

IN THE STUDY

Last minute editorial space problems led to the exclusion from the previous "In the Study" of the review with which I begin. It concerns a book¹ that asks about the 'point' of christology and thus inevitably poses unusual questions. When the writer is one of America's respected post-war philosophical theologians it may be wise to give him a hearing. The material on offer is densely packed, even at times repetitious. Not to put too fine a point on it, Schubert Ogden does rather go on and on. Equally, however, he is challenging things too often taken for granted. He broached his present concern nearly a decade ago in a thought-provoking article in the *Journal of Religion*. That essay is now both complicated and considerably extended in range.

Ogden, we may say, has one foot in Bultmann and the other in Hartshorne - surely a combination calculated to make the stoutest heart blench. But it does ensure that he will take seriously not only the existential but also the metaphysical question, and so will not be content either with an historicist or with a functional christology. He sees with precise clarity that any proper christology must embrace on the one hand the structure of ultimate reality and on the other hand the meaning of ultimate reality *for us*. It must ask not only 'Who is Jesus?' but also 'Who is God?' and 'Who am I?'. This seems exactly right. Score one.

So then, we are to seek an adequate formulation for our day of the 'constitutive christological assertion' according to which Jesus is decisive for human existence because he is the re-presentation of the meaning of ultimate reality for us. In so doing, we shall have to ask about the matter of truth or credibility and about the matter of meaning or appropriateness. The question of truth or credibility in turn has two aspects, one metaphysical, the other moral, one theoretical, the other practical. In asking about theoretical credibility in our day we are scrutinising the metaphysical assertions implied by the claim that in Jesus ultimate reality (God) is made explicit, claiming and authorising human existence. In asking about practical credibility we are asking about the moral assertions similarly implied. Ogden favours the Bultmannian procedure of demythologising (negatively) and existentialist interpretation (positively) to deal with the problem of theoretical credibility. He favours the 'liberationist' procedure of deideologising (negatively) and political interpretation (positively) to deal with the problem of practical credibility. We may challenge his solutions. But his guidelines seem, again, exactly right. Score two.

But now, as the backdrop to all this is a running critique of contemporary 'revisionist' christologies. The weakness that Ogden there locates is that in most essential particulars they are still playing the old classical christological game. The *identity* of Jesus is still the *narrow* point of concentration: it is simply that 'man of God' replaces 'God in man'. Jesus is the Christ because of what he actualises or embodies: it is simply that 'the possibility of authentic self-under-

1 *The Point of Christology* by S. M. Ogden. SCM Press.
E5-95 pa. 1982.

standing' replaces the being and presence of God. A christology from below replaces a christology from above, but fundamentally the same (wrong) question is being asked and answered. That Ogden has here exposed a crucial nerve seems likely. Certainly his objection to the tendency of revisionist christologies to fail to locate Jesus on the divine side of the God-man equation seems exactly right. Score three.

Already the result is a respectable innings with many a ball landing in the pavilion. The trouble is that these immaculate drives are interspersed with not a few wild and ragged strokes. The commentator will want to study many a replay of those shots involving neo-classical transcendental metaphysics (Hartshorne, with a dash of Tillich, but freshly glossed), of others involving contorted and fragmentary appeals to a few New Testament texts, of yet others building heavily on the paradigm of Jesus the Liberator.

These, however, are often matters of style and technique. The basic weakness arguably lies in a different direction. I spoke earlier of Ogden's proper preoccupation with the twin questions of truth and meaning. Whilst elaborating on the first, I left the second dangling. Designedly. For in speaking of 'meaning' what is said to be at stake is in the end appropriateness judged by the criterion of the 'normative witness of the apostles'. And it is just at this point that the questions crowd in. What then is at stake?

Ogden rightly avers that the modern revisionist christologies identify the subject of the christological question as the 'Jesus of history', and that the widespread argument that sufficient of the empirical-historical Jesus is recoverable by the application of the critical scalpel partly reflects the implicit belief that what is judged theologically necessary must be practically feasible. So far, so good. He goes on to deny both the validity and the practicability of such a procedure. All we can with any real confidence recover is the earliest witness to Jesus. What that provides us with is not the empirical-historical Jesus (Jesus in terms of his own being) but the existential-historical Jesus (Jesus in his meaning for us). Granted that the assertions about him that they make move uniformly in the existential-historical direction. So it is that, while Jesus himself is the *primal source* of all authority, our governing christological authority is the earliest witness to Jesus.

