

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

JESUS IN CURRENT THEOLOGY II SALVATION AND COMMITMENT

MY FIRST ARTICLE of last October noted how classical theology normally treated the person of Jesus Christ apart from his saving work. To put this in technical terms, Christology was separated from soteriology. This second and concluding article has two aims. First, I wish to examine the contemporary efforts to overcome the person-work separation and to deal with salvation through Christ. Then popular books, like Malcolm Muggeridge's *Jesus*, invite us to reflect on the way in which they recapture something scholars often prevent readers from seeing: that religious dimension of Jesus's story which demands our commitment.

Functional or ontological?

When they seek to rehabilitate soteriology, many of the wiser spirits today remark that they do *not* intend to choose a merely functional approach and abandon ontological assertions about Jesus. Walter Kasper dismisses any such 'dilemma' of 'an ontological and a functional Christology' as 'a fictitious problem and an alternative into which theology should not let itself get manoeuvred'.¹ Jesus's value and function for us demands that we examine and recognize his status at the level of his being. His saving work indicates who he was and is – both in himself and in his relationship to the Father. There can be no satisfactory account of what Jesus does, if we dismiss as unimportant the question who he is. Every soteriological statement has its christological implications. This point has won wide acceptance and in any case seems obvious enough. To go on insisting that one cannot pursue a functional approach without somehow taking an ontological stand looks like exhuming and beating a thoroughly dead horse.

Nevertheless, some critics of Hans Küng's *Christ sein* level the charge that, when he finally comes to discuss Christ's pre-existence he lapses into a merely functional Christology. The book may offer an unsatisfactory version of pre-existence. But my point here is this. In principle it appears impossible to speak of some person's value, significance and role without making at least some implicit claims about the nature of that person. A merely functional Christology which sets aside ontological issues is simply not feasible. Küng declines to try his hand at such an impossible task. His approach may be 'primarily' functional, but it is not exclusively so.²

¹ *Jesus der Christus* (Mainz, 1974), pp 25ff; cf Gerard S. Sloyan, 'Some Problems in Modern Christology', in G. Devine (ed), *A world more Human, A Church more Christian* (*The Proceedings of the College Theology Society* 51, 1972), pp 29ff.

² *Christ sein* (Munich, 1974), p 438.

From implicit to explicit soteriology

Genuine debate has flared up in recent years over the redemptive value which Jesus attached to his coming death. Theoretically, two extremes are possible here. On the one hand, it could be argued that there was no connection at all between what Jesus intended and what actually overtook him. Crucifixion abruptly cut his life short and brought salvation to the human race. But he neither expected nor intended to bring this about. The value of his death in no sense derived from his deliberate purposes. On the other hand, one might assert that Calvary and its effects were totally foreseen by Jesus – right from babyhood. Past versions of that extreme position described his death as premeditated to the extent that they made it look like suicide. Or at any rate his life became cruelly incredible. It was spent under a conscious count-down to death by torture. What sense could we make of a man who from his very cradle clearly anticipated and fully accepted a crucifixion which he knew to be fixed for a certain day, hour and place?

Among recent writers, Wolfhart Pannenberg has gone as far as any in playing down the voluntary obedience of Jesus. The way he explains matters, Jesus was so seized by his mission that he was scarcely left with any genuinely human choice about accepting or refusing his fate on Calvary.³ At the other end of the spectrum of opinions, Muggeridge attributes to Jesus a long-range knowledge and acceptance of his execution. Jesus realized from the start that something dreadful waited for him at the end of the road. Yet even Muggeridge pulls back from suggesting that from the beginning Jesus anticipated and accepted death in the precise form of crucifixion. He writes: 'From the beginning, it has been borne in upon him that the only possible outcome of the mission on earth God had confided to him was an ignominious and *public death*'.⁴

All in all, it is hard to find any contemporary author, whether scholarly or popular, settling clearly for either of the extremes mentioned above. Nevertheless, a recent debate between Hans Kessler, Heinz Schürmann and others exemplifies the trend either to minimize or maximize. Kessler has pressed the case that the crucifixion was something which overtook Jesus rather than being a destiny which he embraced and interpreted in advance. Schürmann, however, insists that Jesus understood his coming death as the culmination of his mission and – within the circle of his disciples – used his farewell meal to indicate that human salvation would result from his execution.⁵

Any discussion here will only shamble and shuffle along, if it fails to distinguish between ascertainable facts and intelligible principles: or, if you like, between historical exegesis and theology. A passage from Bruce Vawter's

³ *Jesus, God and Man* (London, 1968), p 350.

