

THE HUMAN MIND AND WILL OF CHRIST

By EDWARD YARNOLD

JESUS WAS FULLY GOD and a real man. What did this mean in practice? In particular, what did it feel like to be both God and man? Was the sense of divinity so strong that Jesus' human knowledge and will, though always present, were almost irrelevant, as an electric light is useless and almost unnoticed in a room lit by strong sunlight? But this is virtual monophysitism, the heresy that Jesus' human nature was absorbed into his divinity. So perhaps the divine knowledge was sealed off from the human knowledge, so that at the divine level of his consciousness he was all-knowing, while at the human level he knew himself only as a man, beset by ignorance and doubt, though admittedly not sin. No, this is virtual nestorianism, the heresy that separates a human person in Christ from the divine. How then do we escape this dilemma?

Professor Eric Mascall cast doubt upon the validity of any attempt to study Jesus' psychology, when he wrote:

I am frankly amazed to find how often the problem of the incarnation is taken as simply the problem of describing the mental life and consciousness of the incarnate Lord, for this problem seems to me to be strictly insoluble. If I am asked to say what I believe it feels like to be God incarnate I can only reply that I have not the slightest idea and I should not expect to have it.¹

Nevertheless, there are good reasons for trying to penetrate as deeply as we can into this situation which is beyond our experience. First of all, christian spirituality has rightly laid much stress on the affinity between our minds and Jesus'. 'We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning'.² Secondly, spiritual writers, beginning with St Paul, have urged us to share Christ's mind, i.e., his values, his attitude to his Father and

¹ *Via Media* (London, 1956), p 117.

² Heb 4, 15.

to created things. To share Christ's mind it is necessary to try to understand its workings. Besides, the definition of Christ as a real man remains an empty formula unless we are prepared to declare its implications. What is the difference between the phantom man of the docetists or the divinely-souled body of the apollinarians, and the complete man of Chalcedon? The answer can be given at the metaphysical level that Christ had a human nature, body and soul. But the modern christian philosopher whose critical sense has been invigorated by a healthy tonic of empiricism is not content with metaphysical entities. In order to attach meaning to the statement that Jesus had a complete human nature, we need to be able to indicate, however tentatively, some of its practical psychological implications.

So that we may know exactly where we stand, it will be best to begin by giving a summary of the Church's official teaching on the subject. Jesus shared our substance in all but sin.¹ His human will could not be at variance with his divine will, though they were distinct.² The Church has therefore consistently taught that he could neither sin personally nor suffer the tendency to sin which arises from original sin and is called by the technical name of concupiscence. The Council of Florence's statement that Jesus was '*conceived, born and died without sin*'³ implies immunity from original as well as personal sin. (This immunity of course does not imply that he was lacking in any part of human nature; for personal sin belongs to the person, not the nature, and original sin is a defect in human nature, not a part of it). Pius XII⁴ declared that Jesus enjoyed the beatific vision from the first moment of the incarnation, and in this vision saw and loved all the members of his mystical body. The creeds affirm that Jesus shared our human experience, including suffering.

So much for the Church's official teaching. I propose next to give the account of Jesus' psychology that most Catholic theologians would have given until very recently. Jesus Christ, being God even after the incarnation, enjoyed the divine, unlimited knowledge, i.e., the intuitive, unchanging consciousness of all being and all truth; he enjoyed also the complete fulfilment that consists in the love of each person of the Trinity for the others. But he also had a

¹ Council of Chalcedon, AD 451; D-S (Denzinger-Schönmetzer) 301.

² Third Council of Constantinople, AD 681; D-S 556.

³ Decree for the Jacobites, AD 1442; D-S 1347.

⁴ *Mystici Corporis* (1943); D-S 3812.

human soul, and therefore a human level of consciousness. This comprised three kinds of knowledge: the beatific vision, infused knowledge and acquired knowledge. The beatific vision is the face-to-face awareness of God that constitutes the happiness of heaven. Jesus, being God, it was said, could not help being aware of God even in his human mind during his lifetime; he was therefore in a state of complete human happiness, even though he could suffer. In addition, his humanity was free from all defect, for one who is God cannot be defective. Therefore he must have been free even from human ignorance, enjoying not only the acquired knowledge which all men derive from experience, but also a privileged knowledge, in quality like ours, but different in origin, since it did not come from experience, but was miraculously 'infused'. Christ did not need to learn; he already knew it all, though this infused knowledge would gain a new dimension as he verified it in his own experience. It was only by reliving in experience the truths that had already been infused into his mind that Jesus could be said to grow in knowledge. Some theologians were so intent on preserving Christ from what they saw as imperfection that they taught that this infused knowledge embraced all possible objects of the human mind; the infant in the cradle understood nuclear physics. Others took a more pragmatic view: it would be no imperfection in Jesus not to be able to know everything, but only to be ignorant of what he needed to know in order to perform his redemptive mission.

