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The Person of Christ in Contemporary Speculation and Biblical Faith

H.D. McDonald

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I wish to introduce this subject by making a rather trite but nevertheless important observation. It is the simple, yet profound, statement that from its very first days the church regarded the gospel it was commissioned to proclaim as having its centre and focus in the living person of Christ. For the church this reality of Christ was expounded by men of God inspired by his Spirit. As, however, the gospel word began to make its way in the world it called for fuller explanation in the light of the apostolic faith. So did the church seek an understanding of its primitive creed, 'Jesus is Lord,' and 'God's Messiah,' in the context of this divine revelation, and of the experience of grace which came to men through the energies of Christ's redeeming cross.

Those of Christian faith knew that through encounter with Jesus they had become alert and alive to God. It thus became shinningly clear for the Christian proclamation, that to talk of Christ was to talk of God and vice versa. In some significant way, that is to say, Christ-talk and God-talk overlapped. For God was certainly met with in Christ, since he is, as Thomas Torrance states, 'the place where God has made room for Himself in the midst of our human existence and the place where men on earth and in history may meet and have communion with the heavenly Father'.¹ Not, to be sure, is God self-evidently present in Christ to human sight or insight, for the deity was hidden in the humanity; yet it is certainly apprehendable to the inward vision of faith. To see Jesus from this perspective is to behold in his face the glory of God, and so, to confirm Christ's own declaration, he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.

At the same time in proclaiming that God is to be found in Christ the first church did not think, as Ronald Hepburn seems to suggest,² in terms of an absolute literal identity between God-talk and Christ-talk. Theirs was not a Christomonistic faith. They were indeed sure that in Christ God was manifested in the flesh, and that the historic Jesus is rightly acclaimed, 'very God of very God'. Yet in making that confession they were aware of the distinction which compelled the conclusion, that while Christ is to be declared God, he is still not co-extensive with the Godhead; he is God truly yet not all that God is.

While within the faith of the church the explanation of the person of Christ is finally and fully in terms of deity, there were those outside who could not make—this affirmation and yet who found the figure of Jesus of compelling interest. For Jesus was there as an enigma of history who presented, 'an authentic, nagging and deeply serious question from which there is no final escape'.³ This Jesus of Nazareth who appears as so essentially human, and, at the same time, so strangely distinct from all the inhuman ways of men, called for explanation. Many of history's greatest personalities were to confess that they found in Jesus qualities which they themselves sorely lacked and surely needed for the business of good living.

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 1969, 24.

² Cf. Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, 1958, 66f.

³ A. O. Dyson, *Who is Jesus Christ?* 1969, 10.

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Throughout the ages, men of all classes and creeds have had their say about Jesus, some painting him in colours, bright or black, according to their orientation, their purpose, or their mood. From the time of Reimarus (1694-1768), however, there has been an increase in the number of attempts to present a picture of Jesus apart from the dictates of the biblical faith and the church's creeds. And as more and more the church itself has moved away from its anchorage in biblical authority and gospel faith, so has it come to decline to Christ that essential divine status which is its fundamental confession.

Two facts then are clear from a survey of the contemporary christological scene. One: there is a widespread interest in the full humanness of Jesus. And this interest is there despite the fact that the Bultmannian school thought to push the Jesus of the Gospels off the stage of factual history and into the mists of an ancient mythology. There is a new awareness and appreciation of Christ's essential manhood. The Jesus of the Gospels was truly a man; a single individual, as Kierkegaard would say. He is not simply Man in a non-personal sense; not just the embodiment, or bearer, of an impersonal manhood. One of the good results of this revived emphasis on the actuality of Christ's true humanity is, as Donald Baillie says, to deliver christology from the haunting spectre of doceticism.⁴ Since the tendency among Evangelicals has always been towards Apollinarianism they would do well to pay heed to this stress on the human reality of Jesus as an essential element in biblical soteriological doctrine.

But there are results from focusing on the human figure of the gospels which are not so good, although it would be wrong to attribute them directly to the new quests for the historical Jesus. There are those who have accepted the Bultmannian divorce between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith and have opted for the former. Such, as we shall see, seek consequently to account for Christ solely in ethical-humanistic terms.

