

# Eberhard Jüngel: The Humanity of God and the Humanity of Man

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Eberhard Jüngel is Professor of Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Religion in the University of Tübingen, and one of the most prominent of contemporary Protestant systematic theologians in Germany. A pupil of both Karl Barth and the New Testament theologian Ernst Fuchs, his work so far has straddled several different theological fields. In a publishing career of just over two decades, he has produced major studies in New Testament exegesis, classical philosophy, the work of Luther and Barth, the philosophy of religion and the theory of language, as well as substantial dogmatic studies and a good number of more popular works. His prowess as preacher and lecturer has won him acclaim from audiences wider than those of professional theologians. In the English-speaking world, however, his work remains relatively little known and is only just beginning to be translated. This is partly because his style and method of approach are often quite sharply divergent from those more favoured in English-language theology at present; partly it is because his writing presupposes familiarity with debates and specialist literatures little attended to beyond Germany; and partly because Jüngel's own engagement with those schools of German theology which have been easily assimilated by English readers — such as the theology of liberation — has been tangential and critical. His work, indeed, represents a massive attempt to shift the theological agenda back to substantive issues in dogmatics, and away from what he feels to be an unfruitful preoccupation with practical or political relevance. To this end, his work is often severely professional, making heavy demands of the reader who would master long passages of complex and nuanced argument.

Jüngel's work so far has been particularly broad-ranging in its elected themes. But if a larger trend is to be discerned throughout his theology, it is a concern to develop an account of the relationship between God and the world in which the divine and the human are complementary. God and man form two mutually irreducible and not antithetical or mutually exclusive realities. This theme, which Jüngel usually labels that of "distinguishing between God and man", could be said to form the pivot of the whole of his theological programme. As we review his doctrines of God and man, we shall see that he is above all else anxious to avoid a reduction of the two-foldness of God and man to a single, self-consistent stratum. He urges the rejection of any doctrine in which God is the only significant reality and which reduces man to a mere function of the divine, not possessed of freedom and authenticity. And similarly, he resists any anthropocentrism in which the divine is a mere function or projection of the human world.

## 1. Christology

Jüngel is widely regarded as one of the most astute living interpreters of Barth. His very profound engagement with Barth's theology, from his early study *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Tübingen, 1964) to his latest collection of *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh, 1982), has given his work a resolute Christocentrism, in which the source and norm of all theological discourse are to be found in God's self-disclosure in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jüngel's work is thus pervaded by the conviction that Christological assertions lie at the heart of authentically

Not all EVANGEL readers have found Dr Webster's survey of recent Continental theology easy to assimilate, but many have written of their appreciation. This quarter he discusses the thought of Jüngel, about whom he is particularly expert.



Christian doctrines of God and Man. "Out of this Christological event theological thinking has to state what may properly be called God and man" (*Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen, 1977) 315). Jüngel, in other words, does not envisage Christology as simply one doctrine alongside others; rather, it provides the basis upon which all other doctrines are built, and it is normative and regulative of the whole corpus of Christian teaching. It has this function because in Jüngel's theology, the doctrine of the person of Christ has come to occupy the place of the doctrine of revelation. As another eminent Barth scholar has written, "there is a structural and essentially Christological pattern running throughout the whole body of our theological knowledge, which can be studied and used as a norm or criterion for helping to shape the true form of each doctrine, for testing and proving the different doctrines to see whether they fit into the essential structure of the whole" (T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London, 1965) 148f).

In view of this Christological colouring of the whole of Jüngel's theology, it may seem surprising that he has not so far published any detailed exploration of familiar areas in the doctrines of the person of Christ, and particularly of patristic and credal interpretations of the Christological dogma. His emphasis has fallen more on the issues in theological method just referred to, and on the hermeneutical questions raised by the Christology of the New Testament. This latter theme provided one of the main thrusts of his doctoral thesis *Paulus und Jesus* (Tübingen, 1962), written at the time of intense interest in questions concerning our knowledge of the history of Jesus and the significance of such knowledge for dogmatic Christology. More recently, Jüngel's Christology has concentrated on the death of Christ as the focal event for our understanding both of his person and of the nature of God and man. "Christian faith in the crucified Jesus Christ leads to the heart of Christian belief. Christian theology is thus essentially *theologia crucifixi*" (*Entsprechungen* (Munich, 1980) 278).

