

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND MARY

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THE STARTING point is to have a framework of psychological reference.¹ Most writings on the subject focus narrowly on dynamic psychology, that is to say, the theories of Freud, Jung, Adler and their successors. Important as this approach is, it is insufficient. The psychological framework needs to be wide enough to acknowledge all the significant points of view which, at the present moment, are the following. The human personality is seen to be the product of two prominent sources: firstly, the biological, as expressed in the individual's genetic and constitutional inheritance, and his make-up as it unfolds over several decades; secondly, as it is influenced and shaped continuously by the environment in which the family plays a vital part. This brief summary comprehends three main psychological theoretical schools, namely the dynamic, cognitive and behaviouristic schools of psychology.

The dynamic school was initiated by the genius of Freud. It envisaged the personality developing primarily through the unfolding of instinctual forces such as aggression and sexuality. Dynamic psychology has been modified by Jung, Adler and many others; but it has left a permanent and powerful mark by emphasizing the vital importance of the early years of life in the shaping of the personality, the importance of feelings, emotions and instincts, of the unconscious and of the development of powerful interpersonal bonds between child and parent. These patterns are never defaced in human life. They are to be seen repeatedly in the behaviour characteristics of all intimate relationships; so that a glimpse of the formative past is always possible by examining the present, particularly in its prominent and pervasive characteristics, either in attitude or behaviour.

This dynamic approach was complemented by the research of Pavlov, Watson, Skinner, Eysenck and others, who considered the human personality in terms of its intrinsic biological propensities,

¹ My methodology is implicit in a number of essays which will appear in my forthcoming book, *Cycles of Affirmation* (Darton, Longman and Todd).

particularly the neuro-physiological ones. The organism is now seen to unfold, not only in the Freudian sense of fixed instinctual phases, but also as capable of developing according to evolutionary dictates, and through its rich ability to learn and form a whole range of powerful bonds. In learning-theory these are known as the stimulus-response bonds. Once again, however, this leaves us with the adult personality growing through the result of several patterns of characteristics: some are intrinsic to its constitutional make-up, but others are learned in its interaction with the environment, particularly the parents. Thus we find ourselves able to catch a glimpse of formative psychological influences by examining adult behaviour.

To these dynamic and learning-theory schools we must add that of Piaget, who has described the cognitive growth of the individual in terms of a wide variety of psychological characteristics of perception, acquisition of intellectual characteristics, language, thought and moral growth. Cognitive psychology complements the other two schools. All three recognize, of course, that the culture in which the individual grows, substantially modifies the unchanging biological and psychological human traits.

What emerges from all this? We believe that, by looking at the fact that the gospels supply about Christ, however defective and distorted these may be through the interpretation of the observer, nevertheless we are able to catch a glimpse, however restricted, of the adult behaviour of a person whose impact was so powerful that a number of his immediate followers were ultimately impelled to interpret it as divine. In so far as it is possible to identify correctly the psychological functions of this behaviour, and relying on the principles enunciated, that these characteristics were influenced by the learning which took place in the encounter between Christ and his parents, we can draw some inferences about the personality of his parents, in our case principally of Mary.

You may consider that this area of inference is virtually a minefield and that the enquirer is likely to trip at any moment and be blown to smithereens while engaged on this particular analysis. You may be right. Personally I consider that the current changes in theology in understanding Christ's humanity will be inadequate unless the processes I have outlined are taken seriously by psychologists and theologians. I have the great advantage that I have no reputation to lose and can, therefore, take on this task.

Thus, all I have to say will be open to criticism from theological scholars, who may challenge my interpretation of scriptural passages, and from psychologists, who may take another view of the importance

attached to various psychological features of Christ's personality. I concede these possibilities. As far as the theologians are concerned, I acknowledge that I am seeking fundamental and enduring features in the life of Christ which must have been so powerful as to influence their recording. These features can be perceived despite the inevitable distortion of the original events. I also acknowledge that my own interpretation is subject to all the biases inherent in me as an individual who sees what he wants to see. With all these disclaimers, perhaps now I can state some of the features that I consider relevant in the family-structure of Christ, seen through the documentation of his childhood and adult life.