The other fact revealed by a survey of the contemporary christological scene is that not only is it characterised by a widespread interest in the full humanness of Jesus, but it is also characterised by a weakened faith in his full deity. Donald Bloesch is certainly right when he declares that among present day heresies which 'pose a threat to the church' is a 'creeping unitarianism which calls in question the full deity of Christ'.⁵ This does not mean, of course, as we shall see again, that there is not some sort of special status accorded to Christ in terms either of a divinising of a man in terms of human effort or divine grace; or as a result of a mutation in the evolutionary process or a breaking through of the cosmic consciousness—in statements, that is to say, which fall broadly under the general headings of ancient Ebionism and Nestorianism. In the end, however, both approaches converge on the proposition that Jesus Christ is basically a human person who manifested a certain godlikeness or embodied the indwelling presence of God, rather than being himself a divine being who assumed the actuality of full manhood.

It was at Caesarea Philippi on the borders between the Jewish and the Gentile world—as if to accentuate his universality—that Jesus put the question first to his disciples, 'Who do men say that the Son of Man is?' He would hear the verdicts of those beyond the perspective of

⁴ D. M. Baillie, *God was in Christ*, 1958, 11f.

⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, i, 1978, 19.

faith to learn how far they had gone in apprehending the ultimate truth about him. He would have the conclusions of human speculations stated, it seems, as a contrast to the confession of Peter which was about to be given by divine illumination.

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And it is this first question we, too, are to ask. What is being said about Jesus? The answers returned to that first question asked by Jesus show that his presence had aroused a lively interest. And each verdict would have served to commend him to a wider public than the incredible confession wrung from Peter under the divine aflatus. There would be something exciting in having a prophet in the midst, for who could predict what a prophet would do or say? But it is an awesome thing to be confronted with very God in terms of a human life: that is something almost unbelievable, deeply confusing, and quite soul-shattering. That is the 'impossible possibility' of the biblical faith; that is truly the scandal of Christianity.

Human verdicts on Jesus interest still. And they are more catching and crowd-winning than the ultimate truth about him which humbles man's natural reason, shakes his soul, and stabs his conscience. This explains the huge success of such stage productions as *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In *Godspell*, Jesus is set in the context of comedy, mirth and gaiety, and the viewer is left with the impression of how sparkingly human he was. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, amidst the music and the lyrics with their crudities and near blasphemy, Jesus comes through, to be sure, with a certain commanding authority. But in neither musical is there any idea of Christ as other than a good sort of human.

When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi did he, we may wonder, look first to the Jewish world to the south and then to the Gentile world to the north as he posed his question, what are they saying about me? Whether he expected to hear the speculations of both worlds or not, it is possible for us to listen to some at least of the things said about Jesus from each.

'Ever since the new Israel,' says Rabbi David Polish speaking of the revived Jewish state, 'a special interest in Jesus in manifested.'⁶ This manifestation of interest has come to expression in the many Jewish attempts to answer the question, 'Who is he?' from the context of Judaism. Typical of these are the conclusions of Geza Vermes and Hugh Schonfield. For Vermes, Jesus is a type of first century Holy Man; himself a Galilean Hasaid of profound insight, indeed, and sterling character.⁷ Schonfield, on the other hand, sees him more, as John Hayes says, as 'The Messianic Schemer'.⁸ Finding himself in a period ablaze with the expectation of a messiah, Jesus, so Schonfield argues, took it as an opportunity to fill the messianic rôle. The situation itself was ready-made for one who dared to act; and Jesus dared. Other situations he engineered so as to establish his position by showing them to be the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Although his early death came as a surprise he had already planned that his 'messianic programme' would be 'saved from the grave of all dead hopes to become the guiding light and inspiration of men'.⁹

⁶ David Polish, *The Eternal Dissent*, 1961, 207.

⁷ Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 1973, 224.

⁸ Cf. John H. Hayes, *Son of God to Superstar*, 1967, ch. 10.

⁹ Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, 1965, 173.

In the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls some have sought to reconstruct a picture of Jesus as an Essene Teacher of a Qumran community who taught, as C. F. Potter contends, 'a simple ethical humanitarian faith'.¹⁰

As we turn towards the Gentile world and hear the verdicts on Christ of those of the outer circle of historic and biblical faith we find views elaborated according to the specific interest of their propounders. Yet they do illustrate a remark of Michael Ramsey that movements which 'invoke the name of Jesus may seize upon one fraction or another of the vast mystery of his truth'.¹¹

For many moderns the significance of Jesus is supremely that of a political agitator. In this regard some like Robert Eisler put Jesus squarely among the Zealot

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group of his time whose avowed object was to rid Judaea of Roman domination.¹² Others, like Cullmann¹³ and Brandon,¹⁴ although not declaring Jesus a Zealot as such, contend that he had ties with the movement and that there his sympathies lay. Brandon asserts that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God was nothing other than the hoped-for 'achievement of an apocalyptic situation that necessarily involved the elimination of the Roman government in Judaea'.¹⁵

