (SCM, 1966) analyses and expounds the different 'models' by which the reality of Christ has been and may be understood.

Finally a word should be said about those who believe that traditional formulations should have more influence in the shaping of contemporary thinking. E.L. Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, (SPCK, 1977) defends traditional christology and its trinitarian grounding, while T.F. Torrance *Space, Time and Incarnation* (O.U.P., 1969) argues that the Fathers' rethinking of the concepts of space and time has much to say to us in face of contemporary intellectual challenges. The first part of Karl Barth's *Doctrine of Reconciliation (Church Dogmatics* Vol. IV, T & T Clark, 1956), with its linking of Christology and reconciliation, remains of incomparable interest, while from the Roman Catholic side, Walter Kasper's *Jesus, the Christ* (Burns and Oates, 1978) combines great learning in biblical studies and theology with a straightforward reassertion of the interlinking of Christ and human salvation.

Colin Gunton

B. New Testament Christology

In the last ten years or so, discussions of the Christology of the New Testament writings have focussed on two related issues: the extent to which the various strands of earliest Christianity contain different Christologies and the extent to which it is possible to trace development in Christological thinking in the first century. It is not without significance that contemporary theologians who wish to set aside or sit very loosely to the Church's doctrinal tradition usually make strenuous efforts to establish their case by appealing to parts of the New Testament. They may refer to one strand within early Christianity (perhaps to Pauline rather than to Johannine Christology) or to a particular historical reconstruction of the development of Christianity. So, in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. J. Hick, SCM, 1977), for example, one finds essays which suggest that Christology today should be anchored in the teaching of the historical Jesus or in the earliest Christology *before* Paul appropriated the idea of Jesus' incarnation in the course of dialectic with Samaritan missionaries in Corinth and Ephesus between 50 and 55!

Since scholars of most persuasions seem to accept that discussion of historical evidence is important for a contemporary Christology, there seems little risk that theologians will set aside historical issues as of no more than academic interest. A partial exception is D.E. Nineham's *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (SPCK, 1978), where it is argued that in any age Christological thinking is so strongly conditioned by cultural factors that the formulations of one period cannot be taken over into very different cultural settings. On a thorough-going cultural relativist position (from which Nineham himself draws back) the historian is trapped in his own culture: a reconstruction of the past is no more than a mirage. Discussion of this important issue is by no means over.

In the next decade attention will probably be focussed not so much on narrowly historical questions as on 'cultural relativism' and a cluster of other problems of interpretation. A.C. Thiselton's *The Two Horizons* (Paternoster, 1980) is a sign of the times: its sub-title is New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein. Thiselton opens his large wide-ranging book with the question, 'Why should the interpreter of the New Testament concern himself with philosophy?', and goes on to show the importance of philosophical questions about the nature of language. The student of Christology, above all, must not by-pass such questions.

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Over the past decade a number of scholars have drawn attention to the diversity of the Christologies of the New Testament writers. Books tend to concentrate on one New Testament writer; attempts to expound *the* Christology of the New Testament are now out of fashion.

In his *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* J.D.G. Dunn underlines the diversity of early Christianity; he also insists that the different unifying factors in first-century Christianity focus again and again on Christ, on the unity between Jesus the man and Jesus the exalted one (p.371). E. Schweizer's *Jesus* (SCM, 1971) holds together a strong emphasis on the affirmations of the post-Easter communities with a concern for historical inquiry into the totality of Jesus' life and death. W.G. Kümmel's *The Theology of the New Testament* (SCM, 1974) examines the message of Jesus, Paul and John and concludes that they are in agreement in a two-fold message. God has caused his salvation promised for the end of the world to begin in Jesus Christ, and in this Christ event God has encountered us and intends to encounter us as the Father who seeks to rescue us from imprisonment in the world and to make us free for active love (p.332). The contrast between Kümmel's soteriological and Dunn's Christological exposition of 'the centre of the New Testament' is interesting and significant.

It is hardly possible here to do more than note some major recent discussions of the Christology of individual New Testament writers: in most cases the books listed include examinations of other views and provide references for further reading. For Matthew, see J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (SPCK, 1976); for Mark, R.P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Paternoster,

1972), for Luke-Acts, E. Franklin, *Christ the Lord* (SPCK, 1975) and especially F. Bovon, *Luc le théologien: vingt-cinq ans de recherches (1950-1975)* (Delachaux, 1978). For the Fourth Gospel, see S.S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Paternoster, 1978), J. Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (SPCK, 1975); and R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Chapman, 1979). We still need a thorough discussion of Paul's Christology; in the meantime, G. Bornkamm's *Paul* (Hodder, 1975) is a useful introduction. On Hebrews and Revelation we now have two fine studies, G.R. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (CUP, 1979) and J.M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (SPCK, 1980).

