

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## JESUS IN CURRENT THEOLOGY I BEYOND CHALCEDON

BACK IN 1951 Christians celebrated an important anniversary: 1500 years since the Council of Chalcedon which gave the Church the classic account of Jesus Christ as one person in two natures. Theologians observed the anniversary by producing a flood of books and articles on the achievements both of Chalcedon and that whole row of early councils from Nicaea (325) to Constantinople III (680-681). For more than a thousand years the formulations of those councils gave shape to Christology or the doctrines on Christ's person.

A quarter of a century after the 1951 anniversary, theological and scriptural preoccupation with Jesus Christ has grown rather than declined. One thinks of works by Leonardo Boff, Raymond Brown, C. H. Dodd, Christian Duquoc, Jacques Guillet, Adolf Holl, Walter Kasper, Hans Küng, Dermot Lane, Jürgen Moltmann, Malcolm Muggeridge, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, John Robinson, Edward Schillebeeckx, Piet Schoonenberg, Teilhard de Chardin, Bruce Vawter, and the whole group who have contributed to the new quest for the historical Jesus (Günther Bornkamm, Ernst Käsemann etc.) I am putting aside scruples here and pulling in names almost at random. But these and other authors serve to illustrate the shift since 1951. Both academic and popular studies have moved beyond the creeds, councils and theology of early Christianity to seek fresh insights in answering the question: 'Where and how do we encounter Jesus Christ today?'

This article can cover two areas. First of all, I plan to indicate several themes in classical Christology which no longer satisfy and have prompted the search for new insights. Then some characteristics of the recent approaches will be discussed. In doing all this I want to pay particular attention to the 'big three' Jesus-books from 1974: Küng's *Christ sein*, Schillebeeckx's *Jezus* and Kasper's *Jesus der Christus*.<sup>1</sup>

### I

Six headings gather together the major reasons for the recent swing away from the classical Christology developed by many earlier generations of theologians. It is (1) a Christology 'from above', which (2) remains incarnation-centred, (3) runs into philosophical problems, (4) mixes together historical, theological and mythical language, (5) bypasses the ministry of Jesus, and (6) separates the person of Jesus Christ from his work, that is to say, separates Christology from soteriology or the doctrine of salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> All these will shortly appear in English translation.

At once some readers may already feel uneasy with this list of reasons. What is wrong, for instance, with a Christology that 'remains incarnation-centred'? Surely the feasts of the Annunciation and Christmas encourage us to see the high-point of all human history as God becoming man? Yet let us at least give the reasons a hearing. Only then can we respond to them with sympathy and understanding, even if we do not leap headlong to embrace them.

(1) 'He descended from heaven' serves as the starting-point for the Christology of Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth and other classic theologians. This Christology 'from above' bothers many of our contemporaries. They are troubled not so much by any mythological picture of a 'coming down' from some heavenly realm. The more fundamental trouble is that this classic Christology *begins from God*. Its opening question assumes the form: How does God become man? How does the pre-existent Son of God enter our world?

This way of formulating the initial approach brings with it two difficulties. First, it has often seemed to cast doubt on the genuinely human existence of Jesus. The figure in the manger may cry like any baby. He may grow up seemingly just another boy playing on the streets of Nazareth. He may preach in the style of a wandering rabbi. The roman forces of occupation can put him to death by that hideous combination of impalement and display which they called crucifixion. But all the same we know he is really God, and this injects an element of make-believe into the whole life-story from Bethlehem on. He looks like a man, speaks like a man, suffers and dies like a man. But underneath he is divine and this makes his genuine humanity suspect. Is he no more than God in disguise? This first difficulty with the classical Christology 'from above' runs along lines suggested by christmas pantomimes. Daisy looks something like a cow and moos better than most cows. But all through the act we know she is no real cow at all. From the moment of the manger, does Jesus simply play at being a man?

The other difficulty about the opening question ('How does God become man?') arises from the answer given by the greek Fathers of the Church to the related question, 'Why?': God becomes man in order that man might become God. The possibility of imitating and sharing in the divine nature seemed easier to grasp during the early centuries of the christian era. Today it is not simply the silence or 'felt' absence of God which makes the old theme less plausible. Man knows himself to be dehumanized in so many ways. He needs first to feel humanized before he can dream of being divinized. Man has to be 'incarnated' before he can bear to talk about the incarnation of a divine person.

(2) This brings us to the major 'mystery' in the Christology 'from above'. This kind of Christology takes incarnation to be the central doctrine about Jesus Christ. Its reflections start from the nativity, not from the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. What happens after the incarnation becomes little more than the mere unfolding of all that has already taken place at the incarnation itself.

Along with Pannenberg and other recent writers, Kasper sets his face against such an

incarnation-oriented Christology. If we allow that the divine-human person of Jesus is constituted once and for all through the incarnation, then the history and fate of Jesus – above all his cross and resurrection – have no more constitutive meaning. The death of Jesus is then merely the completion of the incarnation. The resurrection is no more than the confirmation of the divine nature.<sup>2</sup>

It is not that the doctrine of the incarnation should be given up. But the New Testament suggests that thinking about Jesus Christ should begin elsewhere.