⁴ *Jesus* (London, 1975), p 135; italics mine.

⁵ See H. Schürmann, *Jesu ureigener Tod* (Freiburg, 1975), especially pp 16–65; the author documents abundantly the recent German literature on the theme.

This Man Jesus illustrates the way in which an argument can shift from the historical to the theological level:

Did he not foresee his death as a substantive part of his mission, but also cast himself in a role like that of the Servant of the Lord . . . ? It is probably impossible to prove either that he did or did not . . . The fact that has validated belief in the atoning power of Jesus's death is not the psychology of Jesus, but the atonement itself . . . The testimony of christian men who professed their lives to be God's gift through a crucified Saviour thus established the 'fact' of vicarious atonement in a way that Jesus's premonition of it *could* or *did* not.⁶

The case here moves from what historians may establish concerning the things Jesus 'foresaw' – his 'psychology' and 'premonitions' about his execution – to what 'could' validate and establish the redemptive value of that death.

To my mind, no version of Calvary delivers a satisfactory form of theological goods, unless it appreciates how Jesus went knowingly and willingly to his death. If we strike out any genuinely free purpose on his part, we turn him into a passive victim whose murder God picked to serve for the salvation of mankind. Such a version certainly cannot enlist support from the contemporary readiness to recognize how far personal freedom shapes reality. Subjective intentions substantially affect the meaning of actions. We must expect that the value of Good Friday was deeply determined by Jesus's own free decision, no less than by the deliberate choices of other men and the freely adopted divine strategy for human salvation. Here one might parody an old principle and say: *Extra libertatem Christi nulla salus*. Theologians should know better than to interpret Calvary in terms of the Father's freedom and our freedom, while making little of Jesus's freedom in consciously dying for certain purposes. Once we acknowledge how much the voluntary quality of the crucifixion matters, we must press on and ask: What did Jesus hope to achieve through his martyrdom? Thus our theological anxiety to respect his freedom brings us to scrutinize the historical evidence.

Here Schürmann and other scholars admit that, in trying to recapture Jesus's intentions in the face of death, we may feel we are largely pulling at broken strings. In Mark 10, 45, Jesus seemingly identified himself with the suffering Servant whose death would atone for human sin: 'The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. But can we treat this verse as reporting the *ipsissima verba*? In particular, do the words 'a ransom for many' come from the historical Jesus himself? The story of the Last Supper promises that the crucifixion will mediate a new covenant between God and the human race: 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk 14, 24). But how far has the eucharistic liturgy of the early Church modified what Jesus actually said the night before he died? The doubts raised about these and other texts may

⁶ *This Man Jesus* (New York, 1973), p 80; italics mine.

trouble us to the point of deciding to contract out of historical debates and settle for some 'safe' view: a theology which leaves aside the intentions of Jesus before his death. However, we need not despair and in this way abandon history for theology. If the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus often elude us, we can be confident of pinning down something of his *ipsissima intentio*.⁷

Violent death was much more than a vague possibility for Jesus. Herod Antipas killed Jesus's precursor, John the Baptist. To preserve law and order in Palestine, the Romans took life easily. From some of his Jewish contemporaries Jesus ran into menacing opposition over the content of his preaching and the style of his life. He relativized sacred traditions, broke the sabbath rest to heal people, associated with religious outcasts, showed himself master in the Jerusalem Temple by temporarily assuming authority there, and – in his own name – interpreted the divine will and communicated the divine pardon. Doubtless the gospels exaggerate the extent of the conflict with the Pharisees, Sadducees and other groups. But it is clear that by the end of Jesus's ministry no major religious and/or political body would step forward to defend him. When he made his journey to Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple, the situation could only have looked extremely threatening. Most readers will find little difficulty in agreeing that, like the prophets before him, Jesus put himself on a deadly collision course through fidelity to his vocation. We may, however, flounder and stagger when faced with the question: What did Jesus intend to bring about by accepting the victim-role which was thrust upon him? The evidence seems fugitive just at this decisive point.