Before turning to examine the implications of this staurocentric Christology for the doctrines of God and man, it is perhaps worth noting how the position which Jüngel adopts depends on a particular interpretation of the resurrection of Christ. He insists that the resurrection is not to be seen as a continuation of the career of Jesus, as a subsequent stage in his story. Rather, it is the interpretation of the meaning of the event of Calvary, the declaration that God has identified himself with the crucified. "On the basis of faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the death of Jesus comes to have formal meaning as an integral of his earthly existence" (*ibid.*, 282). In other

words, resurrection faith enables us to see Jesus' history as a unity with shape and form contours, no longer ambivalent in meaning. There is certainly here a confusion between "the resurrection" and "faith in the resurrection". And there is, moreover, a failure to grapple with the way in which the New Testament is uneasy with any underplaying of either Good Friday or Easter Day. Crucifixion and Resurrection are not related as "event and interpretation" or as "reversal of fortunes followed by triumph"; rather, together they form one complex event. "The centre of Apostolic Christianity is Crucifixion-Resurrection; not Crucifixion alone, nor Resurrection alone, nor even the Crucifixion as the prelude and the Resurrection as the finale, but the blending of the two in a way that is as real to the gospel as it is defiant to the world" (A. M. Ramsey, *The Resurrection of Christ* (London, 1961) 20).

But how does the crucified Jesus form the locus of truth about God and man?

## 2. The Humanity of God

Jüngel's work is deeply scored by the conviction that the character of God is to be discovered by attention to the character of Jesus. For if in the man Jesus the essence of God is played out before the world, then his humanity is not an obscuring of the being of God, the hiding of divine glory in human weakness and suffering. On the contrary, his humanity is the manifestation of God. Accordingly it is both appropriate and necessary for Christian theology to talk of the "humanity of God": God in the flesh is the one who chooses to be himself by becoming man. As Barth wrote, "If He (Jesus) is the Word of Truth, then the truth of God is exactly this and nothing else" (*The Humanity of God* (London, 1961) 49).

Jüngel takes Barth's work a good deal further by his heavy emphasis on the cross. Not simply the man Jesus but in particular "the crucified is as it were the material definition of what is meant by the word 'God'" (*Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*, 15). Indeed, so bound up with the cross is the definition of God that an inevitable concomitant of God's identification of himself with the crucified is language about the "death of God". "Faith in the identity of the Son of God with the Crucified necessitates the confession that in and with the man Jesus God himself has suffered and died" (*Entsprechungen*, 283).

This somewhat provocative language about the death of God needs careful interpretation if it is not to be misunderstood. Jüngel does not use it in the way in which it was used by the ephemeral "death of God" theologians of the 1960's, namely as a startling way to describe the cessation of belief in God as a public option in much of Western society. Rather, he uses such language to try and state as sharply as possible how God defines himself by becoming man. Above all, his concern is to state how the death of God on the cross of Christ can be ontologically positive, an affirmation rather than a denial of the being of God. To speak of God's death is not to speak of the collapse of God into nothingness, or of his ceasing to be — such talk of God would be absurd. Rather, to speak of God's death is to specify the character of God's being, to ask how God is able to be himself in such a way. In this concern to map out some of the ontological implications of talk of the death of God, Jüngel advances significantly beyond some of the more popular and rhetorical theopaschite theologies current in some circles. Unlike, for example, Jürgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God* (ET, London, 1974), Jüngel refuses to dodge the questions of precisely how it can be that "God's self-surrender is not his self-abandonment" (*Entsprechungen*, 289). And he offers two main answers to the problem.