St Paul occasionally speaks of the Son's pre-existence (Gal 4, 4; Rom 8, 3), but he takes the incarnation as no more than the prerequisite to the central mystery. The nativity as such neither saves us nor can it serve as the baseline for our further reflection. Paul's starting-point is always Christ's saving death and resurrection. He implies that we should think of Christmas in the light of Easter, not vice versa. He offers us an elaborate list of resurrection witnesses (I Cor 15, 5–8). But he passes over Christ's nativity in almost total silence. We hear from him no more than that Christ was born into a Jewish family (Gal 4, 4), who belonged to the house of King David (Rom 1, 3).

Paul's thinking about the sacraments ties in with his basic approach to Christ. Baptism draws believers into the crucifixion and gives them promise of resurrection (Rom 6, 3–5). We are not baptized 'into the incarnation'. The Eucharist proclaims the death of the risen Lord until he comes in glory (I Cor 11, 26). We do not celebrate the Eucharist to proclaim the birth of Christ until he grows to manhood.

Paul's letters, written from the late forties to the early sixties A.D., make him our earliest New Testament author. When he composed his gospel around sixty-five, St Mark began with the baptism of Christ and left us a work which has been often described as a passion story with a long introduction. Good Friday and Easter Sunday brood over this gospel, which includes no nativity or incarnation stories. When they wrote later with Mark's gospel in front of them, Matthew and Luke decided to start with stories of Jesus's birth and childhood. Finally St John, towards the close of the first century, began his gospel with the sublime proclamation: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we saw his glory, the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father' (1, 14). The movement from Paul through the first three gospels to John represented an increasing concern to clarify Jesus's origins. This movement continued beyond the age of the apostles. The early centuries of controversy about Christ's identity culminated in Chalcedon's confession that Christ was one person in two natures.

If we wish to make some progress in our own wrestling with the mystery of Christ, we need to follow for ourselves the direction in which Christian

<sup>2</sup> Kasper, W.: *Jesus der Christus* (Mainz, 1974), p 44.

thinking originally went. We must begin with the Easter Jesus, not with the Christmas Jesus. The classical Christology involves an unworkable, as well as an unbiblical, plan of attack. It reflects on what Christ was from the beginning rather than on what he did at the end. This condemns it to tortured and frustrating attempts to relate Christ's humanity and divinity within one personal existence. That brings us to the third major problem with the classical approach.

(3) By starting from the Chalcedonian confession, classical Christology commits itself to endless wrestling with the questions: What terms – be they strictly or only loosely philosophical – should we use to relate in a true unity the being human and the being divine in Christ? How can we state the double reality of 'true God and true man', so that one aspect does not prevail at the expense of the other? This way into Christology sows dragons' teeth which instantly spring up as fully-armed problems to block our way forward.

Firstly, *either* (a) the being human and the being divine co-exist in a dubious unity, *or* (b) a credible humanity gets edged out for the sake of insisting on Christ's divinity. The first alternative fails to match the very council to which appeal is made. Chalcedon's confession dwells insistently on the oneness of Christ's person. In an almost literal sense, its first and last words about Jesus Christ are that he is one.

Alternative (b) has been adopted in practice by most theologians, tolerated by Church leaders and believed by vast numbers of the faithful. As Erik Routley remarks, 'traditionally an over-emphasis on the humanity has always tended to lead to positions that the Church labelled as eccentric; and over-emphasis on the divinity has led to positions which were comfortably accommodated within orthodoxy'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, such an imbalance plays false to Chalcedon itself and the pope who loomed over the council. Leo the Great insisted: 'It is as dangerous an evil to deny the truth of the human nature in Christ as to refuse to believe that his glory is equal to that of the Father' (Sermon 27, 1).

Secondly, Chalcedon introduced terminology from (popular) Greek philosophy in speaking of 'one person in two natures'. Of course, it neither intended to replace the New Testament message by such terminology, nor set out to define exactly what the divine nature and the human nature are. Nevertheless, the two terms (nature and person) can leave us smothered with difficulties.

Take the *two-natures* teaching. Only too easily it can suggest a Christ divided into a divine and a human layer – a double being with two natures juxtaposed. 'One person in two natures' sounds almost like a man in two jobs or someone with dual nationality. The terminology obscures the dramatic difference between being human and being divine. The 'job' of being divine is radically other than the 'job' of being human. Divine 'nationality' is worlds away from human 'nationality'.

<sup>3</sup> *The Man for Others* (London, 1964), p ix.