In particular even in his human mind he was always fully aware of his divine nature and his redemptive role. The only reason he did not say outright 'I am God' was that his hearers would not have understood.

Similarly it was argued that there could be no moral struggle in Christ. As he was God, he could not commit personal sin, which is a rejection of God. Nor was he infected by original sin, either in the sense of an inherited loss of grace, or in the sense of an inherited tendency to sin. Therefore it is hard to see how he could have been tempted in any real sense, despite the gospel story of the temptations, and the statement in the Letter to the Hebrews that he 'has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning'.¹

Furthermore, in this view, Jesus could at any moment have worked miracles, because, being God, he was almighty. When he appeared weak, for example when the priests mocked him with the

¹ Heb 4, 15.

words 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross',¹ or when he appeared to be no stronger than any other new-born baby, he was consciously choosing not to exercise the divine power which was available to him. At times, however, e.g., at the transfiguration or when he worked miracles, he allowed the divine power to shine out from behind the cloud of his humanity.

Again, according to this view, since he was a perfect man, he possessed none of the particular traits which give a man his character, for they imply limitation, and therefore defect. Christ's response to every human situation was always the ideal human response. Therefore his life presents the blueprint of the perfect human life; christian living consists in the imitation of Christ. Hence the importance of the study of the gospels, in order to acquaint ourselves with this pattern in all its detail; for they provide us with an utterly accurate, though not of course complete, account of his life, which gives us a sufficiently detailed model for our imitation.

I have expounded, I trust without caricature, a traditional Catholic account of the psychology of Christ and the importance of its study. This theory must now be tested in the light of the evidence of the gospels.

St Luke relates that the boy Jesus grew in wisdom.² Jesus himself admitted ignorance of the last day.³ Some of his actions make sense only on the supposition that he did not know the future; e.g., his choice of Judas to be an apostle, his prayer that the cup might pass from him;⁴ his question 'Who touched my garments'? when he felt power go out from him to cure the woman's haemorrhage;⁵ his plan to take his apostles away for a rest, which was frustrated by the crowds;⁶ his prophecy of the end of the world within a generation.⁷ On the other hand the evangelists, especially St John, do attribute extraordinary knowledge to Jesus: not just knowledge of men's hearts,⁸ which could after all be nothing more than highly developed insight into men's characters, but also knowledge of events at a distance, such as Lazarus' illness and death,⁹ and of miraculous events in the future, such as the finding of the coin in the fish's mouth.¹⁰

The gospels show a similar complexity in their picture of Jesus' power to act. They show him suffering human weakness: a helpless baby; too tired to work while the apostles still have energy in

¹ Mt 27, 40.

² Lk 2, 52.

³ Mk 13, 32.

⁴ Mt 26, 39.

⁵ Mk 5, 30.

⁶ Mk 6, 30ff.

⁷ Mk 13, 30.

⁸ Jn 2, 25; 6, 70.

⁹ Jn 11, 4, 11.

¹⁰ Mt 17, 27.

reserve;¹ unable to work many miracles;² needing help to carry his cross. But against this unambiguous description of human weakness must be set his miraculous powers and the transfiguration.

There is therefore a certain inconsistency in the gospels' portrait of Jesus, a tension between the human and the divine, or rather between the suffering and the glorified humanity. The traditional solution was that the glorious, praeternatural privileges were always at Jesus' disposal, but he chose not to exercise them, or even pretended not to possess them. This view, which has long been accepted more or less explicitly by Catholics, has the fatal weakness that it makes our Lord's humanity a sham, a mask presenting the appearance of limitation, behind which he led a private life free from the restrictions of human nature. This is a denial of Jesus' humanity in practice, though the exponents of this view would be the last to subscribe to the docetic heresy in theory.

I wish to substitute the view that Jesus' weakness was real; that there were many things of which he had no knowledge of any human, usable kind. He worked miracles not by his own divine powers, but by the messianic power given him by the Father, just as many saints seem to have had miraculous powers while remaining subject to the limitations of human nature. This messianic power may have included occasional, though not habitual, extraordinary knowledge of the future or of secrets.

