

# Some Recent Developments in Christology

THE PROBLEM of the person of Christ is the most crucial problem of all in Christian theology. That is why it is also the most sensitive. Re-thinking our beliefs in this hallowed area of theology is perhaps more painful than anywhere else, but it has to be done, unless of course we just affirm orthodoxy for the sake of a fragile doctrinal peace, and hope the difficulties, if unspoken, will vanish away. But the last few years have seen some interesting developments in the field of Christology, and the understanding of Christians generally will be the poorer if these are simply pushed to one side because of the controversy they are likely to raise.

I have in mind particularly two essays in the volume *Christ, Faith and History: Cambridge Studies in Christology* (1972).<sup>1</sup> These are Maurice Wiles' "Does Christology rest on a mistake?", and John Robinson's "Need Jesus have been perfect?", part of which re-appeared in 1973 in his book *The Human Face of God*.<sup>2</sup> Wiles, the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, offers his paper as "a starting point for further discussion":<sup>3</sup> it is an invitation to engage in a debate, and this present paper is intended as a small and belated contribution to that debate. Robinson's related paper, as he himself acknowledges, gets its stimulus from Wiles' earlier one, so it is convenient to look at both papers together. In this short essay, I hope (i) to outline very briefly the suggestions Wiles and Robinson make, and (ii) to make some tentative suggestions about how their case can be, and should be, supported.

## I

The heart of Wiles' case is that Christians have used two distinct types of language when speaking of Jesus. They have told two different stories, a human historical story and a divine mythological story. This second story has a different character, a different function and a different logical behaviour from the first, with the result that the divinity of Christ is to be understood more as an interpretative category than an ontological reality. Once the logical separateness of the two languages is understood, much of the confusion which accompanies traditional formulations of the Christological problem is avoided.

Wiles' argument can be seen as having four stages:—

(i) *The doctrine of the incarnation arose alongside two other doctrines, those of creation and fall.*<sup>4</sup> This seems a pretty indisputable observation. As Wiles says, "When Jesus was thought of as second Adam, this implied both that his work was a continuation and a completion of the work of creation and that it was a reversal of the disaster of the fall".

(ii) *Both creation and fall used to be understood as specific acts in history*, i.e. as datable events, one the consequence of God's love, the other the consequence of Adam's sin.

(iii) *Creation and fall no longer require an explicitly historical understanding*: the process of evolution as a whole is seen as the locus of God's general activity, whereas the doctrine of the fall indicates the universal condition of the human race at all times as having denied that fellowship with God for which it was created. The two doctrines are as important to Christian theology as they ever were, but their importance does not at all depend upon their being understood as specific historical events in the remote past. The older forms of the doctrines, insofar as they were thought to refer to direct and specific acts in history, rested on a mistake, "albeit a very respectable and not easily detectable mistake".<sup>5</sup>

(iv) *The doctrine of the incarnation has a similar mistake built into it*. It used to be thought that God's redemptive act in Jesus required a specific and divine presence of the Father in the Son, a specific consubstantiality of Jesus with the Father, in order to be effective. But theologians have had to learn that theological assertions are not necessarily dependent upon specific acts in history. More painfully still, Wiles suggests, we are now maybe having to learn that the doctrine of redemption can also stand without the postulation of a specific divine presence in Jesus, just as the doctrine of creation can stand without the affirmation of a specific act or acts of God.

This might seem to be a very sad and inadequate conclusion, a new version perhaps of an old heresy which will offend believers and appeal to no-one else: indeed, Wiles admits he may very well be wrong.<sup>6</sup> What needs to be understood straight away is that Wiles is *not* denying or abolishing the divinity of Christ any more than he is abolishing the doctrines of creation and fall. He is making an interesting suggestion about how the divinity of Christ is to be understood. He thinks we should see Christological statements as the combination of two languages, one empirical and descriptive, the other mythological and interpretative ("mythological" does not imply the connotations of legend, untruth, unreliability, etc.). In cosmology too, we tell two stories, or use two languages, one the scientific story of evolution, the other the "frankly mythological story" of creation and fall, so that "if we know what we are doing we can weave the two stories together in poetically creative ways". In Christology then we tell two stories, a human historical story and a divine mythological story. To locate the divinity of Christ in the second kind of story is not to deny it (as John Whale sensationally suggested in a feature article in the *Sunday Times*),<sup>7</sup> but to classify it (this point is taken up by Robnson as we shall see). Wiles still wants, in common with all Christians, to see "the life and death of Jesus as a part of the human story which is of unique significance in relation to seeing the human story as a whole as a true story of divine redemption at work".<sup>8</sup>