It costs little time to ferret out the difficulties that cluster around 'person'. Even though Chalcedon did *not* call Christ a 'divine person', traditional theology has interpreted its confession in that sense. Christ is not a human person, but a divine person who assumed human nature without assuming human personality. But, as Schoonenberg argues, can Christ be completely human if he is not a human person? To deny his human personhood seems tantamount to denying that he is man. Moreover, nothing can be done to conceal the real shift between the ancient and modern concepts of 'person'. Classical theology spoke of a rational being existing in its own right. It failed to express interpersonal relations in its account, 'an individual substance of a rational nature' (*naturae rationalis individua substantia*). Modern thought latches onto self-awareness, freedom and inter-subjectivity as key characteristics of personhood. We repeat the traditional word ('person') at our peril. It has changed its meaning.<sup>4</sup>

(4) The fourth way in which traditional Christology has looked inadequate concerns its easy acceptance of that mixture of history, faith and mythical imagery which the old creeds present. The statements run, one after the other, as follows:

Christ was conceived by the holy Ghost,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead and buried;  
descended into hell,  
he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven.

The simple listing together of these items can conceal the fact that we are constantly shifting from one order to another. Where does 'ordinary' history begin and end? It is no surrender to nervous trendiness to point out that the crucifixion belongs to the order of public history, whereas an ascension into heaven does not. To accept that Jesus was born of Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate does not demand christian faith. But only a believer will admit that Jesus was conceived by the holy Ghost.

Küng reminds his readers that Christ's resurrection may not be presumed to be of the same order as the virginal conception, the descent into hell and the ascension, simply because the Apostles' Creed takes all these articles of faith together. He points out that 'the oldest New Testament witness, the apostle Paul, says nothing about virgin birth, descent into hell and ascension. But with inexorable decisiveness he takes the resurrection of the crucified one as the centre of christian preaching'.<sup>5</sup>

(5) The fifth objection deals with a startling omission in much traditional

<sup>4</sup> In his *The Christ* (London, 1972), Schoonenberg develops at length the difficulties that he (and others) find in the chalcedonian pattern – at least as classical theology has understood it. See also 'Is Jesus "man plus God"?', in *Theology Digest* 23 (1975), pp 59–70.

<sup>5</sup> *Christ sein* (Munich, 1974), p 336.

Christology. Like the Apostles' Creed, that Christology jumps straight from 'born of the Virgin Mary' to 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. It undermines its usefulness by simply bypassing the history of Jesus's ministry.

Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians attended to the 'mysteries' of Christ's life. But in recent centuries Christology became impoverished by losing its capacity to think about the great features of the ministry. Even such a recent and innovative work as Pannenberg's *Jesus-God and Man* (1964) disconcertingly ignored the miracles and other prominent themes of Jesus's life. Pannenberg dwelt on the claims to authority, but showed no interest in providing some 'personality profile' of Jesus. Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1964) passed over the ministry in almost total silence. Despite that book's sharp polemic against Rudolf Bultmann, it did not effectively part ways with his reduction to a minimum of the theological importance of Jesus's history. As a classical spokesman for such an approach, Kierkegaard long ago expressed the conviction that Christology need find nothing very urgent or interesting to say about the historical existence of Jesus: 'If the contemporary generation (of Jesus) had left nothing behind them but these words: "We have believed that in such and such a year the God appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died", it would be more than enough'.<sup>6</sup>

Kasper, Küng, Schillebeeckx, Moltmann in his *The Crucified God* (1972), and other recent authors include lengthy sections on the history of Jesus. What we witness here is not a determination on the part of theologians to appear *au fait* with the latest results coming in from their colleagues engaged in purely biblical studies. Rather they refuse to take their cue from the ancient creeds of the Church and to leap straight from the incarnation to the passion. What should have been obvious has come as a grand discovery. The ministry must claim attention in any serious study of Jesus Christ.

(6) Finally, much theology that took its inspiration from Chalcedon managed to separate Christology from soteriology, and felt happy to consider the person of Christ apart from his saving 'work'.

To be sure, the ancient creeds of the Church confessed the cause of Christ's 'descent from heaven' to be 'for us men and for our salvation'. Moreover, the historical setting of Chalcedon makes it clear that a deep concern for redemption lay behind the discussions of Christ's divine and human nature. The long struggle to defend and clarify his status as 'true God and true man' aimed at preserving the reality of salvation. Any tampering with either component was understood to undermine the experienced truth of redemption. If Jesus were not truly God, he would not have liberated us to share in the divine life. If he were not truly man, he would not have taken hold of and saved human life in all its fullness.

Nevertheless, the chalcedonian teaching on the two natures seemingly 'represents Christ to us merely as an object of knowledge'. 'Such a view',

<sup>6</sup> *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, 1962), p 130.

