Myth and Truth

Stephen Neill.

A Trinity Sunday sermon, which I preached shortly before the publication of this book,* opened with the sentences: 'The fundamental error in the study of Christology is the supposition that this is a doctrine about Jesus Christ; of course it is not; it is a doctrine about God. The fundamental error in the study of the doctrine of the Trinity is that this is a doctrine about God. Of course it is not; it is a doctrine about Jesus Christ'. I believe both these statements to be true. It seems to me that the writers of the book were in danger of forgetting both their truth and their relevance.

The early church was landed with Jesus Christ, and just did not know what to do with him. It is clear that, in the sayings and doing of this obscure Galilean carpenter, a force incomparably greater than any which has ever, before or since, impinged upon it, struck the human race and the whole of its life. That obscure man, and his even more obscure followers, launched upon the world a movement which has continued to spread and grow, and the waves of which still wash up, often unconsidered, upon our shores. The Christian church has endured the most enormous disasters and has overcome them. It has been persecuted as no other faith since the beginning of time has been persecuted, and it has survived. It has shown astonishing versatility in adapting itself to all kinds of situations, and has proved able to win converts from every other religious system from the most complex to the simplest; it has presented the world in this century with one of the few really new things in history, a world-wide religion.

One of the first lessons that every student learns is that, whether it be in the realm of history or of philosophy or of science, we must in Platonic phrase, save the phenomena; i.e. what we call our explanations must be adequate to account without remainder for the occurrence of the phenomena that we are studying. The early Christians had not read Plato, but they understood the principle very well. Who is this that has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel? It is not surprising that they hesitated and fumbled; as one of the authors of this books has rightly pointed out (as have I) there is not one Christology in the New Testament, there are many; it would be very odd, if it were otherwise, considering the enormous creative ability of which the New Testament gives evidence. But there is a convergence of ideas, towards the view concisely

expressed in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel: 'the eternal became one of us and lived our life' (surely this is the best translation of the mysterious 'and the Word became flesh'). How many first-century documents have disappeared it is impossible to say; they may have been many, and we can see that in the formation of the New Testament Canon a rigorous process of selection has taken place. The documents which were excluded were excluded mainly on the ground that they did not save the phenomena, that their account of Jesus Christ did not correspond to the experience of the first generation of believers, an experience amplified and confirmed in the experience of those who came after.

The Patristic Task.

The New Testament showed the plan of foundations; it gave no more than a limited sketch of the building or buildings that might be erected on those foundations. To erect the building was the task of the succeeding generations in what we generally call the patristic period, and particularly in the centuries that led up to Chalcedon in A.D. 451. What remains of the writings of that period reveals to us the extraordinary patience, dexterity and adventurousness of the Christians of that time both 'orthodox' and 'heretics'. It is to be regretted that the Syriac-speaking churches played on the whole so little part in this development; if the church the genius of which produced The Hymn of the Soul had shared in all the discussions, we might have had a Christology rather different from that which has become canonical. But the achievement of the Fathers seems to me to be greater and more satisfying than Mrs Young and Professor Wiles are prepared to grant. Admittedly the great Councils were more successful in their anathemas than in their positive statements – it is often easier to say what a thing is not than to say what it is. This is not evasion, it is just a fact of language, and the value of a negative definition is not to be underestimated; 'Non-Roman Christianity' is negative in form but highly positive in content; it is the most convenient way of referring to a vast complex of churches, which it would be tedious to enumerate individually but which are all in their very positive existence subsumed under that apparently negative expression. So the famous negative adverbs of Chalcedon do not represent, as William Temple once unkindly said, the bankruptcy of Greek-speaking theology. What the Fathers felt able to do was to indicate some limits; 'if you dig within this enclosure, you are likely to find oil; if you dig outside it, experience shows that you will find no oil.' The experience of fifteen centuries suggests that they may possibly have been right.

Having been as successful as they were, why were these Fathers less than completely successful in saying what they clearly wanted to say? Dr Young

