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## *Process Christology*

**H D McDonald**

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Of the many who in recent decades have sought to operate a theology with the use of the concepts of process thought, Norman Pittenger seems to have been the first to have endeavoured a christology, and incidently to set the pattern for others<sup>1</sup> within the framework of its categories. Pittenger's interest in the 'process' thesis began early in the 1920s and from its basic ideas he has not since then departed. Following the lead of Charles Hartshorne,<sup>2</sup> Pittenger sees the 'emergent evolutionism' of C Lloyd Morgan<sup>3</sup> and the 'progressive creativity' of A N Whitehead,<sup>4</sup> when wedded, as providing a fully credible schema for a Christian doctrine of the Godhead. God is consequently regarded in process theology as virtually identified with the on-going process of history. As eternal 'Creativity', *God* is ever creating to absorb within 'himself' the totality of events by which he becomes consequently 'enriched'. In his *Process Thought and Christian Faith*, Pittenger declares that, for 'the process thinker if God be in fact *creator*, with creative activity in love at his heart, then he cannot be the *God he is*, and hence not really God, unless there is a world in which his creativity is expressed and which is an expression of that creativity, and unless he is 'affected' by that world and what happens in it'.<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'God acts' it is then stated, is a short way of speaking of 'the divine causal efficacy, moving toward the fulfilment of the divine aim' which is 'in varying degrees the dominant element in each occasion'. In the onward process there are open possibilities: 'Hence each occasion (and more particularly every 'good' occasion) may be seen as an 'incarnation' of deity under the conditions of finite creativity'.<sup>6</sup>

Pittenger's, *Christ and the Christian* (1944) was his first attempt to work out a doctrine of the person of Christ in the light of process thought. But he specifies his 'large study in Christology', *The Word Incarnate* (1959) as 'an extended essay in the interpretation of the person and work of Jesus in process terms'.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore, this volume, and his more recent *Christology Reconsidered*, written in defence of criticisms of his earlier work, that must be considered for an exposition of his process christology.

Pittenger insists that his approach to an understanding of Christ is that of a 'Catholic' who 'belongs within the great institutional-sacramental Christian community', and of a 'modernist' who would re-think and reinterpret and relate that Christian message in the language of his time.<sup>8</sup> His apparent discontent with the nomenclature of the early councils and

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creeds of the historic church, in his major christological work, which seems at odds with his 'Catholic' claim receives an apologia in his *Christology Reconsidered* (1970). Finding an ally in Professor Maurice Wiles, he affirms that while he must reject the terminology of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf D Griffin, *A Process Christology*; J B Cobb, Jr and D R Griffin, *Process Theology* (1977).

<sup>2</sup> C Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity; The Logic of Perfection* (1962).

<sup>3</sup> C Lloyd Morgan, *Emergent Evolution* (1923).

<sup>4</sup> A N Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (1920); *Process and Reality* (1929); *Nature and Life* (1934).

<sup>5</sup> N Pittenger, *Process Thought and Christian Faith* (1968) 41.

<sup>6</sup> 53.

<sup>7</sup> Preface, viii.

<sup>8</sup> *The Word Incarnate* (1959) preface, xiv f.

ancient symbols he is still faithful to the 'intentions' and 'objectives' of the patristic declarations. Any true christology, Pittenger then asserts, must do justice to the person of Christ as witnessed to in scripture, as the object of worship, and as the mediator of salvation,<sup>9</sup> while at the same time developing a christology characterized by modernity and relevance.