Schoonenberg continues, 'detaches Christology from Soteriology. This objection holds for many christological treatises which, as formal elaborations of the *unio hypostatica*, are completely distinct from soteriology'.<sup>7</sup> Too often Christology simply lapsed into a mass of abstract and cliché-burdened teachings about the divine-human constitution of Christ. It obscured the truth that not just 'Saviour' but all the other titles used of Jesus in the New Testament express aspirations for salvation. It was likewise forgotten that behind the christological statements of the early Church we find soteriological themes. Today, however, few would disagree with Kasper's insistence that we need to overcome this separation between the person and work, between what Jesus is in himself (*in se*) and what he is for us (*pro nobis*), between the so-called ontological and a functional approach. How Kasper's ideal is to be realized is another question, to which we can return later.

## II

Thus far we have glanced quickly at certain features of traditional Christology which no longer win acquiescence from modern theologians. Inevitably, this rapid survey does less than justice to some aspects of the past. It is only too easy to caricature our theological forefathers. Granted, however, that some of the criticisms stick, what does the best current writing about Jesus Christ offer as a replacement? Here, as elsewhere, there is little point in exchanging one inadequate situation for another. Let us then examine what fresh lines of approach have emerged in contemporary Christology.

(1) Almost all contemporary thinking about Jesus Christ begins not 'from above' but 'from below'. It takes as its starting-point (a) man, (b) the created cosmos, (c) history, or (d) some combination of all three elements. Its initial questions assume the form: What does it mean to say that a particular man was and is both universal Saviour and God-among-us? How could a man be such and be recognizable as such?

Where this Christology 'from below' chooses (a) for its way in, it may follow Küng's lead and study the experience, ideologies and faiths of human beings in the late twentieth century before going on to consider what the gospels indicate about the earthly existence of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Or a Christology 'from below' may simply go straight to the humanity of Jesus. In both cases some anthropology or doctrine of man will shape the discussion. Catholic theologians may support their approach by pointing to *Gaudium et Spes* and other documents which made Vatican II the first church Council ever to deal explicitly with anthropological issues before going on to strictly theological matters. Protestant theologians may complement or introduce their christological reflections with studies entitled *Man* (Moltmann) or *What is Man?* (Pannenberg). It requires no special enlightenment to read off a common

<sup>7</sup> *The Christ*, p 63.

<sup>8</sup> *Christ sein*, pp 15ff and 109ff. See K. Rahner and W. Thüsing, *Christologie – systematisch und exegetisch* (Freiburg, 1972).

concern on both sides of the denominational divide. Scholars share the conviction that we can find and fashion ways of understanding Jesus, only if we attentively re-evaluate the nature of humanity itself. Christology is not proving oddly different here. An orientation towards man characterizes all the branches of contemporary theology.

Nowadays the idea that man is a changing and developing being surfaces right across the whole spectrum of human studies and theories. The process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead, various marxist ideologies, evolutionary humanism and all kinds of theses that stress the dynamic element in man agree at least in this. Man is a being on the way rather than a finished product, a future-oriented being who ceaselessly moves beyond himself rather than a completed essence fixed once and for all. It is against the background of such dynamic views that we now call Jesus 'true man'.

Christology 'from below' takes place in a world of thought that has been led in new directions by Darwin, Marx, Freud, Durkheim, John Stuart Mill and a host of other pioneers. The human sciences have taught us all to appreciate man in his many-faceted sociological, psychological and political dimensions. Theologians can hardly be expected to forget all this schooling, once they turn to consider Jesus of Nazareth. It would be schizophrenic to inhabit one world as a result of one's seminary training and another world as a result of one's university studies.

Duquoc introduces sociological interpretation and psycho-analytic theories in his two-volume work, *Christologie, essai dogmatique*.<sup>9</sup> Whatever our verdict on the merits of this particular Christology 'from below', it exemplifies the need not only to recognize and affirm in Jesus the fulness of human existence, but also to do that in a world of thought shaped by the human sciences. Once we agree that as a genuine human being Jesus developed psychologically, we cannot then ignore Freud, Jung and Erikson by refusing even to raise the question: What could that development have been like – before and after puberty?

Instead of, or as well as, starting from considerations about (a) human existence, a Christology 'from below' may choose to begin from (b) the whole created *cosmos* or (c) from the *history* of the world. Teilhard de Chardin interpreted the appearance of Christ within his scheme of evolutionary optimism. As the whole of creation moved dynamically forward and upward, Christ marked a unique leap from the lower level of matter towards a higher spiritual unity. History plays a large role in the christologies 'from below' developed by Moltmann and Pannenberg. In taking the crucified Jesus as the origin of all christian theology, Moltmann develops a Christology situated 'after Auschwitz' and within the whole *history of suffering*. Pannenberg endorses the hegelian principle that the truth is in the whole. Universal history becomes the place to look when we seek the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. His resurrection anticipates the end of world history and allows us to find in

<sup>9</sup> Paris, 1968 & 1972.



his destiny the revelation of God. History – whether the history of suffering, universal history or some other version of history – can offer perspectives from which to organize the material taken into one's Christology.