In particular, the reason Jesus did not tell his followers clearly that he was God was not so much because they would not have understood as because he himself would not have understood the words. This is the crux of the problem of Jesus' psychology. How could he be God without knowing it? How could the same person have two separate centres of consciousness? If the divine consciousness did not penetrate to the human, we seem to have two distinct selves or 'I's'; in which case it seems meaningless to say there was not a human person of Christ distinct from the divine. If on the other hand Christ's divine consciousness so penetrated the human that he had no ignorance but simply pretended he had, he was not a real man. We are caught once more on our original dilemma.

But there is a way to escape. The human mind thinks in two ways: with and without words. We are not content to leave our thoughts in their non-verbal form; to make them more vivid, to link them together, to communicate them, we express them to our-

¹ Mk 4, 38; Jn 4, 6.

² Mk 6, 5.

selves and to others in words. These words we learn in two ways. We learned the word dog by hearing it spoken while a large, friendly, four-footed, comfortably-smelling, moving bulk was pointed at. This first method of explaining the meaning of a word can be called definition by pointing. A more complicated word like kennel we may have learned by being told that it was the dog's house; we knew what dog and house meant, and so were able to recognize a kennel when we saw the dog going into a large wooden box. This second method of explaining meaning can be called definition by words. It presupposes that the words used in explanation can themselves ultimately be defined by pointing. Now Jesus learned to understand words as any child does, first of all by hearing them spoken by his mother while she pointed to the objects they represented, later by being taught definitions in words he already understood. He was all the time aware with his human mind of his divinity, but did not know how to think in words about this awareness, because the words he learned had no point of contact with it. Gradually, as he learned the Old Testament from his mother and St Joseph and the rabbis, he tried to match his non-verbal self-awareness with his verbalized religious knowledge and sought its true formulation. Was he the suffering servant of Isaiah? The son of Man of Daniel? The conquering messiah-king of the psalms?

His first recorded attempt to work out his self-awareness in words was his mysterious explanation to his mother of his absence: 'How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'¹ Perhaps Mary had recently told him (he had just come of age) that St Joseph was not his father; therefore God was his father in a unique way. His baptism marks another step in this progressive verbalization of his self-awareness: as Matthew and Mark recount the events it is Jesus who sees the dove descending;² the incident is for his instruction, to reinforce his conclusion that God is his father, and to teach him that he possesses the Spirit as the merciful anointed one of Isaiah.³

This theory that Jesus was progressively clarifying his self-awareness makes sense of the temptations. He was incapable of sin: his human will could not be in conflict with his divine will, because the same self cannot reject God while utterly accepting him.

¹ Lk 2, 49.

² Mt 3, 16-17; Mk 1, 10-11.

³ Isai 61, 1-2; Lk 4, 18-19.

In what sense then was he tempted? The temptations were perhaps intellectual: he had to work out in human terms what his Father's will was, what his messianic role was to be. He had to work it out from his own experience and the Old Testament; but was he to choose the Old Testament role of Messiah with an earthly kingdom that the devil put before him, or the role of the suffering servant who conquers only through failure? As St Paul puts the contrast, was he to choose God-like honours or the form of a slave?¹ The temptations were the process by which Jesus discovered that God's will for him was the humble not the glorious role. It was a process which had to be repeated when Peter played the part of Satan and tempted him,² and again in the agony in the garden.

St John attaches great importance to Jesus' first miracle at Cana. If all the time Jesus was holding in check miraculous powers which he knew he possessed, the incident had no deep significance, except as an example of the power of Mary's intercession. But did he know he had miraculous powers? The question presented itself at the temptation. His reading of the Old Testament may have led him to discuss the question with his mother and to conclude that he did indeed possess the power of working miracles as the consequence of his anointing with the holy Spirit.³ At Cana Mary challenged him to exercise his powers for the first time, to pass from speculation to practice.

The gospels depict a Jesus possessed by the determination to fulfil the Old Testament prophecies. The fulfilment of the prophecies is so central a theme in the gospels that it is probable that it originated with Jesus himself, though perhaps it was elaborated by the Church after the resurrection. The prophecies were the source from which Jesus learned the will of his father, which was meat and drink to him.⁴ The prophecies taught him that a passion lay before him: 'How is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?'⁵ After the resurrection he explained to the apostles that his achievement of glory through suffering was 'necessary',⁶ and in accordance with 'the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms'.⁷ It was only when the last prophecy was fulfilled by his thirst that Jesus could say 'it is finished', and die in peace.⁸

Such is the theory I am advocating. A few loose ends remain to

¹ Phil 2, 6-7.