## **BASIC AFFIRMATIONS OF A CHRISTOLOGY**

According to Pittenger no christology can be finally true to the 'intentions' and 'objectives' of historic formulations which omits any of four affirmations. First, that Jesus Christ is truly man. Here Pittenger begins; and throughout his book he continually makes the point that the Christ of faith is authentically human, a particular historic individual. However much the figure of the Gospels is presented to us from the standpoint of faith there can be no gainsaying that 'there was One who in the picture which we possess of him in the Gospels is shown to be genuinely and fully man — "truly and intensely himself" as a Jew of the first century, with all that implies'.<sup>10</sup> Pittenger lays heavy stress on the 'realism' of Jesus' humanity. His main criticism, in fact, of the christologies he reviews in chapters five and six of his book, *The Word Incarnate* is that they somehow lessen the actuality of Christ's full humanness.<sup>11</sup>

The second requirement for a christology is that Christ must be acknowledged as fully divine. At this point Pittenger merely states that what was accomplished in Jesus Christ was no human achievement. Those who encountered him became aware, in the apprehension of faith, that in some luminous way God was certainly present in this man.<sup>12</sup> For a third feature of a christology Pittenger declares that Jesus Christ is one person. He notes, however, that this statement has been interpreted along two main lines: those who follow the Alexandrian or Cyrillian school of theologians and conceive of the human element as being almost, if not indeed entirely, swallowed up in the divine; and the Antiochene or Nestorian school which sees the human and divine in juxtaposition in the Christ-person. For himself he insists that 'as we read the life of our Lord in the days of his flesh, we are not conscious of any duality in his life; he is all one, both in his relation with his brethren and in his relationship with God his Father'.<sup>13</sup>

Pittenger's fourth affirmation is intended to bring Jesus Christ into direct contact with the total purpose of God in, and for, the world. In this regard Jesus Christ is declared to be intimately related to the more general action, presence, and revelation of God to the cosmic totality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 50.

<sup>10</sup> 99; cf *Christology Reconsidered* (1970) ch 2. 'It does not make sense to insist on the one side that Jesus was fully and truly man, when on the other side it is admitted that we can know nothing, or next to nothing, about him as a man among men'. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Cf '...the so-called "orthodox" Christologies have had a tendency, manifested most clearly in modern theories, to minimize the humanity of our Lord'. *Word Incarnate*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Loc cit.*

<sup>13</sup> 13.

<sup>14</sup> In *Christology Reconsidered*, Pittenger specifies 'three essential elements in the christological enterprise'. 'First, there is the firm conviction that in some fashion we meet God in the event of Jesus Christ. Second, there is the equally firm conviction that God is thus met in a genuinely human being. Third, there is the assurance that God, met in this man, and that man in whom God is met, are in relationship with each other, in a manner or mode which is neither accidental or incidental, but the most complete inpenetration—and this means that the relationship or union, as the ancient formulations call it, must be conceived after the analogy of personal togetherness of God and man'. 6-7.

## THE CHRIST OF A CHRISTOLOGICAL DOCTRINE

Although Pittenger is specific that Christianity is an historical religion, he can still state emphatically that a mere historical interest in Jesus of Nazareth provides no datum for a christology. Even the synoptic picture of Jesus he regards as interpretative of 'Jesus as he is known in the experience of his Church, and telling of "the days of his flesh" in the light of that all over-arching and all-embracing faith'.<sup>15</sup> It is not possible, therefore, to sever the seamless dress of history and interpretation.<sup>16</sup> The Christ we have is the historical Jesus seen from the perspective of faith: and this means that a genuine christology must be concerned to build on the whole New Testament picture of him.<sup>17</sup>

Having made this point so strongly, Pittenger goes on nevertheless to allow that there is much in the Gospels which does not belong to the actuality of Jesus' history. He specifies the virginal conception, the miracles, the empty tomb and the ascension. Yet these cannot be dismissed as mere accretions arising out of an excess of loyalty to or enthusiasm for the Man of Nazareth. They are to be read rather as anagogical statements of faith's valuation of the 'importance' of Jesus,<sup>18</sup> in the experience of the primitive and continuing church.<sup>19</sup> They can thus be referred to as 'legendary' in the sense of being 'tales told about an historic person or event, with the intention (perhaps never consciously formulated as such) of heightening the testimony to the significance which this person or event is believed to possess'.<sup>20</sup>