Whichever precise way it runs, a Christology 'from below' will probably safeguard the genuine human existence of Jesus. But will it compel us to push beyond his created humanity and confess, 'My Lord and my God'? What was so special about him when set over against the great prophets, the martyred Socrates or the finest among the ancient rabbis? Classical Christology 'from above' could quickly lay its finger on the distinctive element. The Word of God was incarnate in Jesus the man. Current Christology 'from below', however, may point to the supreme love shown by Jesus, his 'being for others', his sinlessness, or his being 'the unique, *supreme*, case of the total actualization of human reality'.<sup>10</sup> 'Face' has become a favourite word to express the special factor. Küng speaks of 'God with the face of Jesus'.<sup>11</sup> John Robinson chose *The Human Face of God* as the title for his Christology, and Schillebeeckx sums up his conclusions as follows: 'The person of Jesus is the revelation of the eschatological face of all humanity, and in that, the revelation of the trinitarian plenitude of the unique God as absolutely free gift to man'.<sup>12</sup>

Any of these Christologies 'from below' crashes into a perennial problem here. Do they say enough to justify us calling Jesus 'true man and true God'? Mere sinlessness or being 'the man for others' fails to take us that far. Likewise, the supreme divine revelation could take place through the person of Jesus without our needing to agree that in looking on his face we are literally looking on the face of God. The agent of divine revelation cannot automatically be assumed to be identical with God.

Debates between christologies 'from above' and christologies 'from below' can leave us fretting over charges and counter-charges about pastoral responsibility, fidelity to Chalcedon and the rest. Last year – to my discredit – I found myself participating in such polemics. A conservative theologian hit out at Küng: 'He is driving people out of the Church by not stating clearly that Christ was and is God'. I struck back: 'Others have driven people out of the Church by not stating clearly that Christ was and is man'.

Both christologies have their difficulties. On balance, however, most contemporary theologians prefer to attempt a Christology 'from below' and practise Augustine's principle, 'Through the man Christ you move to the God Christ' (Sermon 261, 7).

(2) Unlike theologians of the past, most practitioners of Christology 'from below' centre on the *death and resurrection*. Not all, however. Karl Rahner describes the incarnation as the 'climax' in 'the total history of the human

<sup>10</sup> Rahner, K.: 'On the Theology of the Incarnation', in *Theological Investigations* 4 (London, 1974), p 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Christ sein*, p 437.

<sup>12</sup> *Jezus* (Bloemendaal, 1974), p 545.

race'. In his view, the death and resurrection of Christ, being already 'implied and accepted' at the outset, turn out to be no more than an unfolding of 'the absolute mystery of the incarnation'.<sup>13</sup> Others like John Robinson in effect make evolving creation itself the primary focus. He insists that Jesus was, 'with the rest of us, a genuine product of the evolutionary process'. The stardust at the foundation of the world prepared the way for the coming of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Here one detects, peeping over the bishop's shoulder, the looming figure of Teilhard. Robinson's *Human Face of God* does include some remarks on Jesus's resurrection, but bypasses Calvary to the point that neither 'cross' nor 'crucifixion' appear in the index. The book passes over the fact that the human face of God became disfigured and silent in the agony of a torture-killing.

Where Rahner and Robinson focus – respectively – on the incarnation and creation, others like Küng revert to the ministry of Jesus as the heart of the matter. It is not that Küng neglects to discuss the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But he seems most at home with Jesus's activity as preacher and healer. With deep and serious feeling he analyses the Sermon on the Mount, the new commandment of love, the miracles and other gospel themes which offer the clearest possible picture of Jesus as he actually lived and impressed himself on his hearers.

Given that we have no decisive consensus, does it really matter where a Christology 'from below' finds its central focus? Why not latch on to creation, the incarnation, the ministry or even the final coming of Christ? Such a tolerant pluralism will not work, at least not if we wish to share the central New Testament approach. The first christians knew themselves to be healed and graced as a result of those days when the Lord 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification' (Rom 4, 25). Through faith and baptism they enjoyed the power which flowed from the paschal mystery. They were not 'baptized into' the creation, the ministry of Jesus or his final coming. Not that they devalued these further aspects of their total belief. But they found in the resurrection of their crucified Lord the centre from which they looked forwards and backwards to the other mysteries of faith.

(3) Earlier we noted some difficulties that confront classical Christology in its use of language and philosophical terminology. Any Christology from below would only be bluffing if it pretended to avoid all such terminology and its attendant difficulties. Kasper rightly requires that every Christology must be properly philosophical. A sentence from Schillebeeckx was quoted above: 'The person of Jesus is the revelation of the eschatological face of all humanity'. Obviously we move straight into philosophical discussion, once we ask for the meaning of 'person', 'revelation' and 'humanity'. And what counts as an 'eschatological face'?

In the past, greek philosophy, both directly or more often in a diluted

<sup>13</sup> *Theological Investigations* 4, pp 130, 185; *Theological Dictionary* (New York, 1965), p 402.