Schürmann and others point us in the right direction. They recall attitudes which characterized the ministry of Jesus: service, love and engagement on behalf of sinners. He went about as one who wished to serve all, associated with sinners and offered them God's forgiveness – despite the outrage this caused to 'the righteous'. Geza Vermes sums up this unique feature of Jesus's practice:

In one respect more than any other he differed from both his contemporaries and even his prophetic predecessors. The prophets spoke on behalf of the honest poor, and defended the widows and the fatherless, those oppressed and exploited by the wicked, rich and powerful. Jesus went further. In addition to proclaiming these blessed, he actually took his stand among the pariahs of his world, those despised by the respectable. Sinners were his table-companions and the ostracised tax-collectors and prostitutes his friends.⁸

The consistent characteristics of Jesus's mission of love converge to suggest his *ipsissima intentio*. He anticipated and accepted death not simply as the consequence of his prophetic mission but as a last service of love. Death was

⁷ This terminology comes from Kasper, *Jesus der Christus*, p 141.

⁸ *Jesus the Jew* (London 1973), p 224.

the climax of a ministry during which, as Schillebeeckx insists, every single action announced, promised and offered salvation.⁹

In these terms the whole ministry yields one major clue to Jesus's attitudes when faced with his violent death. The other major clue comes from the current Jewish idea that a just man could represent others and expiate their sins by dying. This conviction was in the air. It would seem almost unaccountably odd that the vicarious role of his death never occurred to Jesus. He who had shown himself the servant of all accepted the vocation to become the *suffering* servant for all.

These considerations prevent the redemptive message of the Last Supper from coming as a complete surprise. Jesus knew that his impending death would atone for the sins of 'many'. Moreover, he linked his fate with the coming rule of God. The liturgy of the early Church simply does not account for one key saying from the Last Supper narrative: 'Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mk 14, 25). This text takes us back to Jesus's last meal with his core-group, on that 'night before he died'. In brief, the coming rule of God and atonement for sin shaped the *ipsissima intentio* of Jesus, at least during the last days of his ministry.¹⁰

We can speak of the earthly Jesus's largely implicit soteriology, which Paul and the early Church developed into an explicit soteriology. Raymond Brown and other scholars have talked of the implicit Christology of the ministry being succeeded by the explicit Christology of the post-Easter community.¹¹ This terminology, which concerns the person of Jesus, can be usefully extended to his work. Kasper prefers to contrast a 'hidden soteriology' of Jesus's ministry with the revealed soteriology proclaimed after Pentecost.¹² It seems, however, rather distracting and intrusive to vary terminology here. An implicit/explicit soteriology both matches the popular scheme of an implicit/explicit Christology, and truly expresses the shift from what the preaching of Jesus implied about salvation to what the holy Spirit led Paul to affirm clearly: Christ 'gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age' (Gal 1, 4).

The language of salvation

Most scholars writing on Jesus Christ show themselves sensitively aware of the need to watch their language and not thoughtlessly slip into adopting current jargon. Did Jesus prove to be a 'revolutionary'? Is the salvation he promised usefully called 'liberation'? Or have revolution and liberation become catch-all terms applied to such a wide variety of phenomena that soteriology can well do without this language?

⁹ *Jesus* (Bloemendaal, 1974), p 256.

¹⁰ *Jesus der Christus*, p 141.

¹¹ Brown, Raymond E.: *Crises facing the Church* (London, 1975), pp 34-36.

¹² *Jesus der Christus*, p 141.