For Pittenger, then, it is the continuing awareness by the community of faith of the importance of Jesus in its midst which is the basic element of a christology. In the community Jesus is 'remembered' and there becomes 'a present and real figure in the lives of men'. Without this continuing awareness, Jesus would be just an obscure personage of a past age with no living relation to the contemporary scene. 'It is precisely this continuing awareness', says Pittenger, 'known to those who are in the Christian fellowship, which gives us the meaning of what would otherwise be a story of an ancient religious and moral teacher who has received divine honours and been rewarded as the saviour of men'.<sup>21</sup>

Neither just the 'historical Jesus' nor the 'kerygmatic Christ' is exclusively, or indeed unitedly, adequate as a basis for a christology. It is rather Christ as continually present in the church who is final for the construction of a doctrine of the person (and work) of Christ. The belief that Jesus is 'divine' was not a truth arrived at by intellectual enquiry, but a truth arising out of man's redemptive relation to a present Christ. 'When the Christian Church said that Jesus is divine, it meant to use this word in the fullest sense: indeed it meant "deity". The God

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<sup>15</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Cf 63f.

<sup>17</sup> Cf 'It is important to insist over and over again that the significant point for a christological study such as we are attempting is the total impression, the full impact, which the records as a whole give us'. 53; cf 63.

<sup>18</sup> Cf '...as many of us have been urging in this area our chief concern has been to maintain Jesus' genuine "importance", not because we like the idea but because we believe that this "importance" is of overwhelming truth'. *Christology Reconsidered*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Cf 'The fundamental datum for the christological concern of the Church is the continuing and persistent communal life of the Christian fellowship, central to which is the awareness of the reality of Jesus, an awareness that illuminates the meaning of the stories told about him in the New Testament and arises from the total New Testament picture of his impact upon men'. *Word Incarnate*, 55.

<sup>20</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> 59; cf 'This persisting presence of the risen Lord of which Christians of all ages are in their own way deeply aware is the basic datum of christological thought'. 63.

who is the Creator of heaven and earth is there in Christ. This is the "scandalous assertion" of Christianity—that the Almighty God who dwells in eternity is here and now in this little limited space'.<sup>22</sup> Thus is God

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present for the believer in the contemporaneousness of Christ. He is truly 'present to the faith of the receiver'.<sup>23</sup>

## CONTEXT FOR A MODERN SYNTHESIS

At chapter seven of his book, Pittenger enters upon what he calls 'Towards a Restatement'. Here theistic process philosophy becomes the all-controlling principle of his scheme with its '*pan-en-theist* view of the world which presents God and creation supremely God and man, in continued and intimate relationship'.<sup>24</sup> God's creativity is continually being realized through the process of the divine self-expression. Pittenger identifies this 'process' with the Logos of God; which is one with God as self-expressive.

With process thought Pittenger introduces as a necessary element of a contemporary christology theistic existentialism. He declares consequently that 'if Jesus Christ is what Christian faith declares him to be—namely, the clue to the significance of life, divine and human—he can never be One who is looked at from a distance. He must be One who makes demands upon us, to whom I respond, whose life is made "the Pattern" for me by *my own choice*'.<sup>25</sup> Theistic existentialism has for Pittenger two important corollaries. On the one hand, it makes Christ unique as an individual. Rejected therefore, in the spirit of Kierkegaard, is the Hegelian notion of the human person as a mere accidental embodiment of an eternal and universal idea. And, on the other hand, it makes sure that the Christ encountered in faith as constructed out of his present relation to the community answers to man's immediate need. Pittenger affirms that process philosophy and existentialist theism supplement each other and provide the right context for a modern christological doctrine.

## BLUE-PRINT FOR A CHRISTOLOGY

The metaphysic resulting from this wedding of process thought and theistic existentialism Pittenger believes is one in which the four affirmations for a christology, earlier stated, best find their individual vindication and united correlation. He thereupon states as his first conclusion 'that the world is an open field for the divine operation'.<sup>26</sup> This is no 'block-universe'. It is dynamic, not static. It is an 'evolving' world. His second conclusion is 'that the world in which we live is a world in which man exists as an "engaged" being'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 87.