The Theology of Liberation would go further and present Christ as a social and political revolutionary. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, while appreciating the efforts of Cullmann and Brandon to link Jesus with the political hopes of the Zealots, dissents from their restriction of his message, since, 'For Jesus, the liberation of the Jewish people was only one aspect of a universal, permanent revolution'.¹⁶

When we come to the inner circle, to those theologians who apparently wish to be reckoned still as sharing the church's faith, we find among them those whose christological speculations in the end fail to raise Jesus above the status of a special kind of man. In actual fact their picture of Christ puts them outside the biblical faith and historic gospel. For some of them explain the presence of Christ in the world in such terms as to deny that he is the Word made flesh, and others in such a way as to deny that the *Word was God*.

Paul Tillich, having contended that all statements about God, even the word 'God' itself is symbolic,¹⁷ maintains that the designation 'Christ' is not a personal name but a symbol for the New Being which came to fulfilment in the otherwise unknown Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁸ He denies outright the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity and stigmatises it as a

¹⁰ C. F. Potter, *The Lost Years of Jesus*, 1958, 155.

¹¹ Michael Ramsey, Robert E. Terwillinger, A. M. Allchin, *The Charismatic Christ*, 1974, 24.

¹² Robert Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*, 1931.

¹³ Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, 1957.

¹⁴ S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factors in Primitive Christianity*, 1967.

¹⁵ Brandon, *op. cit.*, 344.

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, E.T. 1975, 231.

¹⁷ Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, i. 265, ii, 10.

¹⁸ Tillich, *op. cit.*, ii, 103.

pagan doctrine.¹⁹ No wonder George Tvard can say that 'Tillich's embarrassment with the doctrine of the Incarnation is patent'.²⁰ His 'whole picture of Jesus becoming "Christ"', says Killen, 'is one of the gradual divination of a man'.²¹

It is Tillich's views, expressed in other terms, which have been given new vogue in *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Only here the writers prefer the term 'mythological' to Tillich's 'symbolical'. Some of its contributors do indeed allow that this divinization of Jesus began quite early. Thus, Michael Goulder declares, 'But the full work of divinizing Jesus falls to John, who has no mere human Being but the Word of God incarnated, striding an inch above the ground'.²²

The speaker in a recent lecture given to the Churches' Renewal Group, although himself neither scholar nor theologian, poses a number of questions designed to suggest that the incarnation is unbelievable nonsense. The incarnation, it is stated, does not provide any grounds for believing in God; and the lecturer affirms he would still believe in God if the doctrine were swept away.²³ But in what God and in what sort of God could we still believe as Christians apart from the incarnation? Certainly not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We may surely ask; Is it possible to have a true belief in God apart from Christ? We need to ponder well the words written long since by F. D. Maurice, 'We accept the fact of the Incarnation, because we feel that it is impossible to know the absolute and invisible God as Man needs to know Him, and craves to know Him, without an Incarnation. Secondly, we receive the fact of the Incarnation, not perceiving how we can recognize a perfect Son of God and Son of Man, such as man needs and craves for, unless He were, in all points, tempted like as we are. Thirdly, we receive the fact of an Incarnation, because we ask of God, a Redemption, not for a few

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persons, from certain evil tendencies, but for humanity from all the plagues by which it is tormented'.²⁴

The faith that saves is the confession with the mouth that Jesus is Lord and the belief in the heart that God has raised him from the dead. But can there be such a faith in Christ apart from the believing acceptance of the biblical affirmation concerning him that he was truly the Word who was with God and the Word that was God; and, who, according to Phillips' translation of John 1: 14, 'became a human being and lived among us'? It is plainly of the biblical faith that God has come among us; not in an airy legend but as an actual life; not in a mythology to be divined by the initiated, but by a miracle to be known by the believing; not as a fancy of a poetic imagination, but as a reality of the prosaically historical. In the incarnation the divine intertwined with the human: and the absoluteness of God commingled with the relativeness of history. 'Christ's Incarnation restores the eternal dimension to the

¹⁹ Tillich, *op. cit.*, ii. 109.

²⁰ George H. Tvard, *Paul Tillich and the Christian Message*, 1961, 120.

²¹ R. Allan Killen, *The Ontological Theology of Paul Tillich*, 1956, 167.

²² Michael Goulder, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick, 1977, 81.

²³ Michael Taylor, *A Plain Man looks at the Incarnation*, 1977, 10.