Küng takes 'revolution' to apply properly to the sudden and violent overthrowing of some social order. He points to the evidence against describing Jesus as a social revolutionary. But then he comes around to allow that Jesus proved to be 'more revolutionary than the revolutionaries'.¹³ Others betray nervousness over 'liberation'. Its political connotations may misrepresent the saving message of Jesus. Kasper knows the problems, but he keeps his head, recalls the concern with 'emancipation' which sprang from the Enlightenment,¹⁴ and ends by presenting redemption as 'liberation' (*Befreiung*).¹⁵

It would be unfair to belittle the performance of theologians as they wrestle with the terminology to be used about salvation. Nevertheless, some show themselves heedless of the niceties of language when it comes to dealing with one topic – Christ's precise role. Words like 'representative' (*Stellvertreter*), 'substitute' (*Ersatzmann*), and 'solidarity' continue to be employed in a confused and cumbersome way.

A decade ago critics took issue with Pannenberg for the carelessness he showed in explaining how Christ was our 'penal substitute'. If someone genuinely represents me, I must agree to his doing so and he must freely undertake the task. Representation is voluntary on both sides, as well as being restricted to specific areas and limited periods of time. A substitute, however, may be simply put in the place of another person or thing. Thus we can substitute a pawn for a rook on a chess-board. Another footballer may serve as substitute for a player injured on his way to a match. On the field the substitute takes the place of the injured man, who may be unconscious and hence without knowledge that someone is acting as his substitute. In wartime another prisoner may be shot in place of one who has escaped. There should be no need to pile up further examples to illustrate the point. In the case of substitution between persons, the parties concerned may neither know nor be willing that the substitution takes place. There is less intentionality and more passivity apparent in the way we use the language of 'substitution'. This consideration alone should win support for speaking of 'Christ our representative', and not of 'Christ our substitute'.

Küng does not take the necessary care about terminology in this area. He moves easily from talking about Christ's solidarity and identification with 'sinners of all kinds' to conclude that 'he died as the sinners representative' – indeed, as mankind's representative 'before God'.¹⁶ But what counts as representation here? I can feel deep solidarity with a group of suffering people without being their representative. Conversely, someone can have power of attorney for me, although I feel little solidarity with this legal representative. Küng's usage may not win acquiescence from those schooled to be precise in language.

Kasper also should be more discriminating about such words as representative, discipleship and solidarity. He argues that 'Jesus's call to discipleship . . .

¹³ *Christ sein*, pp 175–83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 242.

¹⁴ *Jesus der Christus*, pp 47ff.

¹⁶ *Christ sein* pp 381.

implied the notion of representation'.¹⁷ This seems wide of the mark. Some 'master' can invite me to be his disciple without undertaking to be my representative before God and man. No one that I have met considers himself to be the disciple of his legal representative, although some people take that attitude towards their political representatives. In general, discipleship and representation do not necessarily imply each other. Doubtless the disciples of Jesus enjoyed a degree of solidarity with the master who invited them to follow him. One can also admit that it belonged to this discipleship that he did 'something "for us"'.¹⁸ But more evidence is required to show that 'the call to discipleship' as such – at least in the case of Jesus – implied 'the notion of representation'. He said to Simon and Andrew: 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men' (Mk 1, 17). The call to discipleship did not take the form of saying or implying: 'Follow me and I will become your saving representative before my Father in dying to expiate your sins'. When the language of expiation surfaces later, Mark has Jesus speak of giving his life 'as a ransom for many' (10, 45), and not just as a ransom for the disciples with him. Of course, one might simply identify Jesus's disciples with all those saved through his representative death and resurrection. In that case the call to discipleship would coincide with a call to salvation as such and hence imply representation. The commission to 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28, 19) could encourage us to adopt this broad notion of discipleship. But in that case we must cease thinking of discipleship as entailing some special generosity which only a small minority can muster – a sentiment to which Thomas a Kempis gave classic expression:

Jesus has now many lovers of his heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of his cross . . . He finds many companions of his table, but few of his abstinence . . . All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to endure anything for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the chalice of his passion (Bk II, ch II).

Before leaving the topic of soteriological language, I believe it only right to mention a recent effort to rehabilitate the language of satisfaction which St Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* gave to christian theology. Anselm (c 1033–1109) was the first writer to devote a treatise explicitly to the atonement. His soteriology won wide endorsement from theologians in the Middle Ages, during the Reformation and later. Although few go as far as Adolf von Harnack ('no theory so bad had ever before his day been given out as ecclesiastical'), some twentieth-century scholars have dismissed talk of satisfaction as foreign to contemporary insights and treated Anselm himself as little more than an interesting survivor from a theological disaster area. It became customary to label his theory as roman, legalistic and engrossed with the divine honour rather than the divine love.