<sup>23</sup> 96; cf Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments* (1957) 101.

<sup>24</sup> Cf 'Not all my readers will subscribe, as I do, to the process philosophy which in North America has become increasingly popular and is now beginning to have some support in other parts of the English-speaking world and elsewhere. But for those who do take this line, philosophically speaking—whether they are influenced by Whitehead, Hartshorne or by Teilhard de Chardin or have some interest in the revival of emergent evolution of Lloyd-Morgan, Smuts, and Alexander, or for some other reason regard an evolutionary or progressive metaphysics as the only viable one of our day—the theological use of substantival idioms, such as marks classical doctrine formulations, become more and more impossible'. *Christology Reconsidered*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> 162 (italics in text).

<sup>27</sup> 162.

Man is such a being as chooses to 'be himself'; it is for him to achieve 'authentic existence'. Such 'engagement' however, cannot be carried out in a vacuum. Man is *qua* man an individual, to be sure; but to be truly man he requires community. It is there he satisfies his deepest need of 'belonging'. This view of human personhood has Christological

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significance. It validates the conviction that Jesus Christ 'is not cut off from the whole movement of God in and to the world, as if he were a visitor from an entirely different sphere'.<sup>28</sup> But as Christ he is both universal and unique. He is the former in that he embodies what God is everywhere and is in some degree achieving in human affairs. He is unique in that he embodies the divine purpose and action which his presence both demonstrates and secures.

This understanding of Christ's relation to God and the world has affinities with the logology of the second and third century Apologists with their idea of Christ as the *Logos endiathetos*, the Word as an eternal indwelling mode within the Godhead, and the *Logos prophorikos*, the Word as proceeding forth from God in creative activity.

### USE OF ANTIOCHENE TERMINOLOGY

In his effort to maintain the integrity of Christ's human life and at the same time to give meaningful effect to the divinity that was his, Pittenger finds himself compelled to use Antiochene language and so to leave the impression of a duality of two separate entities in the person of Christ: and this in spite of his affirmation that for a true christology the absolute oneness of Christ as human and divine must be safeguarded. He says indeed that 'Christ is divine not by being utterly different from other men in whom God dwells and through whom the divine activity works; rather he is divine in that he actualizes in human nature that transcendent divine principle which is at the root of man's being, but which through other men is only potentially or at best partially expressed'.<sup>29</sup> He hastens to add, however, that he does not wish to confuse the divine and the human; nor to assert what is 'immanentist in tendency'. His view is, he insists, 'incarnational in its outlook, for it safeguards the transcendence of deity through the Word. If in the whole cosmic order the work of the *Logos* is prevenient on every level to whatever response may be given, we shall see that Christ is not man-become-God but God-become-man: not man-God, but God-man'.<sup>30</sup>

In his chapter on 'The Self-expression of God in Jesus Christ', Pittenger uses Antiochene language on an increasing scale. He stresses the affinity between God and man and the indwelling of man by God. He affirms consequently that, 'The Antiochene words, so often criticized by contemporary defenders of orthodoxy—*eudokia*, or God's good-pleasure in man; *sunapheia*, or man's union with God in surrender of self to the divine purposes—are words which have a biblical ring; they are not abstract or cold like *ousia* or *hypostasis* or *phusis*, valuable as the latter terms may be in their proper place'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> 163.

<sup>29</sup> 164.

<sup>30</sup> 166-167.

<sup>31</sup> 169.

With this point made, Pittenger then speaks of Christ as one in whom supremely the Logos 'is active, at work incarnate, "enmanned"'.<sup>32</sup> Man is the potentiality of God, and in the great ones of the race that

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potentiality was in a measure realized. In Jesus Christ it found full actualization.