Facts for consideration

Perhaps the first point to be made is to specify the factors that I would like to consider in the family structure. I would like to deal with the virgin birth, and thus the question of the origin of Christ's life; Christ's relationship with his parents and his separation from them, with the ultimate awareness and orientation towards his heavenly Father; the particular kind of impact which Mary had on him as a woman and as his mother, with particular reference to his capacity to form loving relationships with others and a sexual identity. Since his capacity to love must have been clear to everyone, this is the feature I would like to examine most closely.

Origin of life of Jesus Christ

'When the appointed time came, God sent his Son born of a woman'.² In the accounts of Matthew and Luke, the New Testament refers to Christ's virginal birth. The implications of this are that as far as his genetic make-up is concerned there was no male contribution. Thus, the impact made by Joseph would be simply that of an adopted parent or stepfather, although his presence from the time of conception means that his awareness of the child, and therefore the child's awareness of him, was far more complete than if he had arrived on the scene at a later stage. As far as Mary is concerned, the question facing us is whether Christ originated in one of her ova which became fertilized by the power of the Holy Spirit, or whether a fertilized ovum developed in her uterus. The doctrine of the virginal conception in the roman catholic tradition is compatible with either view; but we must conclude that one of her ova was involved, so that her genetic contribution must be

² Gal 4, 4.

taken into account. Furthermore, in Luke's gospel, the comparison between Mary's conception and that of Elizabeth would indicate that physiologically a comparison is made in this sense, that reference to old age suggests cessation of ovulation.

Even this situation leaves us, humanly speaking, with a mystery, the fertilization of Mary's ovum in the absence of a male sperm. The mystery so far cannot be penetrated in that we have no knowledge, at the human level, of any process of parthenogenesis.

Family structure

The biological mystery of the presence of the male Y chromosome in Christ's body in the absence of a male donor is intensified by the further controversy whether the brothers and sisters referred to in the gospels were actual brothers and sisters or more distant relatives. It makes a lot of difference in the personality whether he is an only child or not. It is assumed in this paper that the traditional view that Christ had no actual brothers or sisters is the correct one.

Under these circumstances, following the traditional views of a virgin birth and an only-child family, we have also to come to the psychological conclusion that, by ordinary standards, this was in one sense an abnormal background for Christ's development. In this paper I will not consider the family structure on the hypothesis that the doctrine of the virgin birth needs modification, although any detailed enquiry would also have to pay attention to this.

Influence of parents

In addition to these traditionally held beliefs, what other information do we have regarding Christ's early years? We read that his parents were forced to flee to Egypt, which must have been quite unsettling, as all those know who have experienced the impact of being refugees. However, after Herod's death he returned with his parents to Nazareth and knew the life of the son of a carpenter. We know next to nothing about Joseph, but about Mary the gospels give us some details.

We read in St Luke that, when the shepherds told Mary the news of the angels, she responded by treasuring and pondering on this information. Her response to the annunciation is also a quiet one, accepting unconditionally the events which she clearly did not grasp fully. These observations, coupled with the remaining few in the gospels, suggest a quiet, introvert person given to emphasizing the inner world, as against her cousin Elizabeth, who is given to loud cries and has a more extrovert temperament. This awareness of the inner world, of the

introvert, also suggests a deeper sensitivity and awareness of feelings and emotions, consistent with the journey 'in haste' to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was bearing a child in her old age. She would have seized the emotional significance of this event for her cousin and wanted to share the joy with her. This inner awareness and concern for others is seen again in the wedding of Cana, where she is sensitive to the discomfort of her hosts when their wine runs out.

Mary's capacity for introverted experience may well have contributed to Christ's undoubted wide-ranging capacity to feel and respond, with emotional accuracy, to the innumerable events in his public ministry which called forth such delicate sensitivity. Clearly, however, Christ's deep range of feelings and emotions were not part of a totally introvert personality, for the image we are given is that of a person who engaged in a great deal of extrovert activity, whilst retaining the proclivity for inner sensations and experiences which he preferred. There was no desire for ostentation, and certainly in his teaching he repeatedly emphasized the inner world.