¹⁷ *Jesus der Christus*, pp 256ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 256.

However, John McIntyre, Gispert Greshake and now Walter Kasper have argued for the subtlety and splendour of Anselm's theology of satisfaction. This version of the atonement appreciates God's fidelity to creation and the moral order in a way that parallels St Paul's sense of divine 'righteousness' (Rom I, 17 etc). Taken within the feudal context, the divine honour implies rather than excludes love. For Anselm 'honour' guarantees peace, order and justice. Lastly, his view of the atonement reflects the germanic rather than the roman culture and customs. Kasper has shown himself favourable to this fresh estimate of *Cur Deus Homo*?¹⁹ But Küng, his colleague at the University of Tübingen, repeats the well-worn criticisms of Anselm's theology of satisfaction.²⁰

Salvation from what?

Kasper and Küng also differ as regards the lostness from which Christ's saving work delivers men and women. Both take time out to ask at depth: What keeps the questions of salvation and redemption alive today? Both recognize evil as that present reality and profound mystery from which we yearn to be saved. Evil includes human sin but goes beyond it. (In parentheses we can note how the pair from Tübingen prove here much superior to Pannenberg. He cannot really handle soteriology because he has not sufficiently faced the problem of evil. Pannenberg has frankly admitted this gap in his theology: 'The role played by sin, evil, suffering, destruction and brokenness in human history has not received very extensive treatment in my writing'.²¹) Where Kasper and Küng pull apart is over the setting in which they choose to talk about human liberation from evil.

Kasper quickly informs his readers that 'the crisis of meaning in modern society' is 'the place where Christology becomes relevant beyond the narrow context of theology'. The background to this crisis he traces through a list of german writers: Novalis, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger. These and other authors indicate the way meaningless nihilism has come to threaten us.²² Here Kasper takes a very european attitude towards the lostness from which Christ promises to rescue us. At least at this point he bypasses the demonic 'crises' produced by hunger, drugs, corrupt government, new forms of international exploitation, exploding cities, the systematic use of torture, massacres in Cambodia, civil war in Lebanon, and all the other horrors perpetrated by human fear and greed. To be sure, Kasper gives 'liberation' a key place in his soteriology and rightly remarks that any discussion of Jesus Christ must try to relate 'a christian understanding of redemption and a modern understanding of emancipation'.²³ Nevertheless, he writes for north atlantic readers, or – more accurately – for Europeans who hunger

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 160ff.

²⁰ *Christ sein*, pp 411ff, 653.

²¹ Postscript to E. Frank Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (London, 1974), p 303.

²² *Jesus der Christus*, p 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 48.

for meaning but find a banal world without and an emptiness within.²⁴ Kasper fails to reflect on the questions of salvation, the crisis of meaning and the sense of lostness which might be alive today in Africa, India, Latin America, and the new China of Mao Tse-tung. Or are we to suppose that the 'crisis of meaning' in contemporary Europe is paradigmatic for the rest of the world?

Küng does better. At the outset his eye runs from Leningrad to Tashkent, to New Delhi and Bangkok and then on to Tokyo and Melbourne.²⁵ He then gives his interpretation of christianity and Christ a wide context which embraces Hinduism and other major religions, various forms of Marxism and that whole world which modern technology is fashioning almost everywhere. At times Küng's comments may leave some readers outraged. Thus he takes up Jesus's 'good news to the poor', observes that 'everyman' meets 'the temptation to live by bread alone', and insists that Jesus preached 'to the damned of this world' that 'beyond the satisfying of economic needs they are – in a much deeper sense – poor, miserable, exploited and needy'.²⁶ If I am well-fed, well-housed and well-clothed, should I tell my starving brothers that Jesus warned us against the temptation to live by bread alone? Nevertheless, one can only applaud Küng's thorough-going attempt to situate his Christology, soteriology and whole account of christian life within a world context. *Christ sein* sees him truly moving beyond the narrow horizons of 'mere' church reform to present Jesus's challenge to universal human aspirations.