The defect, however, of the historic Antiochene view, Pittenger agrees, was the sharp dualism it allowed between the divine and human in Christ. But he will permit no such 'sticking-together of two utterly disparate entities, nor the replacement of one entity by another, but rather that he [Christ] is the perfectly adequate and sufficient vehicle in and through which the divine purpose and activity are operative in man, and for man'.<sup>33</sup> In spite of his admission regarding the Antiochene christology, however, Pittenger can still contend that the charge of 'mere association' of the Word with man in the person of Christ is a caricature of the Antiochene position.<sup>34</sup>

## THE TEST QUESTION

The question is inevitable from the way Pittenger speaks of the indwelling of the Logos in the man Jesus, whether it is a difference in kind or merely in degree from that of the divine indwelling in other men. He seeks, however, to lessen the force of the objection that his view seems to allow for a matter of degree only by arguing that the antithesis 'degree or kind' is a false one. In the end he is prepared to accept that the divine indwelling in the case of Christ is that of a heightened intensity in comparison with other men.<sup>35</sup> In the light of reviewers' criticisms on this issue he returns to argue his case again in *Christology Reconsidered*.<sup>36</sup> His conclusion is, however, the same although he adds, as if to soften the bluntness of his admission, that 'the intensity of the operation of God in union with the humanity of Jesus is so great, as demonstrated by its concrete results, that he is God-man rather than God "acting in" a man'.<sup>37</sup> This last declaration does not seem to fit in with Pittenger's constant affirmation about God's *acts in* and *through* 'this man'. Such is indeed a characteristic note of his throughout.<sup>38</sup> In his later book he takes a whole chapter to sustain his thesis that God acts in all mankind, but significantly and decisively in Jesus.<sup>39</sup> It is certainly Pittenger's position in *The Word Incarnate* that in Christ we have the full existential response of manhood to the action of God so that therein and thereby the 'union' of God and man is 'clinched' and 'established'. And his conclusion is that the difference between the divine indwelling in this man, Jesus, and in other men is, that he was possessed to an 'almost immeasurable degree'.

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<sup>32</sup> 178; cf 'I should prefer to speak of the relationship or union of God and that man, rather than of Godhead and manhood, thereby running the risk of attack as Antiochene, if not Nestorian'. *Christology Reconsidered*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> 179-180; cf 'It is not a mechanical union in which godhead and manhood, or God and man, are stuck together in some less than personal manner'. *Christology Reconsidered*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 180 n 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Christology Reconsidered*, ch 6.

<sup>36</sup> Cf 'Here I am frank to confess that if I must choose, I would say that it is a difference of degree, and not of kind', 189.

<sup>37</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 253.

<sup>38</sup> Cf a typical statement, 'Jesus Christ is the focal self-expression and action of God in human life', 215.

<sup>39</sup> *Christology Reconsidered*, ch 7.

## MAN'S CAPACITY FOR GOD

Pittenger's nervousness over the issue of the divine indwelling in Christ being stated as a matter of degree is returned to in a chapter headed 'Four Problems of Christology'. The focus of the section is an attempt to

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justify the contention. He premises that there is a natural or essential abiding union between God and man: and so opts for the *capax infiniti* of man's native being of Roman Catholic theology against the non *capax infiniti* position of the Reformers.<sup>40</sup> The divine which he sees everywhere 'diffused', he declares to have become 'focused' in Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> And then he enters the observation: 'Probably the chief reason that the notion of a "difference of degree" has been rejected is that it has been assumed that it would make our Lord only *slightly* different from the rest of us.'<sup>42</sup> But, says Pittenger, the difference is 'very great'; for in him the union between God and man found its fullest measure; in us a pitiful approximation. By underscoring that in every case of God's action the initiative is from God's side, Pittenger believes that his use of the language of Chalcedonian trinitarianism is justified. He states emphatically that 'it is the Eternal Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who is incarnate'.<sup>43</sup> It is right to declare, he insists, that Jesus is divine: at the same time it would, he avers, be altogether wrong if we were to ascribe deity to him absolutely. For 'whatever is divine in Jesus Christ is all divine but is not all of divinity'. This assertion helps him in his speculation on whether the incarnation of the Logos in Christ is the only instance in the universe.<sup>44</sup> There may, he thinks, be other peopled planets which have their own apprehension of a divine incarnation. For, after all, Christ 'is never said to be the whole of God's action in his creation. For Christian faith Jesus defines but does not confine God in his relationship to the created world'.<sup>45</sup>