naturally brings us to Cyril's *apathos epathe.* Many years ago I described this remarkable phrase as evidence of Cyril's monumental stupidity. I now take a rather kinder of view of the Patriarch of Alexandria. I think that he was expressing, though I grant you in rather clumsy form, the element of paradox which is always bound to be present in our attempt to express such things as cannot be expressed in strictly logical terms. But he was hampered in his attempt by failure to distinguish between two senses of the Greek verb *pascho.* The Greek Fathers were almost hypnotised by the Stoic ideal of *apatheia.* To take Lampe's Lexicon of *Patristic Greek* (not of course available when I was working on these things), and to go through the articles on *pascho, apathes* and *apatheia* is an education in itself. The very *pascho* means at least two distinct things. It does mean suffering in the ordinary sense of the word – of pain, discomfort and so on. But it also means to have things done to you without your consent and against your will, or to have experiences which you did not seek and would much rather be without. Now it is quite clear that God, as understood by Christians, cannot *paschein* in the second of these senses. No one can do anything to him without his consent or contrary to his will. But the situation is entirely changed if God should choose to create something outside himself, with at least some measure of independence, and should thus exchange his unrelated existence (or, if you are pedantic, conditioned only by the internal relations within the blessed Trinity) for related existence. If the created has any measure of independence, there is the possibility of recalcitrance. If the created has any measure at all of personal freedom, there is the possibility of rebellion – but only because God has willed that it should be so. It seems to me that the writers of this book have been a little casual in their handling of the question of creation, just as were the Fathers because of the rather Parmenidean concept of God, to which they found themselves committed.

This understanding of the relation between the uncreated and the created leads on to the further question, can we use of God the word *paschein* in the first of the two senses noted above? It all depends on whether we believe that God is love or not; all human experience shows that wherever there is love there is also suffering; it is the law of the universe as we know it that these two are inextricably entwined. If it be objected that we must not argue from the human to the divine, we had better give up talking about God at all. We are well aware that our words about God must always be analogical; but there are true analogies and there are meaningless analogies. To the Buddhist, as to Professor Ayer, the words 'God is love' are meaningless, and we had better stop talking. But the title of our book indicates that we are going to talk about God with some hope of making sense. So let us come back to it. Can God suffer? This was a question very ardently discussed when I was a

undergraduate. The admirable J.K. Mozley wrote his *Impassibility of God*, a book I thought a little less than worthy of him. William Temple summed it up in one of his massive and monosyllablic phrases, 'the heart of God did break'. Now Professor Jurgen Moltmann has entered the fray with *The Crucified God*, not in my opinion a very good book, but indicating that the Germans are catching up with English theology where it was fifty years ago.

We must be careful not to be turned aside by the artificial dilemma put forward by Mrs Young (p. 35): Can we make the equation 'Jesus = God'? Of course a great many simple Christians would express their faith in this way; but I doubt if even a single first-year theological student would be trapped into such naivete. We may be grateful to Professor Moltmann for expressing so clearly the Christian view that whatever the Father does the Son also does, and whatever the Son does that the Father also is doing.

The second point of weakness in patristic theology is, in my opinion, their lack of any adequate vocabulary to express the idea of personality. Greek and Sanskrit are both immensely rich languages, but neither of them has a word which really corresponds to our idea of personal being. The old Platonic (though it is older than Plato) dichotomy of body and soul just will not do, though this of course is still found in hymns and in some Christian discourses. The trichotomy of body, soul and spirit, if these are understood as *parts* of the human make up, is equally unhelpful (this incidentally, is one of the points at which I find Bultmann most helpful). This trouble runs all through Christian theology. It is strange that psychology is almost the last of the sciences (or pseudo-sciences) to be developed. Of course there is an enormous amount of psychological observation to be found in poets and novelists. But I doubt whether we should read to-day, except for historical interest, any work on psychology earlier than James Ward's *Psychological Principles*. It is perhaps significant that the first notable work of theology in the title of which the word Personality occurs is Moberly's *Atonement and Personality* (1901). It has long seemed to me that the major defect of that generally admirable document The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England is a defective understanding of human nature and of the nature of personal existence. If this is true, then for all the great virtues of the patristic age and of the scholastics and of the Reformation, we have a tremendous task to carry out in rethinking all our theology in the light of the new knowledge of ourselves that has come to us over the last century.

Movement Downwards or Upwards?

There are really only two views on the problems discussed in this book. One is that the movement is from above downwards; the other is that the movement is from below upwards. Of course these two are not mutually exclusive

in an absolute sense. There could have been no downwards movement from the side of God, if there had not been such preparation of the human race that it was able to respond to the movement from the godward side when it took place. And there could have been no upward movement from the side of man, if God had been so totally indifferent to the affairs of men as he is necessarily represented as being in all purely monistic systems. But by and large the distinction does hold. The traditional Christian interpretation is from above downwards. It is now time to consider the alternative possibility – that we should consider Jesus as the highest attained or perhaps attainable by man.