Küng takes a broad scale and chooses world guidelines in pursuing his intention to 'activate the memory of Jesus as the one who is *ultimately normative*'.²⁷ He wants to show that his first-century life, death and resurrection possess a unique and universal value for human salvation. All the same, one may wonder whether he actually succeeds in producing satisfactory grounds for making such an absolute claim for Jesus. Küng seems to rest much of his case on a repeated contrast between Jesus and the founders of other religious movements. Set alongside Buddha, Mohammed, Moses and Confucius (who is consistently and correctly called Kung-futse), Jesus looks quite different.

He was not educated at court, as Moses apparently was. He was no son of a king like Buddha. Also he was no scholar and politician like Kung-futse, nor was he a rich merchant like Mohammed. Precisely because his origin was so insignificant, his lasting importance is so astonishing.²⁸

Whether we look at Jesus's background, career, message or influence, he evades any comparison.

None of the great founders of religions worked in so narrow a field. None lived such an outrageously short time. None died so young. And

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 14ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 116, italics mine.

²⁵ *Christ sein*, p 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 203.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 260.

yet what an effect (he had)! Every fourth human being, about a thousand million persons, is called christian. Numerically christianity comes by a wide margin at the head of all world religions.²⁹

Küng marshals expertly the historical data which make Jesus's person and influence appear startlingly different. But does he manage to get beyond facts to the level of *principle*? Millions of people believe Jesus to be 'ultimately normative' for their lives. But what justifies their faith? Historical research gives Küng a stick with which to beat those who would glibly line up Jesus with a standard set of religious figures who have shaped world history. However, does Jesus differ from Buddha, Mohammed, Moses and the rest not merely *de facto*, but also *de iure*? Do we face simply a difference of degree, not one of kind?

I take it that these comparisons function apologetically. They prepare readers to move beyond the historical phenomena to accept in faith the theological basis for seeing Jesus as ultimately normative. That basis Küng locates, as Pannenberg and others do, in the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The resurrection puts an absolute stamp of divine approval on the life of Jesus. Despite the shameful crucifixion, the cause of Jesus turns out to be truly the cause of God. Deciding for or against Jesus is nothing less than deciding for or against God. The crucified and risen Jesus personifies the final divine commitment to the world. He offers a definitive answer to the ultimate issues of life, including the questions of suffering and death.³⁰

So far this article has been sampling contemporary reflections on the redemptive 'work' of Jesus Christ. For the most part it has been a matter of raising questions rather than presenting developed conclusions. One vast theme has been barely touched upon – the nature of salvation. Küng urges that 'being saved' is nothing other than being radically and genuinely human. In *Jesus*, Schillebeeckx uses the traditional terminology of 'salvation', suggests that it amounts to what we mean by 'humanization', and promises to write a soteriology for our times. This is clearly an urgent task. Those who seek to reunite Christology with soteriology will prove successful only if they confront the serious and decisive problems buried in the word 'salvation'. How does one explain today what Jesus Christ saves us for?

This article and its predecessor have tossed around the names of 'big-league' theologians: Brown, Kasper, Küng, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Schillebeeckx, Schoonenberg, Schürmann and Vawter. But the scholars cannot be allowed to have it all their own way when we examine the current thinking about Jesus.

A book written with the verve and vigour of Muggeridge's *Jesus* can tempt us to feel that technical theology and critical exegesis at times let us down. Where some scholars fail, this popular writer succeeds in letting the religious appeal of Jesus come through powerfully.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 142; see pp 269, 273, 324, 334, 427, etc.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 371-400; 418-26.

Historical scholarship

It takes, of course, no great effort to rustle up sweeping criticisms against the methods of a Muggeridge. He uses John's gospel as if it were a reliable historical source, indulges in wild anachronisms, and largely ignores two centuries of biblical scholarship which have laid bare the processes behind the formation of the New Testament texts. Despite (or because of?) his being somewhat fundamentalist, however, Muggeridge discerns and describes a person fit to be the object of our faith. His Jesus is genuinely 'believable'.