## A SUMMARY STATEMENT

On page 91 of his book, *The Word Incarnate* there is what may be taken as a compressed statement of Pittenger's whole christological doctrine.

Jesus Christ is 'emergent' in the world-process, continuing with that order at its human and historical level. He is a *genuine* emergent, for he is the bringer of a 'new order' into which men are taken for enlarged and enriched life through the self-commitment consequent upon genuinely and vitally meeting him in the life of the Christian community. If we ascribe this by calling Jesus Christ the emergence of God-manhood,

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<sup>40</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 238.

<sup>41</sup> Cf 'The Word of God—the Self-Expressive Action of God—is focused for us men in Jesus our Brother Man' 249; cf "Who is Jesus Christ?" He is *the* Man precisely because he is man united with God, the conjoined organ or instrument for God, who is the supreme and all-fulfilling Reality... of course He is truly human, a Man among men. But he must be more than that... there must be more in this human life, this Man, the presence and working of God. Jesus Christ must be more than this Man; he must be this Man in whom God acts in a decisive, as well as a supreme manner... in everything that Jesus does and says as a Man, God is working and acting, God is present, God is speaking and looking at men and bringing them to himself'. N Pittenger, *The Pathway to Believing* (1960) 91-95.

<sup>42</sup> *The Word Incarnate*, 241.

<sup>43</sup> 237.

<sup>44</sup> Cf 248f; see E L Mascall, *Christian Theology and Modern Science* (1956) 36-46; A E Milne, *Modern Cosmology and Christian Theism* (1952) 153f.

<sup>45</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 249.



then those who are thus 'taken into him' are made participants in that order of God-manhood. But this neither demands nor implies divine intervention in the sense of an *irruption* of God into the world; the world itself is constantly informed and moulded by the same Word who in Jesus is thus fully emergent so far as we men can apprehend such an emergence. He is the unique focus for a universal presence and operation.

This passage is significant for the use of such expressions as 'the Word

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who is in Jesus'; 'fully emergent'; and 'the unique focus for a universal presence and operation'. The preposition *in* in the first phrase makes clear the essential Antiochene perspective of Pittenger's christology. The phrase 'fully emergent' leads inevitably to the discussion followed above consequent on the question; difference in degree or in kind? The term 'unique' is one that has bothered Pittenger greatly. He uses it frequently but acknowledges uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of its application to Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere he observed, 'I am entirely convinced that any view of Jesus which makes him so unique (although the word does not in fact admit of degrees) that he is removed from the context of the ongoing God-man relationship is not only absurd on the face of it but is also (I am sorry to say) in my judgement blasphemy'.<sup>47</sup>

The summary passage reported above raised for Pittenger the question of Christ's pre-existence to which he addresses himself in the following chapter, 'The Incarnation and the Trinity'. Certainly, 'Jesus as a man did not pre-exist his conception and birth'.<sup>48</sup> Yet, 'Something *did* exist'.<sup>49</sup> What pre-existed was the Eternal Word; but the Word conceived of as God's self-expressiveness. Pittenger sometimes refers to the pre-existing Word by the term 'person'. But for him the concept is not to be understood as 'substantial selfhood', or 'given nature'.<sup>50</sup> 'The "persons" of God are something half-way between nouns and adjectives. If they are "aspects", they are eternal and are relatively distinct and different; if they are "persons", they are so by interpenetrating and so make up the one life which is God that they are also one together. Or we might say that as relationships subsisting in God, they have a certain "propositional" character: of him, in him, through him'.<sup>51</sup> The fact however is that, in Pittenger's view, it is almost improper to speak of the 'divine nature' of God as something he has. It is equally false therefore to speak of Jesus as having a 'human nature'. No man has a 'nature' as something he possesses like a suit of clothes or a bookcase. Thus, says Pittenger, 'if we think of Jesus as having a human nature, we are talking nonsense'.<sup>52</sup>