Space restrictions do not permit the probe this issue deserves. Let me simply say this. To relocate canonical control in the earliest stratum of christian witness detectable behind the synoptic gospels threatens to beg a host of questions and attribute to synoptic scholars a quite awesome responsibility. It is to be hoped that not least at this point a provocative study will prompt the discussion it deserves.

Back now to things biblical. A guide to the academic study of the Old Testament² sounds like a book for student beginners. Indeed it is. Under direction provided by Rogerson, Barton, Clines and Joyce, we are introduced to areas of Old Testament

2 *Beginning Old Testament Study* ed. J. Rogerson. SPCK. pa. £3.95. 1983.

concern which include history, theology, ethics, world-view; we sample the diversity and unity that mark the Old Testament; we savour methods of study and use; we plot the relationship of the Old Testament to the New. But if this is a preparatory textbook for the college student who gazes bemused on the biblical landscape presented to him, it should presumably speak to many an equally bemused minister who passed through the brief years of academic study of the Old Testament like a shell-shocked Israelite tracking through a wilderness in hope of a promised land. The question is whether the required light (and manna) is actually afforded.

Let it at once be conceded that within the compass of 150 pages many good things are said. Particularly in the chapters on Old Testament world-view and Old Testament theology, Rogerson and Barton have perceptive and helpful insights to offer. Maybe there is an inevitable tendency to assume more background understanding than is often present; yet wholly to guard against that danger is probably an impossible task. The deeper and more serious issue is whether this study provides the kind of escalator that will actually move the student from the place where he is likely to be to the place where he needs to be if pennies are to drop, light is to dawn, and disclosures of meaning are to take place. That this is no easy task is clear from the fact that, while the printing presses roll and the lecturers drone on, the sermons remain much what they were before.

Where then is the beginning student likely to be? That crucial question may need more explicit attention than it is given. The Introduction at least offers a timely admission: 'In colleges and universities, we have taken too much for granted. We have confronted our students not only with an unfamiliar text, but with unfamiliar methods by which to study it'. Probably the unfamiliarity of the text is more dangerously significant than the unfamiliarity of the methods. All too quickly attention moves to the presentation of a critical reconstruction of the Old Testament - which then gets locked in polemical encounter with an embattled 'traditional' reconstruction. The casualty is the text.

What Rogerson *et al.* have provided should do much for those who have begun to tune in to this particular station but have hitherto found reception poor. The deeper problem remains to baffle and to perplex. 'The Old Testament has become largely unknown even to many worshippers'. That is a church malaise. Until it is satisfactorily treated, the Old Testament will presumably remain a dusty unexplored storecupboard, occasionally providing ill-digested pabulum for piety.

Reliable introductions to the Pauline literature for the non-specialist are scarcely thick on the ground. A revised and expanded edition of one of the proven candidates³ is therefore worth a moment's pause. It begins in unexceptionable fashion with a survey of the world within which the apostle thought, operated and witnessed, with an adequate discussion of and recognition of the importance of the 'letter' form Paul used, and

3 *The Letters of Paul* by C. J. Roetzel. SCM Press. pa £5.95. 1983.

with a succinct summary of the traditional material lurking within the letters. Procedurally, this is exactly what is required if readers are to come at Paul from the right angle.

Thus primed, we are then invited to engage the letters themselves. They are to be approached as 'conversations'. To understand them we must research and expose the conversation partner and the context of the interchange. Since we have only one side of the dialogue and often inadequate information about the specifics of the situation, a good deal of hypothesising is inevitably involved. Roetzel leads expertly through the maze, and within the compass of thirty pages allows as much of a glimpse of both probabilities and uncertainties as might reasonably be expected. A similar exercise is carried out on the letters he judges to be from 'interpreters of Paul' - II Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, the Pastorals. Here, differing judgment about authorship will not always and necessarily fault presentation of content and significance. What remains is a chapter on Paul and his Myths and concluding comments on issues that have dominated Pauline interpretation across the centuries. Within its obvious limits, the treatment could scarcely have been bettered.