But where do the so-called 'strictly historical' techniques take us? They may entail analysing texts, dismantling beliefs and carrying on minute debates in such a way that the Jesus of the gospels suffers the death of a thousand comments and details. Looking for Jesus and his message in the official journals of New Testament studies often seems futile. In the mid-sixties I trotted off one summer and attended an international scripture conference at an ancient university. The vice-chancellor, a lawyer by profession, had been asked to welcome the overseas visitors and open proceedings. A conscientious person, he prepared himself for the occasion by reading several commentaries on the gospels. He became baffled by the scholarly passion for dismembering the New Testament texts and preventing them from speaking for themselves. He mentioned this. Then slightly outraged and greatly puzzled he added: 'But these are good books! There's no need to treat them like that!' Muggeridge is not slow to hold up his hands in horror at 'the deserts and jungles of biblical criticism'.³¹ He derides the scholarship which has produced rows of new translations: 'Future historians . . . are likely to conclude that the more we knew about Jesus the less we knew him, and the more precisely his words were translated the less we understood or heeded them'.³²

All of this borders dangerously on an irrational plea for the heart rather than the head, a preference for the 'simple' faith of the french peasant over the complexities of the german professor. Nevertheless, set Muggeridge's *Jesus* alongside Vawter's *This Man Jesus* and the contrast is startling. Vawter's book is technically correct and shows up the fundamentalist mistakes of Muggeridge, the brilliant amateur. The blurb on the cover claims that 'this book . . . offers all believers help in their desire to be in authentic contact with the living Christ and embrace his message in the light in which it was first proclaimed'. I wonder how many have accepted the proffered help. Vawter's book has not proved anything like as successful as Muggeridge's in bringing believers – or for that matter non-believers – into authentic contact with the living Christ. Why is such New Testament scholarship failing? Or, *pace* the blurb, does *This Man Jesus* properly remain at one remove from religious commitment, and need to be 'applied' pastorally before it directly affects the life of faith?

³¹ *Jesus*, p 74.

³² *Ibid.*, p 8.

Vawter himself remarks: 'The route of the historical method is admittedly not an easy one, and not everyone will always agree exactly where it leads'.³³ It is in fact high time to blow the whistle on the folly which can seem to turn this method into a latter-day idol. Some authors risk alleging that their use of historical techniques establishes contact with Jesus in a uniquely privileged way. Küng, for instance, contrasts 'the traditional' Jesus with 'the original' Jesus, compares the work of the critical scholar with that of an art expert, and concludes that the expert may uncover an original masterpiece which later hands have unwittingly painted over. Likewise 'it could come to light what the Church and theology have made out of Jesus and done with him – liturgically, dogmatically, politically, juridically and pedagogically'.³⁴

Küng betrays here the enthusiasm for a brand of historical exegesis that so often mars as well as makes some recent roman catholic theology. To begin with, do we find Jesus by studying history rather than by participating in liturgy and persevering in scriptural meditation? Can exegesis assure us of some strikingly privileged contact with Jesus, denied to St Francis of Assisi, St Teresa of Avila and others unfortunate enough to live before the historical-critical method came along to uncover God's masterpiece? Secondly, Küng at this point lays claim to a fresh objectivity over against all that 'the Church and theology have made out of Jesus and done with him'. But what does the theologian Küng make out of Jesus and do with him? Should any theologian pretend to occupy a 'wiser-than-thou' position that puts him above and beyond the Church and other theologians?

Küng, however, goes on to allow that faith in Jesus does not depend upon the historical method.³⁵ At the end of the day he may in fact be high-lighting only two functions of this method. First, it has the apologetic role of answering those who challenge the amount of public information available about Jesus. Secondly, it tracks down events which generated the New Testament texts. This grappling with the visible order of things can only serve to present the humanity of Jesus in a clearer light.