²⁴ F. D. Maurice, *Theological Essays*, 1957 edition, pp. 84, 85.

spirit and *reveals* man's intrinsic relation to an eternal Origin. In the Incarnation eternity communicates itself personally to man's existence in time.²⁵

While some explain the presence of Jesus in the world in such terms as to deny that he was the Word made flesh, others, as we have stated, conceive of the divine aspect of his person in ways which discredit the assertion that *the Word was God*.

It is not, of course, possible or necessary, to survey the whole range of christological speculations which assure this conclusion. But we will glance at those who like Knox and Ferré read the divine aspect in Christ in terms of function; and those others, like Pittenger and Hook, who use the concept of the divine indwelling, either that of God's presence or of his Spirit.

Knox is emphatic that Jesus was altogether a man, albeit 'an individual of vastly more than ordinary stature' and of 'the most amazing originality'. About this man 'remembered' as someone special by his disciples there grew up the belief that God had acted in him in some unique way.²⁶ This uniqueness is not, however, to be sought in his possession of a divine essence, but is the result of 'God's unique action in him'.²⁷ Knox's final account is that of a man 'divinised' by the church's faith that God acted in the series of events which surrounded his life.

Nels Ferré, too, refuses to Jesus the fundamental reality of deity. He was essentially a man; but such a man as to give us 'a new definition of true manhood; Agapé man'.²⁸ Although it is not possible to pronounce him sinless, he was nevertheless certainly 'God-possessed' because manifesting and radiating the Agapé love of God. It was because he functioned as love he is to be designated divine.

Such views of Jesus have found other advocates. H. W. Montefiore, for example, in answer to his own question, 'Who is Christ?' asserts that such a question does not intend, 'What is his nature?' but rather, 'What is his function?'.²⁹ Jesus is divine because he is 'the pattern of God's loving activity' in the world. John Hick's contribution to *The Myth of Christ Incarnate* is an extension of the thesis regarding Christ elaborated in his earlier essay entitled 'Christology at the Crossroads'. In the essay he rejects such Chalcedonian terms as 'substance' and 'essence' as no longer meaningful. Now we can only speak in the category of 'action' rather than 'being'. Christ is divine, he argues, because of a certain continuity between the divine 'agapéing' and that of Jesus. The formula by which we are now to designate the concept of Christ's divineness the essay declares is that of 'homoagapé rather than the homoousia!'.³⁰

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²⁵ Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, 1963, 93.

²⁶ Cf. John Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, 1967, 23, *et. al.*

²⁷ Knox, *Jesus Lord and Christ*, 1958, 232.

²⁸ Nels Ferré, *Christ and the Christian*, 1958, 75.

²⁹ H. W. Montefiore, 'Towards a Christology for Today,' in *Soundings*, ed. A. R. Vidler, 1964, 158.

³⁰ John Hick, 'Christology at the Crossroads,' in *Prospect for a Theology: Essays in Honour of H. H. Farmer*, ed. F. G. Healey, 1966, 165.

Bishop John Robinson likewise upholds a functional christology and finds the uniqueness of Jesus in his intimate union with God grounded in his faithfulness and obedience. While the doctrine of our Lord's pre-existence and incarnation are pronounced 'mythological', his divinity is stated in 'adoptionist' terms which Robinson openly advocates, making clear at the same time, his awareness of its rejection by the early church as basically a denial of Christ's essential deity.³¹ 'How can Christ be God for us without ceasing to be man?' Robinson asks. His answer is that he never was or could be other than man. For if he were ever more than man in himself—the God-man—he would have ceased to be man. So he concluded that the Father-Son language of the Gospels is symbolic, designed, as such, to express a unique relationship of the man Jesus with God.³²

Norman Pittenger, from the standpoint of Process Thought, conceives of Christ as a 'mutation' in the evolutionary process. He makes use of the indwelling formula of Nestorius in exposition of his view. All reality is 'in' God in a pan-en theistic sense. But in Christ this 'inness' of God differs in degree from the rest of us. So, says Pittenger, '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'.³³

Others conceive the divine aspect in Christ after the manner of the early Ebionism, as the action, that is to say, in him of God's Spirit. Early twentieth-century accounts of a higher aspect of Christ in these terms can be found in Pringle-Pattison's *Idea of God*, and in the essays contributed by C. W. Emmet and B. H. Streeter to the symposium, *The Spirit*. Emmet spoke of Christ as the 'supreme Example of the Spirit's inspiration',³⁴ while Streeter contended that the Holy Spirit is none other than the spirit manifested in the life of Christ. All we need, he affirms, to explain the person of Christ is to allow that the divine spirit, active in the cosmic totality, found in him its unobstructed expression.³⁵ Like statements by R. C. Moberley to the effect that 'The Holy Spirit is mainly revealed to us as *the Spirit of the Incarnation*'³⁶ so that we may say, 'the Spirit of the Incarnation is the Son of God,'³⁷ were taken up by W. R. Matthews and expounded in his Maurice Lectures (1949). The mystics were right, Matthews asserts, in looking within for encounter with the reality of God. But most men, even the best, the poet and the prophet for example, have only an 'intermittent' awareness of the divine inspiration. In Christ this action of the Spirit was 'complete'. But 'the fact that Jesus was supremely inspired does not make him inhuman; on the contrary, it makes him fully man, the representative man, the human person after God's image'.³⁸