<sup>14</sup> *The Human Face of God* (London, 1973), p 148.

form, helped theological musings and at times even held them together. Some theologians may have refused to espouse Aristotle's five causes, doctrines about 'prime matter' and reflections on 'substance and accidents'. Nevertheless, to a degree all shared in the one perennial philosophy deriving ultimately from the Greeks. In the last century or so things have fallen apart, even if much debris from that perennial philosophy still lies around.

A new philosophical pluralism affects Christology no less than any other branch of theology. Schillebeeckx mixes Thomism, existentialism and some elements from linguistic philosophy. Boff draws on Marxism. Hegelian terminology pops up everywhere in Kasper's *Jesus der Christus* to betray his heritage from German idealism.

What forces itself on our attention here is the constant need for philosophical awareness. At times traditional Christology used debased philosophical language which was hideous and empty of meaning. Contemporary Christology can fail in stringency and coherence. Küng's *Christ sein* serves to illustrate this.

Küng rightly draws attention to the rich variety of ways in which piety, literature, theology, art and Church teaching have represented Christ. He asks: 'Which is the true picture of Christ?' He then introduces a give-away comparison: 'Too many different and possibly touched-up photographs of one and the same person can make detective work difficult. And detective work – often one of the most exciting and tense efforts at discovery – is again and again a really considerable part of Christian theology'.<sup>15</sup> He presses on to offer a long discussion entitled 'The Real Christ'.<sup>16</sup> He warns us to be ready for surprises as we join him in the task of detection and look for 'the original Jesus'.<sup>17</sup>

Three things make Küng's method suspect. First, he seems to presuppose that some *one* picture or description will give us the true Jesus. This premise ignores the fact that, in describing persons, indefinitely many true accounts are possible. It would be nonsense to line up all Rembrandt's self-portraits, and after a careful comparison select one as the only true picture of the artist. Are we to scrutinize all the literature about Napoleon on the supposition that we can finally hold up just one biography and declare, 'That's the real Napoleon'? Various portraits, accounts and biographical reflections can all be describing the same person truly. Some say more and others less. We will expect a number of common pictures. But we may not compare and contrast them on the grounds that only one will turn out to be *the* genuine 'photograph' of the person in question.

Secondly, I am not convinced that Küng sufficiently alerts his readers to the irreducible difference between (a) Jesus Christ *in himself* and (b) *any* picture, idea or description Küng and others may have of *him*. We can use

<sup>15</sup> *Christ sein*, pp 120–22; cf p 136.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 137–66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p 152.

the gospels, traditional faith and practice and our own experience to check and correct our description of Jesus. But we may never reduce 'the real Christ' even to our most carefully formed and cherished picture of him.

Thirdly, analogies should not, of course, be expected to indicate all that is involved. Nevertheless, the comparison with detective work risks implying that our study of Jesus and his history can be pressed into the mould of some neutral science of detection. Not only in the case of Jesus but in the study of history generally, the past becomes present only as something conditioned by one's personal attitudes. My set of beliefs must inevitably colour any interpretation of Karl Marx, Oliver Cromwell or Abraham Lincoln. Both Küng's comparison with detective work and other material in *Christ sein* (to which we will return later) can imply a spurious objectivity in historical investigation. It is dangerous to suggest that we can act like detectives – hunting through the available materials and using some special scientific skills until we finally seize the *real* Jesus – faster and, so to speak, more objectively than others. Add, too, the perennial conviction and experience of Christians. *We* do not hunt down Jesus. He is the divine detective tracking us down. We find him because he has first found us.

(4) The fourth complaint we considered in our first section came from traditional Christology's failure to sort out history, mythical imagery and theological belief in the various doctrines about Christ listed in the Apostles' Creed. We can sample some of contemporary Christology's contributions here.

Few readers, I suspect, will be troubled by Küng's remarks on the ascension. But many will be upset by what he maintains about the virginal conception of Jesus. First, the ascension. Küng points out that the story about the risen Lord being taken up into the sky before the eyes of his followers (Acts 1, 9–11) has a double function: to mark the end of the 'ordinary' Easter appearances,<sup>18</sup> and to introduce the Church's mission which will last until the Lord comes again. The ascension was not in fact a separate happening in its own right, but an aspect of the total Easter-event. Luke communicates his message by means of a story.<sup>19</sup> Only fundamentalists will insist that forty days after the resurrection the Lord literally 'took off' for heaven from the Mount of Olives and then two angels came to send the disciples home to Jerusalem.

On the virginal conception, Küng draws attention to the silence of Mark, Paul and John. They proclaim Jesus as Son of God, without ever mentioning the virginal conception. They believe that the appearance of Jesus meant a startlingly new situation for mankind and the world. But accepting this today, Küng suggests, may not be made easier by 'the legend' of a miraculous con-

<sup>18</sup> Luke describes Paul's encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road in 'heavenly', glorious terms. That meeting is quite unlike the meeting with the two disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24, 13–35).