Christ's capacity to love

The central fact about Christ's life which needs understanding is how the sum total of his views, attitudes, actual behaviour, led many of his contemporaries, but particularly the apostles, to see in him the presence of the divine. It is my belief that there can be one explanation and one only, which is found in the first epistle of St John, namely that God is love. What was seen, heard, felt and experienced, convinced enough of his audience that this man was the consummate expression of love. We can say that any understanding of Christ's personality must start and finish with an understanding of the meaning of love. Here I believe that psychology has the most complete range of means to understand the meaning of love, and there can be no theological progress of any substance until this dimension is explored fully. To do full justice to the subject a book is necessary. Here I can only draw attention in outline to the psychological features of love which have to be present if love is to exist. These features can be summed up in one word — availability.

There are two vital components of availability. The first is the possession of ourselves; we cannot give to others that which we do not possess. The second is the ability to receive. We cannot love unless we give ourselves and have the capacity to receive others in a reciprocal exchange. How does this process of loving ourselves and our neighbour develop?

Identity and affirmation

Essentially it is a psychological process made up of three elements. The first is the process of growth, which is a combination of physical, intellectual and social components. Parents play a vital part in facilitating the process, by providing the raw material of food and shelter; and far more importantly, through their presence they offer the possibility of forming relationship-bonds. The second is that within these relationships the growing persons learn how to recognize and accept themselves, a process for which I have used the word 'affirmation'. The core of christianity is vitally concerned with this process, which ultimately determines man's image of himself as good or bad and, therefore, his need for salvation. It would take me a long way from our subject to argue what I consider to be the need for a fundamental reformulation of christianity's view of man as a fallen being; but I want here to assert that the essential core of the psychology of christology must be the understanding of the growth of Christ in such a manner that he had a total affirmative self-acceptance. There was no part of his personality which was not available to him, and accepted as good and available to be given to others; and, reciprocally, there was no part of his humanity or the humanity in others that could not be accepted by him and transformed through love. The essence of Christ is his total affirmative acceptance of himself and his inability to reject one iota of another person who really needed to be reached.

If my contention is correct, then the part that Mary played in such affirmative growth is fundamental and all-pervasive; a dogma such as the immaculate conception is a necessary postulate, not in giving her full comprehension of Christ's identity, but in ensuring that her presence did nothing which inhibited Christ's growth.

Man has frequently come to the conclusion that goodness has to be reached ultimately by the avoidance of badness; in Christ, goodness was reached by the affirmative acceptance of his total being which had no components of badness, and Mary was a principal element in this unique development.

This affirmative growth of identity also required total separation from his parents, so that the relationship with his heavenly Father could be established. Psychologically this is a fascinating and arresting process. Christ had to acknowledge lovingly his relationship with his earthly parents, and yet shift the pivot of his internal world to the key relationship in his life, namely that between himself and the Father, without finding all this utterly confusing and leading to an identity-crisis, or having to repudiate totally his earthly parents.

Here again there is room for a full study about Jesus Christ, not as the Son of God, but as a man who was so dissatisfied with the reality of his life that he had to create the delusion or phantasy of a special relationship between himself and Yahweh to compensate for his personal dissatisfaction. There is no doubt that here is fertile ground for fundamental attacks on christian belief.

Yet the orthodox view would be that Christ was able to sustain a loving and harmonious relationship with his earthly parents, and yet grasp and fully respond to the more fundamental relationship with God the Father which dictated the whole motivation of his life.

Affirmation and autonomy

Those who see in the infancy and childhood narratives of Matthew and Luke just a mixture of the literary genre of Midrash and Haggadah, will be sceptical about any undue emphasis on the historical accuracy of the details. Yet the next episode is psychologically crucial for my thesis, that Christ was able to establish clearly his identity in relationship to his earthly family and with the heavenly Father. This episode is the Finding in the Temple, and is a psychological gem.³

In my view, by the age of twelve, Christ was able to separate himself from his parents and have an independent inner existence, to establish a clear relationship with his heavenly Father and still remain in harmonious contact with Mary and Joseph. Mary, in turn, had to feel this undoubted inner separation of her son, accept his judgment, and his orientation of his inner world in a direction she did not comprehend, and still trust him unconditionally.