The first is what can be best labelled the notion of God's ability. What God does, he can do. Decisions about what is and what is not appropriate for God, in other words, can only be made on the basis of how God has actually shown himself to act, and not on the basis of general or natural notions of what is appropriate to divinity. To the acts of God there corresponds the ability of God to do those things which he has done. In the case of our talk of God's death, God shows by dying on the cross of Christ that he has the ability to give himself freely to death. His aseity, the freedom of his self-determination, is actual in his self-renunciation at Calvary. And so that self-renunciation in no way spells the end of God. Rather, it is the full expression of God's determination to be himself in this way, in giving himself up to death, God is most characteristically himself. His suffering of death is the freely-chosen mode of his life and not its negation, and in death he retains his freedom as the origin and end of his own ways.

That this can be so is set out in the second answer, which is the trinitarian character of God. One of the functions of the doctrine of the trinity in Jüngel's theology is to show that in death God is fully congruent with himself. One of the results of a strong emphasis on the cross is an apparent threat to the coherence of the being of God: Father and Son seem to be split apart by the events of Calvary. But because God is triune he remains in that opposition nevertheless related to himself. At the cross, "God does not contradict himself. God corresponds to himself. And so we need the doctrine of the Trinity" (*Gott Als Geheimnis der Welt*, 474).

Thus for Jüngel talk of the humanity of God inevitably drifts into talk of the Trinity. Far from furnishing a speculative reconstruction of the doctrine of God with little real grounding in the apostolic gospel, the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact the attempt consistently to think through how the mission of Jesus and the negativity of his death can be characteristic of the ways of God. And since God is such that he identifies himself in the man Jesus, then he is the one in whom alone humanity is properly safeguarded.

## 3. The Humanity of Man

How does the humanity of God issue in the humanity of man?

Jüngel is deeply suspicious of what he regards as the tradition of metaphysical theism, in that its doctrine of God, built on speculative rather than on Christological foundations, tends to exclude the incarnation and the death of Christ from the being of God. In this, the "traditional" concept is too human: it objectifies or projects man's desire for mastery over his fellows, and in so doing it falls woefully short of the humanity of God. Because it will not allow God to be man, it does not allow God to be God. And, furthermore, it does not allow man to be man, for it constantly projects man's desires for divinity. And in so doing, it merely alienates man from himself.

Over against this, Jüngel suggests that the purpose of the incarnation is not so much man's deification — God became man that man might become God — as man's humanisation: God became man that man might become man. As he put it in a radio talk, "The Christian faith is that human view of God, in which man trusts himself to the fact that God became and remains man, in order that man can become human and ever more human. Put more briefly: the essence of the Christian faith is the proper distinction between God and man, namely between a human God and an ever more human man" (*Unterwegs zur Sache* (Munich, 1972) 299).

In his more detailed exploration of theological anthropology Jüngel makes a good deal of use of the doctrine of justification. That doctrine is more usually confined to a soteriological context. In Jüngel's hands, its use becomes much more extended, so that for him the doctrine of justification functions as a definition of man. It does this by its emphasis on the proper *passivity* of man as a creature of God. Man's sinfulness consists in the drive to self-realisation through activity and to self-definition without relations. In such self-realisation and self-definition, man understands himself first and foremost as agent, as the architect of his own humanity. He is, in the fullest sense, self-made. It is the insistence of the doctrine of justification that over and above his agency man is primarily a receiver or a listener, one whose being is granted in obedient hearing of the Word of God. In such passivity, man's disposition is such that his whole self is contingent upon the creative activity of God through whom his humanity is fashioned.

#### 4. The reality of man

Behind this anthropology lies a profound appreciation of Barth's use of Christology as the key to the doctrine of man. For Jüngel as for Barth the real being of man lies not so much in what he makes of himself as in Jesus Christ, through whom humanity is constituted afresh. The foundation of human reality is the history of Jesus: he alone is authentically human, and to be human is to be made in his image, or, as Jüngel prefers to say, to "express God". Man is man insofar as he is an image or analogy of the humanity of God in Jesus the true man. "Humanity consists in expressing God" (*Entsprechungen*, 298).