<sup>19</sup> *Christ sein*, pp 342ff.

ception. 'No one', he argues, 'can be obliged to believe in the biological fact of a virginal conception'.<sup>20</sup>

If many Catholics will find this position helpful and liberating, others will angrily part ways with Küng here: 'Having demythologized papal infallibility, he now turns on the Virgin Mary. Where will it all stop?' Ultimately, however, any discussion can settle down and become fruitful, only if we agree to change our fundamental question from 'Where will it all stop?' to 'How do we stop?' How should we go about interpreting the scriptures and traditional belief on this or that point? What principles should we apply to this task of 'faith seeking understanding'?

Any serious reflection on the virginal conception would mean indulging an enormous parenthesis. Interested readers might consult Raymond Brown's valuable treatment.<sup>21</sup> I must, however, confess some misgivings about his language and possible presuppositions. At the end of a careful and reasonable look at material from scripture, traditional teaching and theology, Brown sums up: 'My judgment, in conclusion, is that the totality of the *scientifically controllable* evidence leaves an unresolved problem – a conclusion that should not disappoint since I used the word "problem" in my title'.<sup>22</sup> But do the connotations of the word 'problem' somewhat prejudice matters right from the outset? In handling such doctrines as Christ's virginal conception, resurrection, ascension and presence in the Eucharist, we do not engage in problem-solving but enter the area of mystery. To be sure, a rational investigation of Church tradition and good exegesis of the New Testament texts are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Will 'scientifically controllable' evidence alone ever prove decisive as regards, let us say, Christ's presence in the Eucharist? What would count as evidence here? What kind of science stands behind the words 'scientifically controllable'? Probably I am being unduly fussy. Yet, granted that it would be wrong to take Christ's resurrection as 'a problem' to be discussed on the basis of 'the totality of the scientifically controllable evidence', what allows us to approach the virginal conception in that way?<sup>23</sup>

(5) Recently, theologians have remedied their predecessors' neglect by introducing material from *Jesus's ministry* as essential for any adequate Christology. But, to put it mildly, the ministry of Jesus is no simple, easily grasped phenomenon. Three themes can be singled out for particular attention: (a) the Christology implicit in the ministry, (b) Jesus as the 'principle' for criticizing the Church, and (c) his language as a key to his imagination.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 446ff.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus', in *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York, 1973), pp 21–68.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 66ff.

<sup>23</sup> In *The Easter Jesus* (London, 1973), I argue that 'with respect to resurrection faith, sheer reason and good sense alone fail to prove decisive' (p 137; cf pp 63–74).

(a) For fifty years or more debates have raged about Jesus's sense of his personal identity. Did he know himself to be *and* call himself Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man and suffering servant? If so, what meaning did he attach to those notions in evaluating and revealing himself? At times these debates moved from the historical record, as far as it is recoverable, to the area of principle. *Could Jesus have been* Son of God and Messiah without knowing that clearly, or at least without in some way being aware of that? Is such a separation between the order of *being* (his actual identity) and the order of *knowledge* (his self-awareness) tolerable and plausible?

Bruce Vawter, for instance, blends history and principle to make his point in this debate:

To say that Jesus in his earthly life knew and judged himself to be God's natural son and very God is to assert the *unprovable* and, from the perspective of the New Testament, the improbable. Had Jesus known such a thing he *could hardly* have contained his knowledge, yet the gospels are witness that his most intimate disciples did not recognize his essential relation to God prior to the resurrection.<sup>24</sup>

We can unpack the argument. Even if X (Jesus's knowing and judging 'himself to be God's natural Son and very God') were the case, we could never prove it. Besides, if X were the case, then Y: Jesus 'could hardly' have kept this to himself. But we have no evidence that he ever blurted out this secret. Therefore, X was not the case. The real issue here, of course, touches Vawter's theological and/or philosophical grounds for claiming that X is 'unprovable', and that, if X, then Y 'could hardly' have failed to take place. Such argumentation has obviously shifted out of the field of 'mere' exegesis.

Many exegetes, however, have been content to subject certain texts to repeated and minute scrutiny. Did Jesus really say, 'The Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10, 45)? If these were in fact his words, was he consciously identifying himself as both the Son of Man (Dan 7, 13ff) and the suffering Servant of Isaiah? Did he mean to distinguish himself from the Son of Man in glory? Or take that 'Johannine meteorite fallen on the Synoptic earth', a saying that at first glance suggests the 'high' doctrine of divine Sonship one finds in the fourth gospel: 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mt 11, 27). Does this verse not only come from Jesus himself, but also imply an uniquely exclusive way of being God's Son?