These writers are perfectly correct in stating that the church has always been so much in danger of exaggerating the divine in Jesus as to lose sight of his true humanity. Where the Athanasian creed is truly said and understood (are not some of our writers obliged to say it thirteen times a year?) there is no such danger. But it has been present in a great deal of popular theology and preaching. But surely we are past all that to day. I well remember the emancipation that came to my generation through the work of the great liberals of our day and of a generation before ours. A little work now forgotten, F.C. Burkitt's *Earliest Source for the Life of Jesus Christ* (1922) with its talk of 'the stormy and mysterious figure' portrayed by Mark's Gospel, brought it home to me that this really can be read as the story of a man, like to his brethren in all things apart from sin. I am everlastingly grateful for that emancipation. We were, perhaps a little hypnotised by what must seem today very obvious and selfevident, perhaps a little too ready to accept a purely human Jesus. But then came the question, at least to those of us who were Platonists, 'Does this account of him save the phenomena?' Impatiently and reluctantly some of us at least were compelled to answer, 'No'. This leaves out a number of things, which much as we may dislike them and wish that they were not there, are as a matter of fact part of the evidence, and must be taken seriously.

Those who believe in revelation as the descent of God upon man may be called in the general sense of the term Trinitarians; those who belive in it as something less than that may be called, I hope without offence, Unitarians.

Unitarianism.

Unitarianism has had a long and respectable history in the life of the church. Not to go back further than the Reformation, the strictly logical and rational spirit of the Italian reformation, as seen in characters such as Sebastian Castellio (1515-63), and the two Sozzini (Lelio 1525-62 and Fausto, 1539-1604), was almost bound to lead to the position later called after them Socinianism; though the Racovian Catechism of 1605 accords to Jesus

Christ a far higher place in the scheme of things than we might have expected. We now know that the great Isaac Newton was a Socinian, and therefore very properly refused to safeguard his Cambridge career by taking Holy Orders. In 1791 the great Dr Priestley became a Unitarian. There was a strong unitarian tendency in English dissent at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries (Lady Hewley's Legacy and all that). In the middle of the nineteenth century this form of faith was well represented by the splendid dignity and devoutness of James Martineau, and by the good Mr Gaskell, so much less distinguished than his elegant and courgaeous wife. Unitarianism has always been popular in America. R.W. Emerson probably went rather further than most with all his talk of oversouls and transcendental affinities (a splendid description in the life of J.A. Froude (Vol. 1. pp. 99-100) of a lecture of Emerson in London, at the end of which the only sound heard in the hall was the loud laugh of Thomas Carlyle who had been sitting in the gallery listening). There seems to have been recently a renewal of unitarian interest in Massachusetts, its old home, among intellectuals who would like to believe as much as is possible, without involving themselves in believing too much. In England at a slightly later date we had *Robert Elsmere* (1888), the immense popularity of which gave evidence of a widely felt need for the clarification of the issues rather than of the excellence of the book. Since then we have had the brilliance of Principal L.P. Jacks and others of unusual intellectual distinction.

The writers of the book would wish to dissociate themselves from traditional unitarianism. It is for them to make plain at what points they would make the distinction. It is always better to put things quite plainly in words of one syllable, and not to skate away on cloudy expression of that which may be true as poetry though it is not true as fact. When we have stripped away the poetry, what is it that Robbie Burns means when he compares his love to a red, red rose? He means that he is in love with a young lady who is beautiful, fresh, charming and immensely attractive. He has found a more pleasing way of expressing these prosaic realities; but it is these prosaic realities that he is expressing. The editor of this book tells us that 'the later conception of him as God incarnate, the second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us' (p. ix). Very well. Let us admit that the *Te Deum* is poetry of a very high order indeed. But, when we ask, What was it that the poetry was intended to express, where do we come out? Behind the poetry lies the conviction that God loved us enough to become one of us, to live our life without honour, without privilege or protection, to share with us the lowest degradation possible; and that this is the content of the familiar expression 'God is love'. Now, whatever is intended by the writers of this

book, it is not that. Where the Christian church through the centuries has said, 'Yes', they are saying a resounding 'No.' Of course it is perfectly possible that the early Christians were wrong, and that the church has been wrong through the centuries, and that these latterday prophets are right. What is essential is that we should know what we are talking about, and that we should not be, through confusion of terms and meanings, ignorant armies clashing by night.

We come back to the question of saving the phenomena. One of the phenomena we have to save is the growth and expansion of the Christian church. Would it have expanded in this way, if the church had preached the Gospel in the terms in which our present writers understand it? In one sense that is a hypothetical question, which can be answered only by God himself. But to some extent history does provide the answer. Unitarians have never had missions to those of other faiths, (and a very good thing, too, might our present writers very well answer). The missionary faiths in the world today are Marxism, Buddhism, Islam, orthodox Christianity, and in a lesser degree Hinduism. Each of these religions, claiming to have a unique revelation of the truth, must be missionary or perish; they make no bones about it. If, however, religion is a matter of *ideas,* and we can meet on something other than the existential level, where we can decide without the passion and the strain of personal commitment, we can go on for ever in our friendly discussion, each learning from the other, and the question of ultimate truth never being raised. But, if from the beginning the Gospel had been preached in this way, would there ever have been a Christian church at all? Would anyone ever have seen faith in Christ as a matter literally of life and death, as signified in baptism and sometimes enacted in the arena? The early Christians did not think that the knowledge of God given them in Christ was given 'not to displace but to deepen and enlarge that relationship with God to which they have already come within their own tradition' (p. 181). It won't work. Over the greater part of India to this day, if the Brahman is led by his enlarged knowledge of God through Christ to embrace the sweeper, he will be immediately cast out of his own community, and will find no place to go except the church of the despised and rejected Jesus Christ. Of course he could love the sweeper in a mythological and poetic fashion, and then no trouble would arise. But I do not find much that is poetic or mythological in the command of Christ that we should follow him.