This kind of Christologically grounded theological anthropology introduces a set of problems into Jüngel's theology, problems which are especially acute in the view of his desire to avoid making man into a mere function of the divine. These problems coalesce in the question of the status of those who are outside Christ. In what sense can those who refuse the divine determination of man in Christ be said to be properly human if humanity as such consists in expressing God? Jüngel clearly wishes to affirm that man outside Christ is still man. But in order to make that affirmation he has to propose that man seemingly outside Christ is in fact at the most fundamental level of his being determined by Christ, the *truth* of his being is in Christ, although the *actuality* of his self-realisation may appear to contradict this.

Consequently, Jüngel has to argue that those acts in which man denies rather than expresses God are not properly definitive of his being. Man's rejection of God is ontologically and definitively inferior to God's affirmation of man in Christ. And so sin becomes not so much a positive historical force, or a human project in rebellion against God, as a surpassed reality, essentially negative. "Under the appearance of being, the sinner celebrates nothingness" (*Unterwegs zur Sache*, 218). Thus the definition of man out of the history of the true man Jesus entails the assertion of the ontological insignificance of man's manifest refusal to be determined by God.

It is at the level of his account of human sin that Jüngel experiences real difficulty in sustaining a theology which is equally affirmative of the realities of both God and man. Because man's sinful acts are not allowed to be substantially determinative of man's being, they remain at what Jüngel calls the *ontic* rather than the more fundamental *ontological* stratum of humanity. They are privative rather than positive; they do not make a man into what he is, because what he is is determined by Jesus. The result of this line of argument may well be to absorb man into Christ, allowing no possibility of man setting himself

outside that determination and realising his being in a way which is alien to that of expressing God. The absolute and undifferentiated inclusiveness of the definition of all men in Christ is unaffected by man's denial of that definition. In this way, a question-mark is set against the reality of human dignity and freedom, and Jüngel's desire to avoid a monism in which man is no longer substantial in his own right is compromised to the extent that the reality of his rebellion is not so much denied as negated.

Two consequences follow from this. The first concerns theological method. Jüngel's account of the reality of man is excessively abstract and a-historical. This is because conclusions about the nature and destiny of man are reached not by close inspection of the human scene but by deployment of the theological principle of the inclusivity of the being of Jesus Christ. One result of this is that counter-evidence to the theory — notably the sinful reality of man — is accorded insufficient weight. By starting from the general rather than from the particular instance, Jüngel's theological anthropology tends to favour an overarching account of humanity without close exploration of the texture of the human condition.

A second consequence of this understanding of human sin is that Jüngel's theology lacks any real theology of the atonement. His answer to the question *Cur Deus Homo?*, "Why Did God Become Man?" is that the incarnation furnishes a new *definition* of divinity and humanity. True knowledge of God and true knowledge of humanity are to be derived from the God-man, the crucified with whom God identified himself. There is, accordingly, little sense in Jüngel's theological scheme of the need for *reconciliation* between God and man. Because of this, the cross becomes primarily the locus of revelation: it dramatises the character of God as the lowly, human God, but it is not seen as that act without which God and man remain estranged. Reconciliation takes place in the person rather than in the work of Christ.

Like a good deal of theological writing which has been deeply influenced especially by the later writing of Barth, Jüngel's massive Christocentrism is soteriologically inadequate. Yet equally it shares with Barth a remarkable confidence about the doctrinal substance of the Christian faith. If this confidence is not always shared by his Anglo-Saxon contemporaries, that may not simply be because they are more alert to the restraints imposed on theology by its Enlightenment heritage.

#### For further reading:

Much of Jüngel's best work remains untranslated. His book on the doctrine of God, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (not, in my view, his best work) has recently been translated as *God as the Mystery of the World* (Edinburgh, 1983). Also available are his early study *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh, 1976) and his little book *Death* (Edinburgh, 1975). Those who can read German should look at his three collections of essays: *Unterwegs zur Sache* (Munich, 1972); *Entsprechungen* (Munich, 1980); and *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh, 1982).

From the rather scanty secondary literature, the best survey in English is that by G. Wainwright, "Today's Word for Today III: Eberhard Jüngel" (*Expository Times* 92 (1981) 131-5). I have two articles by Jüngel in press: a detailed bibliography for *The Modern Churchman*, and an interpretation of his theory of language for the *Quarterly Review of Theology*.