The idea of Jesus as the Spirit-filled man is further elaborated by Norman Hook, Dean of Norwich. Hook seeks to construct a christology solely on the basis of the Synoptic Gospels. He consequently discards the Fourth Gospel which he acknowledges accords divine status and essential Godhood to the Incarnate Logos. But he asserts: 'our concern in dealing with a

³¹ Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 1968, 189.

³² Robinson, *op. cit.*, 186.

³³ Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, 166, 167.

³⁴ Cf. C. W. Emmet, *The Spirit*, ed. B. H. Streeter, 1919, 221.

³⁵ B. H. Streeter, *op. cit.*, 371.

³⁶ R. C. Moberley, *Atonement and Personality*, 1901, 194.

³⁷ 195, cf. 203.

³⁸ W. R. Matthews, *The Problem of Christ in the Twentieth Century*, 1949, 79f.

Spirit christology is not the Fourth Gospel, which is really a meditation on the Logos doctrine, but the Synoptic Gospels which appeared before the Logos doctrine was accepted'.³⁹ He thereupon goes on to formulate the view of Christ as the Spirit-filled man *par excellence*. More recently, James Dunn following the earlier Oskar Holtzmann of Giessen has put forward a similar thesis. He states that, 'Jesus saw himself as a Spirit-inspired

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exorcist and healer, and if the words of Matthew 11: 21 go back to Jesus, as seems most probable, they confirm that Jesus saw himself as a charismatic worker of miracles'.⁴⁰

There are other speculations about Jesus which likewise fall short of the biblical faith and the historic gospel. For Ernst Fuchs, he is 'a man who dared to act as God's representative'.⁴¹ Dorothee Sölle, orientating her christology towards the future, sees Christ as a 'representative for God' in a world in which God is no longer present. In this sense Jesus is the one 'who holds the place of this now absent God open for him in our midst'.⁴² John Cobb sees Jesus as the unique and extraordinary prophet whose openness to God's 'creative transformation' steadily at work in the world and in every person, was actualized in him to full potentiality.⁴³ While Todrank, seeking to accommodate Christianity to a pluralistic society opts for a 'Christology without Jesus'. For him the 'Christ' idea and ideal is embodied in other figures, in Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mao Tse-tung.⁴⁴ All those views in the end, however, leave Jesus only and altogether within the circle of humanity. Even if they do heap up enthusiastic adjectives to elevate him within the human context this does not put him finally outside. And that means for us that a Christ only extended to the limits of the best human has not dealt with the human dilemma.

Maybe we have heard enough of the answers to the first question posed there at the borders of Caesarea Philippi, 'Who are men saying that I the Son of man am?' 'But whom say you that I am?' This is the question put to revelation and faith. And it is in this context that the question can only be finally answered. For the truth of the matter is as A. M. Hunter declares, 'if what the New Testament and the creeds of the church affirm about Christ is to be accepted, there is needed a personal response to the challenge with which God confronts us in his Son. Of course to the natural man in his pride of intellect this is nonsense. He supposes that the mystery of Christ's person can be solved intellectually, without any self-commitment to him. Experience shows this to be mistaken. Take the natural man's approach, and Christ will stay for you an enigma. Only faith and love know who he really is, and the Christian faith is the decision to commit your whole soul and future to the confidence that Christ is not an illusion but the reality of God'.⁴⁵

At this point I would like to remind you of the title of this lecture: 'The Person of Christ in Contemporary Speculation and Biblical Faith'. It is now with this latter issue we are concerned. But I do not intend to chronicle here the evidence of the New Testament for the

³⁹ Norman Hook, *Christ in the Twentieth Century*, 1968, 106.

⁴⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 1975, 71, cf. 88, 89.

⁴¹ Ernst Fuchs, *Studies in the Historical Jesus*, tr. Andrew Scobie, 1964, 22.

⁴² Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, tr. David Lewis, 1967, 132.

⁴³ Cf. John Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 1975, 225f. 246f.