Robnson presses further the distinctiveness of the two Christo-

logical languages. We are not talking, he says, about "two storeys, but two stories. The one is natural, scientific, descriptive. The other is supernatural, mythological and interpretative".<sup>9</sup> Instead of a dualism of natures we are dealing with a dualism of languages: thus talk about the "supernatural" is no longer to be understood as a "parallel, superior causal sequence, but an interpretation, a *re-velatio* or turning back of the veil, in terms of myth or a 'second' story, of the same process studied by science and history". For Robinson the doctrine of the sinlessness of Jesus, as well as his uniqueness, perfection and finality,<sup>10</sup> is to be understood as belonging to the second language. The sinlessness of Jesus is a "theological judgment rather than an extrapolation from the historical evidence".<sup>11</sup> The judgment, of course, could never have arisen if there were not sound historical reasons for affirming it. But what is important is the recognition that "sinlessness" belongs in an interpretative context in which the death of Jesus is presented as "the perfect sacrifice for sin". It is a very important element in the interpretative story, an element which would continue to stand without the historical certainty (which would in any case be impossible to substantiate) that Jesus was at all times somehow objectively free from sin. Considerations of this kind are responsible for the title of the paper, "Need Jesus have been perfect?" If the view was held, or could be shown historically, that the empirical life of Jesus included some "imperfections", this would not affect the theological doctrine of Christ's perfection, since that doctrine is an interpretation of the life of Jesus, an evaluation, not a straightforward empirical description.

## II

I shall in this section try to offer reasons why the dualism of languages proposed by Wiles and Robinson is a valuable contribution to current Christology.

One possible way of testing or evaluating a new development in a particular discipline is to look around and see whether there has been any similar sort of development in another related discipline and, if there has been, to compare them. The method of interdisciplinary comparison should yield up interesting similarities and dissimilarities between the two developments, but more than this, it sometimes makes possible certain insights which, without comparison with a development in another discipline, might have escaped unnoticed. The suggestions made here are modest. I am assuming that when a topic in a particular discipline is compared with a similar topic in a related discipline, two things may happen. We can draw analogies between the two disciplines which, while instructive, must be treated with caution because of their analogous character: and we can look at a problem in our own discipline from the point of view of the treatment of a similar problem in another discipline, with the possible result that new understanding gained in one area may be shared in another.

I suggest that some of the developments in recent Christology are more supportable when they are compared with some similar developments in the *philosophy of mind*. Both Wiles and Robinson use the notion of a "category-mistake"<sup>12</sup> or "category confusion"<sup>13</sup> when they question whether the divinity of Christ should be substantively understood. Talk of category-mistakes immediately suggests Gilbert Ryle's use of the term in *The Concept of Mind*,<sup>14</sup> and only a passing acquaintance with the contents of Ryle's work is sufficient to draw out the similar character of the issues involved in recent Christology. I shall select three related topics from recent philosophy of mind, comparing each of them in turn with similar topics in the field of Christology. They are, (i) the notion of "category-mistake"; (ii) the eclipse of Cartesian dualism; and (iii) some other "non-Cartesian" theories of mind. Should this area be a little unfamiliar to some readers, I hope its relevance to the current debate about the person of Christ will become clear in due course.

(i) *Category-mistakes*

In a famous passage from *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle illustrates his term "category-mistake" by the example of a foreigner who, visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time, is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks, "But where is the University?" Ryle continues, "It then has to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized . . . He was mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong".<sup>15</sup>

Ryle used his notion of category-mistake to undermine the Cartesian doctrine that man is a dualistic being comprised of body and soul (= mind). He objected to the view that our word "mind" referred to some non-physical substance independent of the body but somehow its counterpart, though "made with a different sort of stuff and with a different sort of structure".<sup>16</sup> Other illustrations reinforce the same point, e.g. "a child witnessing the march-past of a division who, having had pointed out to him such and such battalions, batteries, squadrons, etc. asked when the division was going to appear. He would be supposing that a division was a counterpart to the units already seen . . .".<sup>17</sup> A more domestic illustration makes the same point: when we stand on the pavement outside 4 Southampton Row, we are making a ghastly category-mistake if we remark, "There's the Baptist Union".

Now Wiles and Robinson both think the early Church made a similar sort of mistake when they quite naturally understood the divinity of Christ to be a specific nature or substance in addition to, or superimposed on, his human nature or substance. That is why Ryle's illustrations are appropriate in the current Christological context. The foreigner who wanted to know where the University was,

was mistaken about how the word "University" is used, and he put it in the wrong category. But we could not conclude from his blunder that it would be a mistake to speak of the University *at all*. It still makes sense to speak of it, though not of course as if it were a separate building, locatable somewhere alongside all the other ones that constitute it. Now Wiles and Robinson, as I understand them, simply want to put our Lord's divinity, along with the Christological titles that express it (Son of God, Lord, Word, etc.) in a different *category* from empirical, factual observations about Jesus. They belong to the interpretative story which the Church has told and still tells when she gives an account of the significance which the totality of the life of Jesus has for her. The Christian, like the foreigner at Oxford, ought not to be dismayed because some of his terms do not refer to specific entities, things or observable properties. Once his category-mistake is pointed out to him, he is in a better position to know what his terms mean.