Affirmation and trust

This trust on the part of Mary in a relationship with her son which had to be comprehended step by step, is one of the most revealing features in the process of affirmation. We have another glimpse of it at the wedding of Cana, when Mary places implicit trust in his efficacious intervention despite his apparent rebuff. Mary's trust also contrasts with the lack of it in his relatives, who thought he was out of his mind.

This trust has, I believe, two implications in the growth of his personality. First of all, through her trust, Mary gave Christ the means of trusting himself and, therefore, the means of self-acceptance. John's gospel puts the words of supreme self-affirmation in his mouth. Psychologically it does not matter whether Christ used these words or

³ Lk 2, 46-52.

not. But unless the evangelist was totally mistaken in his understanding, he was portraying a feature which must have impressed those who saw Christ in action.

When Jesus spoke to the people again, he said: I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life. At this the pharisees said to him: You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid. Jesus replied: It is true that I am testifying on my own behalf, but my testimony is still valid, because I know where I came from and where I am going.⁴

These words summarize the complete personal affirmation and self-acceptance which gave Christ his supreme confidence and his authority.

But trust is also required to get close to other human beings, and through this closeness reach them and be reached in the depth of being which is mutually exchanged. Psychiatrists have the widest experience of the human personality in all the situations in which closeness with others breaks down. The isolated, aloof, schizoid man or woman cannot get close to others and is a recluse. The anxious person cannot get close to others because intimacy is threatening, either in generating anxiety and tension in physical proximity, or the fear of being taken over by the other and of being overwhelmed. The insecure person cannot get close to others because he does not feel worthy of their attention, does not feel loveable enough and so keeps his distance. The unsure, aggressive, paranoid individual either fails to get close to others because of the fear that his anger will destroy the other person; or his sensitivity, when hurt and rejected, does not allow the continuity of a relationship.

Now the gospels portray Christ as capable of friendship, love, intimacy, and as expressing in all this the key of love in relationship, namely continuity. He did not have to repudiate his love for any of the reasons mentioned and, what is more, he discovered within the depths of his personality the necessity of providing continuity of relationship with all life until the end of time, in the mystery of the Eucharist.

Affirmation and sexual identity

This complete affirmation of self leads us to the question of his sexual identity, and the role of Mary in this aspect of his development. Lying in one of my drawers is an extensive paper on Christ's sexual identity which has never been offered for publication: an interesting commentary on my own inner world. In it I have examined the various aspects of

⁴ Jn 8, 12-14.

human sexuality with reference to Christ. These involve first the dimension of maleness and femaleness or gender: that is to say, the capacity of the individual to behave in accordance with the expectations of their environment in a male or female manner; secondly, the level and direction of the sexual drive: that is to say, the intensity of libido and the personal or impersonal features which are sexually attractive: thirdly, the capacity to express in a sexual encounter the characteristics of love which imply a relationship of continuity, reliability and predictability, within which the physical characteristics of sex are blended with affection and love: a situation normally characterized by marriage.

The family structure is a powerful influence in all these features, but it is not, of course, the only contribution, since the physical make-up of the individual contributes to the level of the sexual drive and may even influence the object of attraction, as, for example, in the case of homosexuality.

What role does a mother play in this process of sexual growth? Freud made the triangular situation of father, mother and child the corner-stone of human development through the Oedipus-complex. I believe that such a complex may exist, but without having Freud's universal significance. On the other hand, some other features are of unusual significance as far as the boy is concerned. Sexual identity is learned by the boy through having the features associated with manhood from the father and those of womanhood from the mother. The physical make-up makes the male identification easier than the response to the woman, but both learning experiences depend on the attitude of the parents. Does the father provide an effective model of manhood? Does the mother provide an effective model of womanhood? Is the boy encouraged to feel positively about his male role and sex in general? Is closeness and exchange of affection and love seen in action in the life of the parents, or discouraged by example or through fear in the relationship between child and parents?