In an early page of his book Pittenger affirms that 'the Chalcedonian definition is basic to our enterprise'.<sup>53</sup> But it is surely only by the most elastic use of its terminology that his view of the Trinity can be harmonized with the ancient symbol. For Pittenger the idea of the Trinity is a conceptual formulation derived from religious experience of a 'triune' activity of the one God. The final logic of the Trinity of God as he has manifested himself in the successive stages of revelational history—the Old Testament period, the days of the historic Jesus, and

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<sup>46</sup> Cf 253f.

<sup>47</sup> *Christology Reconsidered*, 68.

<sup>48</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 216.

<sup>49</sup> 219.

<sup>50</sup> 225.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Christology Reconsidered*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 96.

the history of the church beginning at Pentecost—is that these are ‘three ways of relationship which have been opened to men from one God; therefore three sorts of relationship were possible with one God; therefore some corresponding distinctions must exist within God, who as ultimate Truth does not reveal himself in any other guise than that which actually is of the essence of being’.<sup>54</sup>

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For Pittenger, then, to declare God as Triune is to acknowledge his threefold relationship with mankind. He is Father, as being God the ultimate source of all that is; He is Son, as God, self-expressive both in himself and in creation; and he is Holy Spirit, as God responsive both within himself and through the created order.<sup>55</sup> Thus the Father is God transcendent; the Son concomitant; the Holy Spirit God immanent: the same one God above us, beside us, and within us.

These three relationships are not, however, to be designated ‘persons’. Indeed Pittenger thinks that the Chalcedonian concept of ‘person’ as a ‘selfhood’ must lead inevitably to tritheism. He would therefore exempt the framers of its declarations from this equation by arguing that by employing the term ‘hypostasis’ they did not intend to suggest that in the one divine existent there are ‘three minds’ or ‘conscious centres’. Their thought was rather to present God as expressed in three eternal modes each corresponding to a fundamental activity of the divine nature in relation to creation.

## COMMENT AND CRITIQUE

Pittenger has long been preoccupied with the christological question: and his book, *The Word Incarnate*, is a major contribution to the subject. He is sensitive to the inadequacy of any account of the person of Christ which removes him from the human scene by making him some sort of celestial being in the dress of manhood. It is on this score that he rejects the *enhypostatic* doctrine by entering a sharp criticism of the *anhypostasia* which it presupposes. In Pittenger’s judgement all attempts to construe a christology in which Christ is left without a human centre of activity is outright Eutychianism. Pittenger upholds the idea of general revelation and seeks to establish his christology within this framework. ‘God himself’, he declares, ‘is there meeting us through the regular course of events and the ordinary happenings of human life’.<sup>56</sup> But God nevertheless, ‘makes a unique, intensive, and particularly significant disclosure’ of himself in Christ.<sup>57</sup>

But in the light of his stress on general revelation, Pittenger fails to show why there is need of such a ‘special’ revelation as that which took place in Jesus Christ. For if God can, and indeed does, act in all men pretty much in the same way as he acted in him, then why should he need to act in this more intensive way only in One? Nor, in fact, is it enough for the requirements of Christian faith to suggest that Jesus is to be called ‘divine’ because of the superlative measure in him of the divine indwelling. Pittenger does, of course, declare that the divine indwelling in his case is identifiable with God’s very presence in him: but he contends also

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<sup>54</sup> 224.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Word Incarnate*, 218.