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There are now two excellent discussions of the origin and development of Christology available. C.F.D. Moule's *The Origin of Christology* (CUP, 1977) includes careful discussions of the familiar characterizations of Jesus as 'the Son of Man', 'the Son of God', 'Christ' and 'Lord'. A lengthy and closely argued chapter examines, mainly from the Pauline epistles, an understanding and experience of Christ as corporate. Moule insists that Paul was led to conceive of Christ as any theist conceives of God: personal, indeed, but transcending the individual category (p.95). In his *Son of God* (SCM, 1975), M. Hengel argues that the main lines of Christological development took place between AD 30 and AD 50, against a Jewish rather than a Hellenistic background. Both books refer to a number of important technical studies which are not readily accessible to the non-specialist, several of these studies do seem to rule out some of the more radical explanations of the origin and development of Christology.

The relationship between 'traditional' Christian doctrines and the evidence of the New Testament writings has been explored from a number of different angles. *The Myth of God Incarnate* is the best known example. *Incarnation and Myth* (ed. M.D. Goulder, SCM, 1979) contains essays from the contributors to the *Myth* and from some of their critics. The issues in the recent furore over the doctrine of the incarnation are not primarily exegetical, but doctrinal and philosophical. However, in a forthcoming study, *Christology in the Making* (SCM, 1980) J.D.G. Dunn explores thoroughly the origin and development of incarnational Christology.

R. Brown's *The Virginal Conception and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (Chapman, 1973) is a sensitive discussion from a distinguished Roman Catholic exegete who has no hesitation in using historical critical methods. Brown has also written an outstanding study of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Chapman, 1977) in which he pursues the historical questions and expounds the Christological emphases of the two evangelists.

In *God as Spirit* (OUP, 1977) G.W.H. Lampe argues that the model of a descent and an ascent of the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, is likely to confuse our attempt to answer the question, 'In what sense is Jesus alive today?' He opts for the concept of the indwelling presence of God as Spirit, in Jesus himself and, today, in the believing community (p.33). This lucid and wide-ranging study is enormously stimulating, even though one may wonder whether justice has been done either to the New Testament evidence or to the *intentions* of the classic Patristic formulations of Christian doctrine.

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Interest in the historical Jesus continues unabated. G.A. Wells asked *Did Jesus Exist?* (Elek/Pemberton, 1975) and, in answering 'No', he revived an old theory which even Soviet propaganda has abandoned. No early opponent of Christianity, whether pagan or Jewish, ever seems to have doubted that Jesus existed. So, not surprisingly, Wells has not been able to convince contemporary historians, whether Christian or not.

In his *A Future for the historical Jesus* (SCM, 1972) L.E. Keck examines most effectively the issues at stake when Christian theology assesses the importance of the historical Jesus. G.A. Vermes's perceptive study, *Jesus the Jew* (Collins, 1973) places Jesus firmly in a first century Jewish setting. When a book is hailed as 'the most important book on Jesus since Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*', one turns to it with high expectations. J.P.

Mackey's *Jesus: the Man and the Myth* (SCM, 1979) is an interesting study, though the publisher's judgement is surely over-optimistic. Mackey's reconstruction of the historical Jesus is not particularly striking. His main thesis is rather more provocative: all religious language is 'mythological'; whatever is said about Jesus will have to utilize that kind of language. In *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979) Ben Meyer, a Canadian Roman Catholic, rehearses earlier quests for the historical Jesus, discusses hermeneutical issues and the appropriate historical methods to be used before setting out his own reconstruction of the teaching and actions of Jesus. He insists that 'once the theme of national restoration in its full eschatological sweep is grasped as the concrete meaning of the reign of God, Jesus's career begins to become intelligible as a unity' (p.221).

In his recent article, 'The Hermeneutical Significance of Four Gospels', in *Interpretation* Vol. 33 (October 1979), Robert Morgan puts his finger on issues which are bound to remain central in future Christological discussions and debate. Morgan insists that 'a reading of the Gospels which sets aside Christian doctrinal presuppositions leads to a purely human Jesus, and a theology which adopts this reading without reservation has already sided against the dogmatic Christology of traditional Christianity, Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox. This new anti-dogmatic version of Christianity has seemed to many theologians the only possible way forward in a world grown suspicious of dogma. That supposition comes naturally to New Testament scholars' (p.377). Is there a plausible alternative approach?

Morgan notes that in practice Christian scholars have long since learned to read the Gospels with bifocal spectacles: they read them 'just like any other book' (e.g. in historical study), but they also read them as Scripture in other contexts (e.g. liturgical and devotional), presupposing that they speak of God. It is at least worth asking whether christology should not take this duality seriously instead of starting ' "from below" with the (in principle if not in fact) cognitively more solid assured results of historical research' (ibid.). 'A Christian theological reading of the Gospels despises neither the historical facts (unlike Strauss, Kahler and Bultmann) nor the tradition of Christian evaluation (unlike most liberals). It seeks to hold these together, whereas historical research as such necessarily puts them asunder. It recognizes the distinction without following liberal kerygmatic theology in making it constitutive for Christology' (p.381). It remains to be seen whether these suggestions will be accepted as one way out of the impasse. The attempt to allow full rein to historical inquiry alongside full (but not uncritical) assent to the Church's Christological tradition is surely refreshing and most welcome.

Graham Stanton