Elsewhere, Küng helpfully remarks that truth should not be reduced to historical truth:

In given circumstances poetry can catch the secret of nature and of man better than some ever so exact description or photograph . . . Truth is not identical with fact, nor is it, in particular, identical with historical truth . . . Poetry, parable and legend . . . can communicate more relevant truth than an historical report.³⁶

He then introduces a remarkably useful comparison between the gospels as dramatic representations of history and the historical plays of Shakespeare, like *Henry V*.³⁷ This comparison deserves development.

Before going to Stratford-on-Avon, we might wonder how freely Shake-

³³ *This Man Jesus*, p 28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 405ff.

³⁴ *Christ sein*, p 152.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p 407.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p 153.

speare has used his sources. We could decide to satisfy our historical demon by investigating the actual story of Henry V. We could settle for ourselves a hard core of facts. But then it would be absurd to sit through a performance, noting down carefully every point where the playwright has modified the record for his artistic purposes. Critical history can likewise assure us about the basic structure of Jesus's story. Brown, Kasper, Küng, Vawter and many others endorse a common consensus which takes Matthew, Mark and Luke to be substantially reliable in reporting what Jesus said and did. Having pacified our historical itch, we can then take up a gospel as a dramatic whole. It frames the story of Jesus and invites our involvement in a way in which, of course, *Henry V* does not. The gospel narratives will come alive for us, if we allow ourselves to come alive in the face of the texts. It may seem 'safer' to stick to a quest for historical details. But in that way we will not truly find anything out – neither about Jesus nor about ourselves.

In brief, let the methods of critical history have their role, a subordinate rather than a dominant one. Sheer historical research can in fact turn out to be a way of avoiding the real drama and the essential issue raised by the gospels: Am I willing to put my whole life – with all its fears and hopes – into the crucified hands of Jesus? Any biblical research that finally prevents this challenge from being heard is both playing false to the nature of the gospels and substituting scholarly idols for the questions: 'What do you seek? Do you love me?' (Jn 1, 38; 21, 15).

Imagination and commitment

Muggeridge's *Jesus* reminds us sharply that we are not saved by historical scholarship alone. A book that can be technically faulted by professional exegetes turns out to be religiously compelling. The reproductions of masterpieces which accompany the text suggest that sometimes we may approach Jesus more effectively through the imagination of artists rather than through the intellect of theologians. Muggeridge overstates his case to make this point: 'Only mystics, clowns and artists, in my experience, speak the truth, which, as Blake was always insisting, is perceptible to the imagination rather than the mind'.³⁸ Our knowledge of Jesus Christ is far too serious a business to be left to theologians and exegetes alone. From the middle ages these professionals have monotonously neglected art and the imagination as guides to religious truth. I find myself in complete agreement with those who wish to reinstate the 'mystics, clowns and artists' alongside the scholars. The imaginable is the believable. To modify Wittgenstein: what we cannot imagine, we must confine to silence and non-belief.

Finally, Muggeridge rests his case on the mutual dependence of commitment and knowledge. St Augustine's 'give me a lover and he will understand' applies here. A genuine moral sensibility and a true religious concern make it possible to know and understand Jesus. After all the criticisms are in, only the

³⁸ *Jesus*, p 37.

mean-minded can overlook the deep attachment to Jesus which lights up page after page of *Christ sein*. The enormous success of Küng's book derives at least partly from this affectionate commitment to Jesus and his cause. Muggeridge goes further than Küng in admitting his personal sinfulness. It makes him unworthy of the Lord. Yet this gives him an ultimate claim on the One who 'came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mk 2, 17). Does Muggeridge's *Jesus* verify at the level of popular writing the need for that multi-layered conversion which Bernard Lonergan has championed? Should we adapt Augustine and exclaim: 'Give me a repentant and prayerful theologian and he or she will understand Jesus'?

At the end of the day, it may be nothing less than the praise of forgiven sinners which will find the right language to use of Jesus Christ, the One who died that we might live.³⁹

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³⁹ Since writing this article and its predecessor (*The Way*, October 1976), I have learnt that Search Press in London and Paulist Press in New York will publish a translation of Kasper's *Jesus der Christus*; Collins in London and Doubleday in New York will publish a translation of Küng's *Christ sein* as *On being a Christian*, and Seabury Press in New York will publish Schillebeeckx's *Jezus*.