⁴⁴ Gustav H. Todrank, *The Secular Search for a New Christ*, 1969, 64.

⁴⁵ A. M. Hunter, *Jesus Lord and Saviour*, 1976, 117.

deity of Christ. I am certain that Donald Bloesch is absolutely correct in his categorical statement that, 'The core of Christological doctrine as developed in the church is to be found in the Scriptures and particularly the New Testament. The New Testament is unequivocal in asserting the deity of Christ'.⁴⁶

What I wish to do is rather to suggest that the approach to a christology must have a different beginning and context from what has been usual in theological discussions and textbooks. And in this connection I will make two points.

1. It must take its start from, and have its perspective within, the biblical concept of God. Historic Christian theism has too often been presented in terms of Greek philosophy rather than Hebrew religion. God's existence, that is to say, has been thought to have been proven by the so-called proofs. And God has been presented to faith as a single, almost static, being. But the God of the Bible is nothing such.

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He is a living dynamic reality—revealing himself as a unity in diversity. For as John MacQuarrie says, 'The unbroken unity of a monolithic God from whom has gone forth neither Word nor Spirit would be something less than a God to be worshipped'.⁴⁷ Early modalistic monarchianism emphasised the divine sameness at the expense of his differentiations, or othernesses. But if God cannot be differentiated he cannot then go outside himself; there can be no otherness of God which has its ground in his own being. Arianism, following dynamistic monarchianism, on the other hand, emphasised the otherness of God to the neglect of his sameness. For, according to Arius, the Son of God is outside God, but not as God; the first creature of God only. Athanasius was right to insist that though the Son is other than the Father yet there is the sameness; which fact was expressed in the credal term 'homoousios'—'of the same substance'. This means for us that the event of the incarnation is related to the essence of God; and that, therefore, the cross of this incarnate One is likewise related to the essence of God. It is only on the basis of the Christ-event that it is truly possible to say who God is, and of what sort. This means precisely that God cannot be rightly conceived of except in the living actuality of Christ. And to say that is at one with saying that God is disclosed in the sameness of his differentiation; in the Son of God who is 'of one substance with the Father'.

2. The second point to be made is that a true biblical christology must take its start from, and have its perspective within, the Christian revelation of the divine Trinity. Historic Systematic Theologies have, I believe, set off on the wrong foot. They have taken the order of historic debate. They have first set forth God as a single monod and then gone on to graft somehow a second being on to the first, and then, with not a little difficulty, to find room for a third. In other words, most Systematic Theologies start off with a basic unitarianism. But this is surely false to that final disclosure of what God is, to which the Christian revelation bears witness. For, according to B. B. Warfield, 'the roots of its revelation are set in the threefold Divine causality of the saving process, it naturally finds an echo also in the consciousness of everyone who has experienced salvation'.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, *op. cit.*, 123.

⁴⁷ John MacQuarrie, *Thinking about God*, 1975, 127, 128.

⁴⁸ B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, 1929, 167.

Leslie Dewart rightly says, therefore, that 'The doctrine of God of the New Testament does not begin with the oneness of God, to which concept of the three-persons-in-one-nature is added by way of modification'.⁴⁹ And this divine Triunity is guaranteed to Christian experience, for as Karl Rahner observes, 'God stands in relation'.⁵⁰ Since, then, 'The doctrine of the Trinity is not an explanation but a definition of the being of God and the life of God,'⁵¹ there, surely, is where a Christian Dogmatics must begin. It will begin, that is to say, with the implication of the divine commission of Matthew 28: 19, and the inspiration of the apostolic benediction of 2 Corinthians 13: 14.

The Christian revelation is, as John Donne says in one of his religious ballads, a 'three person'd God'.⁵² And Christian experience, we are saying, inevitably reflects this reality of the triune God. For we are born of God; born of the Holy Spirit into the fellowship of sons through and in the divine Sonship of Christ, and are thus brought into a relationship of 'adoption' to the Father. This is not, of course, to make Christian experience itself the ground of our theology or christology. They must rest on the revelation of the nature of God made real *to* experience. Yet it is true, as a writer of an earlier date declares, 'Many a man in the very bosom of the church at this day cherishes a belief in the triune God, that

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involves a speculative definition of the three persons and their mutual relations, which in his present lack of theological discipline he could no more give with exactness, and without deviation towards Sabellianism on the right hand, and Arianism on the left than he could specify the chemical elements of the air he breathes, or map the sky under whose dome he walks every day'.⁵³ Maybe, however, the historic declaration 'three persons and one God' savours too much of tritheism. Perhaps we would do better to speak of the being of God as he has revealed himself, as possessing three eternal centres of personal consciousness. And the total essence of the Godhead belongs to each one, and yet each is separate within the Godhead.

