

# *A Graspable Jesus* Displaces God

by: Douglas Lockhart

The German theologian Rudolf Bultmann suggested between the wars that his fellow theologians had their heads stuck in the sand; they were, he said, ignoring the fact that Christianity was embedded in the language and thought-forms of first century mythology. Drawing on existential philosophy, Bultmann reinterpreted New Testament events in the hope of relieving the tension between Jesus' supposed divinity and his historical existence. There was an immediate uproar, but the challenge could not be ignored; Bultmann had opened Pandora's box, and whether orthodox theologians liked it or not, the contents of that box were going to change for ever the character of 20th century Christian scholarship.

There was of course nothing particularly new in trying to interpret the mythological elements known to exist in the New Testament. What was new about Bultmann's approach was that he linked the problem of interpreting myth to the Gospel's proclamation of Jesus as divine saviour, and in doing so seemed to suggest that this proclamation was in itself mythological. The New Testament presented its case for human salvation through classical antiquity's mythical world view, and as such espoused a belief in a three-tier universe long-since shown to be false. The idea of Heaven (the abode of God and his angels) being somewhere above our heads, and hell (the abode of the devil and his angels) being beneath our feet, was no longer tenable. And the equally bizarre notion of the Earth being the place where these opposing forces battled it out for supremacy was, by Bultmann's time, a view already abandoned by many thinking men and women.

Obvious as all of this was, however, the intractable problem of Jesus' identity and the purpose of his life remained unsolved, and Bultmann, although in favour of an expanded mythological view, stolidly refused to take up the kind of liberalism which used secular reasoning alone in the reconstruction of Jesus' image. It was one thing to demythologise the New Testament, it was quite another to entirely dissolve it in an intellectual acid bath. Whatever it was the gospel message was struggling to say, it was centred on Jesus Christ, and that was how it should remain. It was this "centring activity" that was important, not the doctrinal manner of the centring. The task facing scholars was to determine how to recentre Jesus in a demythologised text.

The crux of the matter was how to reimagine the gospel story so that its transcendent quality remained intact. Bultmann realised that only an existential approach to the gospels could do this, for it was through life and living that we realised our inherent inadequacy and felt the need to seek a more substantial relationship with God. The symbols necessary for the forming of this relationship were in the New Testament, but they were embedded in 1st century events which no longer properly reflected their inner dynamic. Bultmann could see no point in foisting this catalogue of events on the modern world. The idea that Jesus' death on the cross saved us from Satan's power, his resurrection defeat death, or his return at some unspecified date inaugurate God's Kingdom on earth were, he argued, obsolete representations. The message was real enough, potent enough; it was the story line that was getting in the way. When all was said and done, the meaning of the Gospels was not that the story was true, or real, or necessary, but that "crucifixion" and "resurrection" were true, real and unavoidable. Believing in Jesus was not about believing in the Jesus story as it had come down to us, it was about undergoing crucifixion and resurrection in our own lives. In this sense, the cross and the resurrection were ever-present realities, not past events requiring continual imaginative renewal. We were, each and every one of us, walking, talking, living gospels in our own right.

Bultmann's argument was that the disciples must have glimpsed the awe-inspiring meaning of Jesus' life as they participated in the events of that life, but that they unlikely to have perceived Jesus in anything like the fashion adopted by the later Roman Church. So the question was not could we accept the crucifixion and the resurrection as God's preordained plan for our salvation, but could we, like Jesus, surrender ourselves to the transcendent reality to the same extent? It was not a matter of "belief", it was a matter of "trust". Belief in propitiatory sacrifices was a prescription already understood by Judaism to be an inadequate pagan response to life's mysteries.

Followers of Paul's "Christ" in the late 1st, and early 2nd, centuries had held views of Jesus quite at odds with those held in the 4th and 5th. This could not be put down to spiritual immaturity, but to a more realistic grasp of early 1st century claims. Diverse accounts of Jesus' nature and mystical talents had abounded in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but those derived from the Apostles had not advocated viewing Jesus as anything other than an ordinary man - albeit a man chosen by God to be Israel's Messiah. Gnostic accounts went much further, and it was the blending of these differing views with Paul's little-understood Christology that had resulted in an existentially stranded Jesus.