It is to be hoped that the almost simultaneous appearance of *Pauline Christianity* by J. Ziesler at an even cheaper price will not lead the working minister to opt for Ziesler as against Roetzel. Though there is a measure of overlap, Ziesler is mainly concerned with distilling from the Pauline literature the apostle's distinctive theology. A serious and prior engagement with the specifics of Roetzel should helpfully sensitise the critical faculties for a useful encounter with Ziesler's arguments and conclusions.

Systematic theologies can take many different forms. James Mackey ploughs what is in many respects an unusual furrow. He began with *Jesus: The Man and the Myth* (1979) which offered a christology 'from below'. Now, in a second volume,⁴ he turns to the classical christological developments that sought to relate Jesus to godhead. That this should take the form of a discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity need not surprise us, particularly when it is argued that this central doctrine is rooted in christology.

Even on a second reading I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that too much ground is covered too quickly. The impression is of a high-speed cruiser splashing over the deep, taking periodical soundings and confidently radioing information about the sea-bed. Less knots, a more restricted tour and the use of a few divers might produce a more satisfactory report. Yet what can be glimpsed through the clouds of spray is a multi-coloured shifting vista, undeniably fascinating and arguably important. What then can be seen from the crow's-nest?

We turn inevitably to scripture for the origin and authorisation of trinitarian doctrine, for here is to be discerned the theological material that bears on the God Jesus revealed and

4 *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* by James P. Mackey. SCM Press. £7.50. 1983.

on Jesus' relationship to God. What is on offer at this point is a pluriformity of christological options, a multiplicity of models and frames which are used to accommodate Jesus in his life, death and resurrection, and his lived relationship to the Father. Even the rich material relating to the Spirit is tabled in relation not to some distinct divine reality but to the status and function of Jesus of Nazareth. It is all a far cry from the details of trinitarian orthodoxy.

How then do we fare as we move on into the early Christian centuries? Greek thought provides the frames for theological construction, and at this point the frames are both binitarian (Middle Platonism) and trinitarian (Neo-Platonism). Either way, the mould is emanationist, hierarchical, subordinationist, enabling some slight eventual contact between the immutable and the mutable. No surprise then that pre-Nicaean theology is so often tacitly binitarian, and unselfconsciously subordinationist in its christological expression.

So how and why does an essentially trinitarian orthodoxy capture the Church? The answer goes something like this. Enter Arius. Enter, as counterblast, *homoousios* (newly glossed and freshly interpreted). Exit subordinationism. Results: (1) the fracture of the Greek model which at least allowed the immutable to touch flux (2) retrojection of the Word/Son into the pre-existent heart of godhead (3) extension of *homoousios* to the Spirit (4) consequent destruction of a real distinction between Father and Son in terms of 'generation' - which worked for a binity but not for a trinity (5) the *hypostaseis* in the godhead therefore telescoped with only a vague residual distinction in terms of properties or acts (6) And so, the driving of a wedge between the immutable godhead and the mutable Jesus of Nazareth, the divine Word and the Jesus humanity. Where do we go from here?

Nowhere very happily, concludes Mackey. Aquinas and Calvin offer us no deliverance. Nor do the moderns - though Lampe and Moltmann get qualified seals of approval. In the end we are nudged in the direction of a possible range of economic trinitarian formulations. Or - put another way - we are invited to step outside the whole classical mould, upset the traditional board, and play a different game. If we ask about the rules to apply, the answer we get rests heavily on an argued understanding of the true functions of doctrine. At the hands of Mackey this also - though presumably unintentionally - assumes a hierarchically trinitarian shape. A primary demonstrative function leads on to secondary and tertiary discriminatory and critical functions. We need not stay to expound these definitions. It is more important to recognise that they enshrine a fundamental recognition that doctrines are derivative from concrete forms of religious praxis and are partly validated by the change of life effected in their adherents.

I hope that I have done no serious injustice to the complex and many-stranded argument this study provides. That the survey has strengths is undeniable. There is a significant concern to engage atheistic humanism, Judaism, Islam. There is

a proper recognition of the extent to which pre-existence language is a 'temporal' way (as talk of 'from above' is a spatial way) of designating the relationship of God to Jesus and through Jesus to the world. There is a valid weight placed upon the life of the disciple and the Christian community as necessary point of reference for establishing doctrine, upon cult and code as significant for creed. There is a welcome exposure of the dangers of claiming a reliable map of the citadel of godhead. Above all, there is a necessary unyielding refusal to dethrone the life and death of Jesus from its rightful place of theological control. Given all that, perhaps we can live with the clouds of spray!