⁴ Jn 4, 34.

⁷ Lk 24, 44.

² Mt 16, 23; Mk 8, 33.

⁵ Mk 9, 12.

⁸ Jn 19, 28-30.

³ Cf Isai 61, 1-2.

⁶ Lk 24, 26.

be tied in. First, ignorance is not necessarily an imperfection; on the contrary, it is arguable that it is a condition necessary for moral freedom; if all the consequences of a contemplated action were clearly seen, one would no longer be free to choose the lesser good. Secondly, although Jesus' indistinct awareness of his divine self can be described as *immediate* vision of God, this vision before the resurrection was not necessarily *beatific*, i.e., engendering happiness, and therefore was not incompatible with genuine suffering and even desolation of spirit. Thirdly, analogies can be suggested for Jesus' indistinct awareness of his divinity; first in the non-verbal self-awareness which we all experience in all our conscious moments; secondly in the mystic's indistinct contact with God which goes by such names as the cloud of unknowing, the night of sense, the prayer of faith, the prayer of simple regard, the prayer of quiet.

It remains to say a few words about the practice of the imitation of Christ. However well-authenticated it is in christian tradition, several objections can be made against it:

1. Although Jesus is the summit of creation, it is misleading to speak of him as the perfect man, as if all human perfection consisted in approximation to the ideal he embodied. There is no such thing as the perfect man. Just as there is no perfect height or weight or complexion or colour of eyes or number of hairs, so there is no perfect character. To regard Jesus as the perfect man without individual characteristics is subtly to deny that he is a real man at all. Therefore, since Jesus had a particular character, it may not be right or even possible for us to mould our character to his, if our type of character is different from his; if, for example, we are placid, he highly-strung.

2. There is another reason why it is wrong for us to imitate Christ indiscriminately. Some of the things he did we have no right to do: e.g., to drown another man's pigs, to take another's donkey without permission, to drive traders out of a church with a whip, to refuse sympathy in order to elicit a response of faith, to try to walk on water. Again, where do we draw the line? Do we all have to be carpenters and itinerant preachers? To be circumcized? To spend more than thirty years in secret preparing for a spectacular public life? To be crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem between two thieves? And if we say we have to imitate him only in essentials, how do we know what the essentials are?

This drives us back to see what the New Testament says on the

subject. Our Lord taught us to imitate him in humble service,¹ in carrying the cross. St Paul similarly taught us to share Jesus' habitual attitude of obedience and self-sacrifice.² So we may safely take Christ as our model to this extent. In other respects we must seek independent reasons for imitating Christ. A religious, for example, confidently imitates the chastity of Christ, because the Church has confirmed that this is an aspect of Christ's life that may fruitfully be imitated. The fact that Christ was chaste provides a motive, but not a criterion of choice.

There is, however, a more fundamental way in which we may imitate Christ. Grace is a share in his life, a 'putting on' of Christ.³ Therefore as we grow in grace, we necessarily grow after his pattern. By growing in love of him we could imitate him in this basic sense without knowing anything about the details of his life, like an acorn inevitably growing into an oak-tree not a beech, or a child growing up to be like his father whom he has never known. This basic likeness to Christ is a share in the process of death and resurrection:⁴ like him we are grains of wheat that must die in order to yield fruit.⁵

It is fortunate that we can imitate Christ without knowing the details of his life, for New Testament scholars now tell us that we know very little about it. The evangelists were not attempting to write biographies, but were preaching Christ, interpreting his life to show that he was the Son of God, the fulfilment of the prophecies. That Jesus was an historical figure who rose from the dead is central to their preaching, but it is hard to say with complete certainty that any incident in the gospels took place exactly as they describe it. But this need not disturb us. Our contact with Jesus is not through historical research among dead records, but through the living Spirit who speaks to us by the Church and the words of the gospels. It is 'to our advantage' that our knowledge of Jesus takes this form.⁶ We no longer need to know Jesus 'from a human point of view'.⁷ The Jesus with whom we have contact by faith through the pages of the gospels is the same Jesus who lived and died nineteen centuries ago. There is identity between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, just as there is between the historical Jesus and the Jesus reproduced in me by grace.

¹ Jn 13, 15.

² Phil 2, 5ff.

³ Gal 3, 27.

⁴ Phil 3, 10-11.

⁵ Jn 12, 24.

⁶ Jn 16, 7.

⁷ 2 Cor 5, 16.