<sup>57</sup> Cf 22; ‘It must suffice here to repeat what I have so frequently, even tediously, emphasised: the absolute necessity for the fullest recognition of the human life of Jesus and of that human life as in every sense (save sin alone) identical with ours’. 26; cf 118, 158, 159, et al.

that the divine in Christ is not exhaustive of deity since it is 'shared' by all men in varying degrees. It almost seems on this view that the *Godness* of God can be parcelled out in measure according to God's intention of his *emergent* self-expressiveness and man's *existential*

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responsiveness. Such an idea cannot be squared with the apostle Paul's declarations of Christ; 'in whom the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9).

By allowing the difference between the divine indwelling in Christ and in other men to be a matter of degree only, Pittenger has circumvented the whole christological problem. He regards Christ as one in whom was actualized the potential God-man relationship which is the ultimate in every man. Yet he affirms that Jesus was the only one in whom the divine 'love-in-action' had full scope. But he does not face the question; But why the only one? In view of his stress on general revelation and his insistence on a divine indwelling in all men an answer to that question is required. If, indeed, Jesus is the only one in whom God acts by his indwelling presence in a supreme way does not this set him apart from the rest of mankind after all? And how comes it that it is he only who actualizes that which is potential in every man?

Pittenger criticizes John Hick for allowing that the love which actualized his life was the Love divine rather than his own human love.<sup>58</sup> Pittenger does so because of his desire to maintain the full humanness of Jesus. But in the end he has virtually to come to Hick's position to give any account at all of his trinitarian claim. He can, therefore, say that 'Jesus is the human act in which the Love that is God is operative in terms of human existence'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed he follows his criticism of Hick with the declaration, 'And everything that I am trying to say in these pages is to be regarded as nothing other than a variation on the theme of love: of God's pure unbounded Love in Jesus Christ'.<sup>60</sup> It is in fact hard to comprehend the point of Pittenger's criticism of Hick. The difference between the two seems to concern merely the measure of the love of God resident and demonstrated in Christ. Both identify his human love with the love of God shed abroad in him. What distinguishes them is this: while Hick argues for a 'numerical identity' of God's love with that of Jesus' love, Pittenger regards the love of God in Christ, not coextensive with, but, rather, wider than the 'pure unbounded love' of God exhibited by him. Pittenger, however, distinguishes God's love from that of Jesus *per se* because he desires to accentuate the 'otherness' of Jesus from God. Hick, on the other hand, stresses the absolute identity of Jesus' *agape* and God's *Agape* because he is anxious to maintain the unity of God and Jesus.

Pittenger's dilemma is a real one. He introduces a distinction between the love of Jesus and the love of God so that he may maintain Christ's full humanity and therefore his 'overagainstness' in relation to God. Yet he needs to identify God's love with that of Jesus to give meaning to his concept of the 'Son' as self-expressive Godhood. Pittenger seemingly makes an absolute identify of love with God; and he underlines the copula in the declaration, 'God is love'. He then argues that the life of the 'triune' Godhead provides the possibility in God himself for the

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<sup>58</sup> *Christology Reconsidered*, 18f.

<sup>59</sup> 42.

<sup>60</sup> 21.

realization of the divine self-expression. It is this self-expressive love he goes on to affirm became evident in the man Jesus. This self-expressive love of God in the love of the man Jesus is designated by Pittenger 'Son of God'.

Having discarded the concept 'nature' in reference to the divine aspect of Christ's person Pittenger personifies the out-going love of God operative in Jesus as Son of God. But to declare Christ 'Son of God' because as the man, Jesus of Nazareth, God's eternal love-activity was present in him in an excessive degree does not meet the requirements of the case. Pittenger does, of course, assert that God's self-expressive love is more than a relationship. In doing so, however, he virtually denies his own thesis that love is the expressive 'mode' of the one divine being, while, at the same time, he merely vindicates the necessity of such a term as 'nature' to characterize Christ as Son in relation to the Father.

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