(ii) *The eclipse of Cartesian dualism*

Descartes taught that human beings are essentially non-physical, being "thinking things" or souls, distinct from their bodies. Such a view has some advantages. When a Cartesian gives an account of bodily actions such as sitting, he ought strictly to say "my body sits", not "I sit", because he is separate from his body and, so to speak, controls it from without. On the other hand when he gives an account of dying he can say not "I die", but "my body dies", i.e. his soul, the real "I", may not. Personal immortality is a good deal easier to hold on a Cartesian view of man, but that view is still widely rejected today. Perhaps the main reason for the unpopularity of the Cartesian account of man is the difficulty of explaining how distinct substances, the physical and the spiritual, can cohere together in the unity of a single individual, or how the mind, an immaterial thing, can operate on the physical body, or how the physical body can operate on the immaterial mind.

Ryle's attack on Cartesian dualism does not leave him in the position of denying that we have thoughts or feelings or consciousness. He objects to that kind of category-mistake which reifies the mind and makes it into a mysterious entity alongside the body ("the ghost in the machine"). The same kind of objection might well be made to the category-mistake which reifies the divinity of Christ and makes it into another mysterious entity alongside his humanity. But to affirm that Jesus is "Son of God" is not necessarily to affirm that Jesus carried around or possessed a divine property or quality in addition to his human faculties: it is rather to affirm, in the parabolic language of the early Church, something like the conviction that Jesus was "the man who lived God".<sup>18</sup> The relationship between a son and his father provides the parabolical material for the belief that Jesus, like no other man, was the embodiment of the faithfulness and love of Yahweh.

The analogy between divine/human in traditional Christology and

soul/body in Cartesian dualism can be pressed a little further. In fact Descartes' account of the soul is a fine model for showing just what is wrong with much traditional Christology. Do not many Christians even today regard the "real Jesus" as the divine substance which mysteriously joined itself to our Lord's human body, in a manner strikingly analogous to Descartes' asseveration that the real "I" is the invisible, intangible, immaterial "soul", both distinct and separate from the body, yet mysteriously conjoined with it? But the humanity of Jesus is not like a cloak surrounding his true nature like a "veil of flesh" concealing his godhead. And in both cases, the remedies are as analogous as the ills. Other accounts of consciousness and mental states more readily suggest themselves without resort to hypotheses about "thinking substances": other accounts of our Lord's divinity more readily suggest themselves without resort to a "divine substance" behind the phenomenon of the human Jesus.

(iii) *Some other theories of mind*

There is no room here to sketch the variety of alternative theories to Cartesian dualism in the philosophy of mind. Two theories, however, are of particular relevance to the Christological problem, viz. the identity theory and the person theory.

The identity theory is neatly summarised by Jerome Shaffer as "the theory that thoughts, feelings, wishes, and the rest of so-called mental phenomena are identical with, one and the same thing as, states and processes of the *body* (and, perhaps, more specifically, states and processes of the nervous system, or even of the brain alone)".<sup>19</sup> On this view, an individual is a unitary phenomenon whose mental life and mental states are explicable in terms of what happens in his physical body. Shaffer in fact does not hold the identity theory, but he aptly states one of the advantages the theory has over against dualism, viz., "It does not have to cope with a world which has in it both mental phenomena and physical phenomena, and it does not have to ponder how they might be related. There exist only the physical phenomena, although there do exist two different ways of talking about such phenomena; physicalistic terminology and, in at least some situations, mentalistic terminology. We have here a dualism of languages, but not a dualism of entities, events or properties".<sup>20</sup>

Now in Christology this is exactly what Robinson wants, i.e. a single, unitary person of Christ about whom a "dualism of languages" is appropriate, and which replaces Nicean talk about two natures. He writes, "The formula we presuppose (i.e. of traditional Christology) is not of one super-human person with two natures, divine and human, but of one human person of whom we must use two languages, man-language and God-language".<sup>21</sup> In other words Jesus is a single subject about which "different things can and must be predicated".<sup>22</sup> It seems to me there are valuable theological gains in so regarding the language used about Jesus, not least that it avoids the inevitable impression of Chalcedonian Christology that Jesus is "a hybrid conjunction of two

strange species",<sup>23</sup> a being quite unfitted for the work of divine redemption.