All this is not new. The attitude set forward by Professor Hick was admirably expressed by Professor W.E. Hocking in *Rethinking Missions* in 1932. Roughly speaking the view is that we should help the Hindu to be a better Hindu and the Muslim to be a better Muslim, perhaps by the injection of what we have found in Jesus Christ. This was not new when Hocking

wrote it. To try to make people better within the confines of their own faith is an admirable and praiseworthy object. When my highly evangelical grandfather James Monro went back to India as a missionary in 1892, to the very area which he had earlier ruled as the representative of the British raj, his first and outstanding lecture to Hindu gentlemen was precisely on this theme. Look at your own Vedas and compare them with what Hinduism is today; to go back to the Veda would mean the clearing away of many additions and excrescences, not always edifying, which have grown up round Hinduism in the centuries; it would mean a return to purer and loftier faith. The lecture was listened to with breathless attention. But to my grandfather this was only 'John the Baptist work;' when we have got back to the Veda, will it answer the deepest needs of man, or is there a further dimension of need and salvation, which can be offered only in one name and no other?

Nothing New.

So we are driven to the conclusion that, considering the same subjects and with the same evidence before them, some men come to one conclusion and others to another. Those who have contributed to the book *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Hodder, 1977, 144 pp. £0.80) have had before them for many years all the evidence available to the writers of *The Myth of God Incarnate*. There is nothing new in the book. I have learned one or two things that I did not know, and am glad to have learned them. Why, then is it that I find the *Myth* book so profoundly unsatisfying? One obvious answer would be that I have ceased to have an open mind, and am therefore unable to give honest consideration to views which do not fit in with what I have been mouthing over many years. This might be true. But a *tu quoque* is always possible; has any of the writers of the myth book ever taken seriously what the New Testament says and what it means? Such debate is unprofitable. We have to face the probability that our decision on such matters, when we have done our very best to be dispassionate and to look at truth as far as we can with the unveiled face promised to us in the New Testament, there is an element of the irrational in all of us, and that sometimes decisions are made on an existential level, of which we may be largely unconscious and which we shall never be able completely to control. I rather darkly wonder whether the difference does not arise from the fact that some of us agree with the small boy who said, 'My mummy says he isn't our captain because we're good but because we're bad.'

Running through all Christian history is the distinction between two types of believer. There is one clear line which runs through Pelagius and Abelard, Servetus, Hugo Grotius, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Hastings

Rashdall, J.M. Creed; another which runs through Augustine, Bernard, Calvin, Bunyan, John Wesley, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Hoskyns. The Pelagian is strong in the whole field of ethical endeavour, of straightforward obedience to the commands of Christ, of a disciplined will and stern endeavour. The Augustinian is strong because he can penetrate to the very depths of the human spirit, where the Pelagian cannot enter, because he has nothing to draw with and the well is deep; this is the whole area of mysticism, of redemption, of hope out of despair and life out of death. So there are the two, and never the twain shall agree. Yet each of the twins is necessary. The Pelagian, if left alone, all too easily sinks into mere formalism and conventional acceptance of the obvious. The Augustinian, left alone, can easily forget the weightier matters of the law – justice and mercy and truth. Each needs the other. A few are neither Pelagian nor Augustinian. Some are one and some are the other. A few, less fortunate, are both. I am a Pelagian by nature and an Augustinian by grace. I wish that I was not. It would be so peaceful to be one or the other, and content therewith. And yet I am not sure. There are advantages in being able to see both sides of the question, to sympathise with both, and to understand the dislike which Esau very properly feels for Jacob, and the dislike which Jacob very naturally feels for Esau. God rules his universe as he wills. I do not think we can hope that in this dispensation either Jacob or Esau will disappear. If each can learn sufficient humility to listen courteously to the other, in the expectation that each has something to learn from the other's strength and to unlearn from the other's weakness, we may come a little nearer to the kingdom of God. And after many years of trying to follow Christ, I am inclined to think that in the end grace is stronger than nature.

Footnotes

* *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick (SCM Press, 1977. 212 pp. £2.95.