Such discussions move in one way or another around the topic of Christological *titles*, their meaning and their use or non-use by Jesus and his contemporaries. Some scholars like Geza Vermes in *Jesus the Jew* continue to keep the issue of titles alive. His study leads to the conclusion that Jesus's intimates

<sup>24</sup> *This Man Jesus* (New York, 1975), p 149; italics mine.

and even his less committed admirers venerated him as prophet, lord and Son of God. Recently, however, more stress has been laid on the *general attitudes* of Jesus as a key to the way he identified himself. Thus Küng refuses to begin by examining the titles which might 'go back' to the ministry of Jesus. We will only get into a mess if our arguments for Jesus's self-understanding rest on a debatable conclusion about some one title or particular verse. Apologists have made much, for instance, of the interchange between Jesus and the high priest during the trial. Yet they had to establish that Jesus replied to the question 'Are you the Christ, the Son of God' (Mt 26, 64) with a straight 'I am' (Mk 14, 62). His answer did not take a non-committal form, 'The words are yours' (Mt 26, 64). Moreover, apologists needed to prove that somehow the disciples had access to the trial proceedings and faithfully reported the master's self-description on that occasion. Rather than get trapped in such debates, Küng points to the broad and undeniable characteristics of the ministry.<sup>25</sup>

The preaching of Jesus implied a stunning claim to authority. At times he called the mosaic law into question, put himself above that law and spoke in God's place. A willingness to lose his life and act as the servant of all drove him to associate with tax agents, prostitutes and other groups considered undesirable by the 'good' people. To all he expressed the divine pardon and love. By eating with people who were obviously and openly guilty, he received them into God's company. Jesus's claim was clear. Deciding for or against him became tantamount to deciding for or against the divine rule itself.

What the earthly Jesus *implied* about himself unfolded in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection into the full-blown Christology of the post-Easter Church. It was *not* a movement from a low to a high Christology, as if Jesus made only minimal and modest claims about his personal identity which were later maximized into the high Christology which called him Lord, Son of God and – eventually – God. Rather the shift took place between the implicit Christology of the ministry and the explicit Christology of the emerging Church. Many scholars of all denominations make such an implied Christology one of their major conclusions from a study of Jesus's ministry.

(b) Above I spoke of Jesus being used as 'a principle for criticizing the Church'. This phrase masks two related but distinguishable tendencies in contemporary theology. First of all, at every level it has become clear that more and more church leaders, theologians and other christians have recognized that ecclesiastical issues will never be resolved unless we push further back – to our understanding of Christ himself. Christology criticizes and determines ecclesiology, not vice-versa. What we do with the Church will rest, or should rest, on what we think about Jesus.

Both during and after the second Vatican Council, Schillebeeckx and

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<sup>25</sup> *Christ sein*, pp 15off.

Küng devoted their theological expertise to the cause of community reform. With prodigal energy Küng wrote about the Church – her past, present and future. Back in 1965, Kasper published his *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes*, a book which widely influenced thinking on dogmatic formulations. Instinctively all three theologians swung in unison towards the basic christological issues, and in the same year (1974) produced their Jesus-books. The eleven years since the closing of the Council have shown that any efforts to renew the Church will remain spiritually empty, emotionally hollow and doctrinally unsound, unless they draw inspiration and strength from the founder of christianity himself. The council attended to ecclesiastical problems. It produced a range of documents on the Church, ecumenism, the liturgy, relations with other religions, the roles of bishops, priests, religious and laity, missionary activity and the rest. But it considered Christology only secondarily. If Vatican III were to meet in late 1976, its major document would not be ‘The Church in the Modern World’ but some response to the question: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Vawter brought out into the open what many were thinking by insisting on just such a ‘priority of Christ’ over any ecclesiastical issues.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, the historical figure of Jesus can come into play not simply to remind us that ecclesiastical doctrines must be subordinated to christological beliefs, but to provide grounds for criticizing – at times intensely – current Church life. Käsemann, in his *Jesus Means Freedom* and elsewhere, has underlined that unique freedom which Jesus both gave and demanded. And yet ‘freedom’, Käsemann reflects, is one of the last words Church leaders wish to hear, let alone use. Boff (*Jésus-Christ Libérateur*) takes the standpoint of Latin American theology to maintain that every theology of liberation must establish Jesus as a critical principle *against* the Church. Holl (*Jesus in Bad Company*) sees the challenge of Jesus’s ministry in this question: Will society and the Church come to grips with their forgotten minorities and worry less about the ‘good’, average people?

Küng presses anachronistic language into service and finishes up with a Jesus whose conflicts with jewish leaders – dare one say it? – prefigure the author’s own battles with church authorities. *Christ sein* repeatedly speaks of the ‘jewish hierarchy’ whose zeal for the ‘prevailing dogmas’ and ‘infallible propositions’ brings Jesus down. The political charges before Pilate conceal the ‘envy of the hierarchy and its court-theologians’. An ‘inquisitorial zeal for the law’ prevents the hierarchy from letting ‘this radical’ go. He is provoking proper authority, represents ‘a rebellion against the hierarchy and its theology’ and would only cause ‘confusion and insecurity’.<sup>27</sup>

How should we assess the current efforts to take the story of Jesus as a basis for criticizing the christian Church? On the one hand, such approaches can

<sup>26</sup> *This Man Jesus*, pp 13ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Christ sein*, pp 325ff.