Ultimately, normal sexual development requires an affirmative acceptance of the bodily configuration and sensations in harmony with the male role, and comfortable ease in intimacy with the opposite sex which is reflected in marriage.

Now Christ did not marry; and each of the following possibilities have to be examined: that he did not feel at home with the male role, lacked sexual drive, could not tolerate intimacy with women, was attracted sexually by men. Each of these points needs careful examination, which I have given elsewhere. What concerns us is the

role of Mary in the formation of Christ's attitude to sex, her capacity to give Christ the sense of comfortable intimacy with women, her ability to facilitate the capacity to give and to receive affection.

Is it not possible, for example, that Mary's virginity made her shy about sexual matters and she conveyed this to Christ? We have, of course, no means of knowing what exactly happened at home; but if we judge by Christ's later behaviour in adult life, there are clues which suggest he was far from being shy in confronting bodily or sexual issues. He could refer to uncleanness of the gastro-intestinal tract and contrast it with human intention in the heart; he could tolerate the woman who was losing blood to touch him, and references to his mother's womb and breasts when expressed by the woman in the crowd. And he clearly must have known sexual attraction extremely well when he condemns the lustful look.

Dynamic psychology might interpret this as evidence for reactive formation, which is a technical term suggesting that we control an unacceptable impulse by exaggerating the opposite tendency: in Christ's case the danger of sexuality and women. But there is not the slightest evidence for this, since clearly he had a relaxed and close relationship with women of all walks of life.

Still, it is possible that he had a positive approach to women, but could not tolerate physical closeness. Yet the episodes of the woman at the well and the woman taken in adultery do not suggest any undue fear of physical closeness, nor is there fear of being actually physically touched, as the anointing of his body with the precious ointment would suggest.

Finally, it is possible that with all this he may have had little or no sexual drive or have been a homosexual, a point of view that has indeed been put forward. As far as homosexuality is concerned, we have no evidence whatsoever that Christ exemplified one of the current psychological notions, that homosexuality in a male is associated with the presence of a powerful, overwhelming and possessive mother with whom the boy identifies in preference to his father. On the contrary, the evidence is that Christ emancipated himself from any undue influences very early on in his development.

On the other hand we have positive evidence that he could have close relationships of physical proximity and emotional intimacy with women, in which he could express care, concern and deep love. If anything, this suggests that the image of womanhood which Mary offered to Christ did not lead either to fear, rejection or antagonism towards woman. There is no evidence in the scriptures that christianity's own

marked confusion towards sexuality and woman stems from anything to be found in Christ or in Mary.

The reasons for not marrying would need detailed consideration, but it is worth noting that, if the mark of love is total availability, then Christ could not have started his life by being limited to the exclusive relationship of one man and one woman, which is my psychological explanation of the virgin birth, nor could his love be restricted by the exclusiveness to one woman in marriage. He noted that in heaven there was to be no taking and giving in marriage, and his mission was to initiate the kingdom of heaven.

A summary of the relationship between Christ and Mary

The kingdom of God is one dominated by relationships and by love. The Trinity is a series of relationships and love is the uniting force. Mary had to provide a relationship and lay the human foundations for the nurturing of love by eventually accepting the work of God.

She is there at the beginning, giving her trusting consent when she finds herself pregnant, and she is there several decades later at the foot of the cross, unconditionally accepting her son on the cross. His encounter with his heavenly Father had made it plain that there was a role which he had to perform which was more encompassing than that required in his relationship with her.

He was still speaking to the crowds when his mother and his brothers appeared; they were standing outside and were anxious to have a word with him. But to the man who told him this Jesus replied: Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand towards his disciples he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother.⁵

There was no mistaking the clarity of his identity nor his deep love and concern for her, so that when he is on the cross facing the moment of moments in his life, he has the energy and concern to place her in the care of his beloved friend. Both at the beginning and at the end of life there is a unity of mutual acceptance and purpose, which suggests that she played a crucial role in the period between. This role can only be seen in the nurturing and shaping of the ultimate source of all love, and everything that we know psychologically demands that Mary contributed an indispensable part.

⁵ Mt 12, 46-50.