It was that personal conscious centre, the Son, who became incarnate; he who ever was God and never ceased to be what he was. It is, then, in the context of the biblical conception of God as triune that the final truth about the person of Christ must be understood. For, beginning with this divine triunity the reality of the incarnation and the deity of the incarnate Son follow. The trinitarian conception of God expresses the belief that God has commended himself to us in the person of Christ. And what God is in his revelation is not other than what he is in himself. God's disclosure in Christ is his disclosure of himself as God.

It is a merit with the various kenotic christologies that they began their constructive account with a statement on the pre-existence of Christ. This is specially so in the case of P. T. Forsyth who prefaces his chapter on the deity of Christ with one under that title.⁵⁴ In that chapter he censures those theologians who suffer from 'mental cramp' by being 'too timid to-

⁴⁹ Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief*, 1967, 143.

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, *Theological Foundations*, i, 148.

⁵¹ Bloesch, *op. cit.*, 37.

⁵² John Donne, Ballad, 'Batter my Heart'.

⁵³ William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, 1888, i, 246, 247.

⁵⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 1909, reprint 1946, ch. 10.

day to stray from the shorelines of explicit statement, to launch out into the deep things of God, and sail by the observation of the heavens'.⁵⁵ But does the conclusion of Christ's essential deity follow from his pre-existence? The modern Jehovah's Witnesses, following the earlier Arius, would hold that the Son pre-existed Bethlehem as the first of created beings. Forsyth's belief in the essential deity of Christ is unequivocal; but his chapter on Christ's deity has the aspect of a *non-sequitur*. We must begin not with the pre-existence of Christ, but with the nature of God as revealed to us in his final disclosure; with God, that is to say, not as a static oneness but as a dynamic being in the unity of three eternal personal centres of consciousness.

This then is what the incarnation means. It means the actual coming of God in the form of a human life; and of God not ceasing to be God when he became flesh. This cannot be written off as an unreality; as a pious story. It is not a 'mythology', but as Paul the apostle says in 1 Timothy 4: 16, a 'mystery'. It is certainly the inspired affirmation of the apostolic word that in Christ God has set foot on the stage of history; yet not in masquerade, not in myth; but as man. In Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Mary we have God truly and God fully. This credal statement about the Virgin Birth as the organ of the divine incarnation is congruous with the reality. It is not to be explained away, as is done, for example, by F. C. Grant as belonging to the poetry of religion whose proper place is in art and devotion, not in theology. Nor is it to be accounted for as a 'midrash' or 'fanciful explanation' of Isaiah 7: 14 which may have had meaning for the first century but none for ours.⁵⁶

For our part, we have no hesitation about the Virgin Birth. We do not find it either a burden or a barrier to faith. The coming of the Son of God on the stage of human history has at once a human and divine aspect. He was born of a woman

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like the rest of us; an event essentially human. But the seed from which he sprang was divinely implanted: a body was prepared for him by a divine act. So the birth from the divine standpoint was a miraculous conception. It was at once a historical fact and a divine sign: a sign that God had indeed stepped into our human situation for us men and our salvation. Just as at the end of his life the resurrection was both fact and sign so was it at the beginning. In both cases the historical facts become divinely attested signs. It is just because the facts are actualities of history that they can become meaningful symbols.

We cannot banish God from the physical world and assert that God never bends physical fact into special conformity with his holy purpose. To contend, as so many do nowadays, that the incarnation and the resurrection are legendary and non-historical is simply to refuse to take seriously God's usage of physical facts. And it is to deny God's sovereignty over total reality and to sever the physical from the spiritual in a way that the biblical revelation will not allow.

Dennis Nineham contends that it is possible 'to be saved and gripped by the gospel' without the assurance and certainty of its historical factuality.⁵⁷ But surely this cannot be. The gospel would not have survived if it were not anchored in secure historical facts. And, besides, to

⁵⁵ Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 262.

⁵⁶ F. C. Grant, *Basic Christian Beliefs*, 1960, 78f.

⁵⁷ D. E. Nineham, *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament*, 1965, 12.

speak of the gospel as somehow detached from the person of Christ is altogether at odds with what is the gospel. For it is in the person of Jesus Christ as living and present that we have God's salvation. We are not saved by accepting a churchly Christ-idea but by encounter with the reality of God in the historical actuality of Jesus Christ the Lord.