Erik Routley's final publication⁵ not only smacks of a last will and testament but also prompts the question as to whether yet another book on hymns from his fertile pen was strictly justified. Had he written himself out? Was there really anything fresh he had to say? It has to be confessed that the sense of *déjà vu* is strong. The study claims to offer a new perspective, in arguing that the periods of religious upheaval are the periods of creative hymnic upsurge, with the contours of the one decisively shaping facets of the other. To which it might be said first that the point is a truism, secondly that it is a rather dangerous oversimplification, and thirdly that it is used as a flexible umbrella under which to accommodate material not always obviously relevant to the controlling concern. Half this slim volume in fact consists of that familiar Routley tour through the centuries which he has mapped so adequately on previous occasions. The mixture as before, with fresh packaging and minor modifications to the ingredients, and a closer eye on the Welsh, the Roman Catholics, and the U.S.A.

Nonetheless, there are other things that need to be said. A conspectus in small compass should speak to many who would shun the weightier and more technical study. The familiar wit and wisdom is amply on display. And, once again, the working environment of the author materially colours his trenchant reactions. Just as his residence in Scotland dictated concerns and judgments in his writing in the sixties, so his Princeton rooting unmistakably affects the preoccupations here evidenced.

In the end, the most significant part of the discussion offered may lie in the comment on the post-war developments in hymnody. In the survey of what may broadly be called Gospel Songs, the pen positively drips vitriol. Part of this is clearly due to the 'backs to the wall' stance that residence in the United States produces. But Britain is not spared. Nor should she be.

For the rest, the verdicts on the curious tale of the last thirty years contain no surprises. Hurrah for the Hymnal Supplements. Broad approval for Bayly and Pratt Green, Wren and Kaan, Gaunt and Hewlett, Bowers and Vanstone and, on the music side, Cutts and Wilson. Particularly pleasing is a long overdue plug for the *Pilgrim Hymnal*.

5 *Christian Hymns Observed* by E. Routley. A. R. Mowbray. £4.95. 1983.

I emerge with three nagging reflections. How slow the churches still are to understand that the battle over hymnody is not finally a controversy over standards and what 'experts' deem to be 'good' but a matter of fidelity to the Gospel, with the upbuilding of the People of God as the prize so perilously at stake. That is not a cue for an ungenerous and inhospitable rigidity. The diversity of the scriptural canon and the breadth of expression it encourages stand guard against false intolerance. Equally, the musical pundits have sometimes painfully and reluctantly to learn that congregational 'singability' is not the *last* criterion to be afforded a place. But yet and still it is theology that remains too often the uninvited guest at the hymnody selection feast - uninvited and therefore unrecognised, while all the while piping in the noxious fumes of unexamined presuppositions. Liberals and radicals have not emerged guiltless in recent decades of a tendency in their hymns to propagandise on social and cultural fronts and to celebrate too painlessly the contemporary consciousness. On the other hand, evangelicals, prone to 'packaged truth' theology and a Gospel somehow presumed to be immunised from any influence on the part of its vessels and containers, have sometimes uncritically embraced any hymnic and musical expression that could claim to be modern, popular, and effective. Hence the appearance of 'collections' every other page of which should arguably carry the equivalent of a Government Health Warning.

The other nigger in the woodpile is language. Enough has been written - and not all of it sanely balanced - about the poverty of modernised liturgical language, spurred on as it is by endless new translations of the Bible and the headlong flight of Thous and Thees from prayer. But the unease of which I now speak is subtly different, and difficult accurately to pinpoint. Partly, I suspect, it is a widespread insensitivity to cadence. Partly, and more importantly, it is a passion for instant intelligibility. Yet, at its best, hymnody deals and must deal in evocative language which communicates beyond what it 'says', which presses towards horizons, which tolls in the deeps of human experience. We, for our part, live in an age of debased linguistic currency.

And so, and thirdly, how ironical it is that people - even liturgical experts - get interminably hot under their variegated collars over such matters as diced bread and individual cups at the Lord's Supper while liturgical enormities in hymnody, which make a nonsense of liturgical reformation at a controlling point, seldom enough even 'make' the agenda. The whole sorry business stems hugely from the paucity of Christian men and women who straddle the biblical, theological, liturgical, and linguistic fields. That is why the passing of Erik Routley leaves a hole that cries out to be filled.

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