Finally we mention the "person theory" of P. F. Strawson. His view, put forward in his well-known *Individuals* (1959), is that both the mental and the physical are attributes of a single reality which he calls a "person". A person is that "type of entity such that *both* predicates ascribing states of consciousness *and* predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation, etc. are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type".<sup>24</sup> If, on this view, we say that someone has a body and a mind, we mean that both corporeal and mental characteristics are appropriate to the single personal entity he is.

Now this theory is not free from difficulties, perhaps the greatest of which is the problem of stating how a "person" differs from a "body".<sup>25</sup> Whereas in the identity theory we had a dualism of languages which refer in their differing ways to a single phenomenon (a human, physical being), in the person theory we have a dualism of differing attributes which are applicable to a single phenomenon (a person). The relevance of each to the double language of Christology is, I hope, by now evident: in Christology as in philosophy of mind, we do not need a duality of substances in order to account either for the nature of human consciousness, or for the nature of the person of Jesus. The content of each discipline remains what it is, baffling and mysterious. And the areas of vigorous debate within the two disciplines are about the adequacy or inadequacy of competing attempts to articulate the problem in the least unsatisfactory way possible. But more than one type of theory is possible, and the *explicandum* does not collapse if one *explicans* is passed over in favour of another.

### III

What then does this excursus into the philosophy of mind add up to?

First, I have stressed that the argument is analogical. Christology is not the same as philosophy of mind, and practitioners of each are not generally known by their sympathy for one another. Second, I am aware that the argument, left as it stands, is capable of being stood on its head. It would be a simple matter to point to the philosophical difficulties in the identity theory and the person theory of mind, and to claim that after all a return to some form of modified dualism is inevitable. There is no shortage of philosophers who do precisely this. Using the same technique of comparison with Christology which I have used might we not finish up where we began, with a duality of natures divine and human?

Perhaps. I happen to think the identity theory of mind, which is structurally nearer to Robinson's Christology than any of the others, is the least problematic of the various alternatives, but that is only an unimportant personal preference. It is much more important to see that in both disciplines there is more than one way of doing the job.

I should be happy enough if this paper had helped to reinforce the view that to speak of the divinity and humanity of Jesus is to speak of the same reality using two different languages and categories. I certainly do not want to claim that it is the *only* way of doing Christology, or that the traditional Chalcedonian type of Christology is best left buried in the past, or that it does not contain valuable elements that the more modern empirical approach may overlook. I do however strenuously object to the view that the divinity of Christ *must* be interpreted substantively, and that to depart from such an interpretation is to lapse into unitarianism, reductionism, modernism or whatever. I hope sufficient has been said about category-mistakes to make further discussion about it unnecessary.

One final comment is in order about the mind/body analogy. The comparison was made between the relationship between body and mind on the one hand, and the relationship between the humanity of Jesus and his divinity on the other. Formally the analogy looks like this:

|      |   |                    |
|------|---|--------------------|
| Body | = | Humanity of Jesus  |
| Mind |   | Divinity of Christ |

The analogy should emphatically not be read as if the human mind of Jesus is replaced by his divinity. That would of course be Apollinarian. Any theory of mind must be as applicable to the mind of Jesus as it would be to the mind of any other human being. The analogy works by the structural similarity between talk about mind and talk about Christ's divinity, and like all analogies it soon breaks down. Much more could and should be said about the content of the language about Christ's divinity, and about why God-language is held by Christians to be appropriate to Jesus as it is to no-one else. Interested readers will consult *The Human Face of God* for Robinson's answers to such questions. I have sought merely to focus on a significant and controversial development in recent Christology and to argue for its theological validity and usefulness.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Christ, Faith and History: Cambridge Studies in Christology*, ed. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (London, Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London, SCM Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> *Christ, Faith and History*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 22nd April, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> *Christ, Faith and History*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.: Human Face of God*, p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> *Christ, Faith and History*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London, Hutchinson's University Library, 1949).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Body, Mind and Death*, ed. Antony Flew (London, Collier-Macmillan, 1964), p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>18</sup> See Robinson, *Human Face of God*, pp. 186f., for a convincing exegesis of the meaning of the term "Son of God".

<sup>19</sup> Jerome Shaffer, *Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> *Human Face of God*, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, Methuen, 1959), p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Shaffer, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 57.

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The draft programme for the Baptist Historical Society Summer School at Norwich, 13-16 July 1978, includes a session for the presentation of about four short papers. The organizers will be glad to hear from any members who would like to speak for about fifteen minutes on some aspect of Baptist or nonconformist history. This is a good opportunity for reporting on work in progress, giving information about a new discovery, or sharing an enthusiasm for a minor character, a small cause or a bypath of history. Volunteers for this session should write to the Rev. Thornton Elwyn, 148 Greenvale Road, Eltham SE9 1PQ, stating the title of their topic.