In a rather blunt word in one of his sermons John Donne using the literal Greek word of Ephesians 2: 12 declares: 'He is an atheist that is without Christ; And he is such an atheist still, that pretends to receive Christ, and not as God; For if the receiving of Christ must redeeme him from being an Atheist, there can no other way be imagined, but by receiving him as God, for that onely, and no other good opinion of Christ, overcomes and removes his Atheisme.... Hee that confesses not all Christ, confesses no Christ.'⁵⁸

That was, as some of you will know, the shattering discovery that changed the life of (Chuck) Colson of Watergate infamy as he tells his story in his Book *Born Again*. He had previously thought of Jesus as one of the great men of history who in spite of his lack of worldly pomp and power managed for centuries to inspire countless to follow him. But Colson, challenged by a reading of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* was sent back to the New Testament to look again at the Christ of the record. He was arrested by the Gospel of John and came to see the truth 'as summed up in one mind-boggling sentence, "Jesus Christ is God" (Jn. 10: 30). Not just part of God, or just sent by God, or just related to God. He was (and therefore, of course is) God.'⁵⁹ Colson had discovered the divine Christ. He had discovered in him the water that never fails and the gate to a new life. And in Christ he became a new man. And that is truly saving faith: the unity of the mind's affirmation of a credal truth with the heart's response in a confident trust. That was Thomas' confession—*My Lord and my God. Lord and God*—there is the propositional affirmation: *my Lord and my God*—there is personal appropriation.

I have been insisting that rightly to approach the truth of Christ's person we must begin with and take our stance from the biblical conception of God as dynamic, the same in his differentiations; and with the final disclosure of God in the Christian gospel as triune. This means that we must write our Systematics

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in a different order. We must begin with the 'Quid sit deus?' question, with 'What God is?' Famous theologies, such as Strong and Hodge open on the wrong note; with the 'An sit deus?' question, 'Whether God is?' But such a question has no essential place in Christian dogmatics. It is altogether improper for a Christian Systematic Theology to begin with the arguments for the existence of God. The bible founds on the revelation of God as actual and living; and a Christian theology should take its start likewise from his fullest and final disclosure as spiritual and triune being. But if the arguments for God's existence have any place in Systematic Theology it is at the end not at the beginning. They have significance not as a preface to God's self-revealing in the scriptural revelation but as pointers to his existence as triune found outside that revelation.

⁵⁸ John Donne, *Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels with a Selection of Prayers and Meditations*, edited, with an Introduction by Evelyn M. Simpson and published by the University of California Press, 1962, 228.

⁵⁹ C. W. Colson, *Born Again*, 1978, 125.

It is after all in the light of revealed theology that natural theology alone gets its perspective and its point. God is hidden from us in his world until we stand in his light, for the knowledge of God is no part of our natural constitution or our natural endowment. Modern natural piety professes to perceive God in the beat of the pulse of nature, but it is not truly God that is declared as the conclusion of a natural theology. For God is what he has revealed himself to be, a unity of triune existences. And because he is that in his eternal being then must natural theology, when viewed from the standpoint of revealed, show some evidence of such a triune being.

'God, all nature sings Thy glory,
And Thy works proclaim Thy might;
Ordered vastness in the heavens,
Ordered course of day and night;
Beauty in the changeless seasons,
Beauty in the stormy sea;
All the changeless moods of nature,
Praise the changeless Trinity.'

What then, do we see most clearly as we look at the world from this perspective? The awareness of the dominant facts of life and purpose and relationship. Can we not consequently suggest that these three relate respectively to a specific personal centre of consciousness within the Godhead? Each has its own special source and spring in the economy of the trinity. The Spirit is essentially the originator of *life*. True, in the New Testament, the Spirit fulfils a soteriological function; but this is to be understood against the background of the Old Testament where he is presented in his life-giving action in creation. And while later mediaeval theology, and that of the Reformers, tended to restrict the Spirit's work to the supernatural gift of salvation, the earlier Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea contended that his life-giving action in creation was proof of his full deity. *Purpose* we see surely evident in the world: and can we have any hesitation in attributing such display of purpose to that personal centre of consciousness in the godhead we know as Father? Everywhere does it appear that things exist in *relationship*, and it is specially only in relationship that human beings can truly exist and be truly personal. God made man in his own image, in the image of that relationship which Eternally existed between the Father and the Son. It was the Son of God as the actuality of that sonship-relationship who came in human form to restore to man the sonship he had lost by his own sin. Life, Purpose and Relationship,

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these three, reflect dimly in the natural order that essential community of nature of Father, Son and Spirit which special revelation itself clearly discloses.