The emerging orthodoxy in Rome had encountered, according to Bultmann "a mode of thought and speech which objectivises the unworldly so as to make it worldly."<sup>1</sup> As a result, Jesus had been elevated by degree, and then by decree, to the level of a divine being. An implosion of symbols had

taken place which seemed to consolidate the idea of his having been a divine being, and the rest was history. The myth was up and running, and when the torture and the killing started, the possibility of dismantling that myth became difficult to imagine.

### Reading Between the Lines

The principal difference between the story of the crucifixion and that of the resurrection was, Bultmann argued, one of differentiating between the historical and the mystical. The resurrection was not an event in history; it was a mystical event lodged beyond time and space. In this sense the Gospel story was continually transcending itself. Bultmann was critical of liberal theologians for missing the point; but he was equally critical of those who returned to "a naive acceptance of the kerygma" because "such an uncritical resuscitation of New Testament mythology [had probably made] the Gospel message unintelligible to the modern world."<sup>2</sup> Well ahead of his fellow theologians he was able to say:

We cannot dismiss the critical labours of earlier generations without further ado. We must take them up and put them to constructive use. Failure to do so will mean that the old battles between orthodoxy and liberalism will have to be fought out all over again, that is assuming that there will be any Church or any theologians to fight them at all!<sup>3</sup>

In their revised edition of *Contemporary Catholic Theology*, John and Denise Carmody mention a troubled meeting in Rome between Vatican officials and bishops of the Dutch church in 1980. The question of Jesus' divinity was on the table, and these bishops, on behalf of their questioning and divided congregations, argued that a distinction had to be made between biblical scholarship and the development of Christian dogma. This distinction had all too often been ignored, the difference between objective assertions and assertions of faith not receiving proper attention. The times demanded a much more sophisticated approach to the question of Jesus' divinity, and Rome was not taking the lead. Jesus had reflected the love of God in a very special way, and committing one's life to Jesus meant being open to the kind of love he had expressed. In this sense, salvation was "healing", it was becoming "whole"; it was not some kind of magical rite enacted by Jesus in the 1st century.<sup>4</sup>

The Carmody's note that personal, passionate faith tends towards the symbolic, the mythological and the poetic - the language is *warm*. Jesus is invested with the treasures of one's life because he was such a revelation, such a realisation of *the way things ought to be*. Closely connected to God, he

is identified as being *more than ordinarily human*.<sup>5</sup> This kind of language reveals the transition point in people's reaction to Jesus - a reaction which eventually toppled over into intellectual and contemplative confusion about his identity. On the basis of such a view, the ecumenical Council of Nicaea debated Jesus' relationship to the Father in the 4th century, and after much speculation (and arm-twisting) resolved that he was coequal, or consubstantial, with the Father. Arius, a priest from Antioch, disagreed, and for many years a heated theological argument raged around this all-important question.

Jesus' transition from man to God can be further explained in terms of emotional identification: Jesus' sufferings sometimes took on a mystic charge capable of carrying the worshipper into ecstatic states. So intense could such states become that contemplation on Jesus sometimes edged over into unconscious worship of Jesus. Slowly, but inexorably, the Jesus of history was transformed into a species of divine being, his every move or statement seen as indicative of his divine status.

The idea of Jesus being divine was consolidated by the Council of Nicaea in 325, but this leaves unanswered the question of what was believed about Jesus by Christians prior to that date. Was the Nicaean decision merely the rubber stamping of something generally accepted throughout the scattered churches of the West, and the East? The answer is No. The debate with Arius (and others) reveals that the question of Jesus' relationship to God was uppermost in people's minds. It was not a matter of the New Testament writers failing to understand who Jesus was, and the Patristic Fathers completing God's revelation (a truly spurious line of reasoning); it was a matter of the Apostle's original vision being changed into something other than what they had intended. In crisis over this question, the ruling faction in Rome forced its particular view of Jesus on everyone.

The theologian Bernard Lonergan may argue that because Arius asked where the line should be drawn between Jesus and God the Council of Nicaea had no choice but to move the argument about Jesus' identity beyond the horizon of scripture,<sup>6</sup> but that is to beg the question. Going beyond the warrants of Scripture cannot be legitimised on the grounds of necessity; truth is not forged out of what is expedient, it is forged out of honesty. Arius' challenge was not met by such a move; it was merely postponed.

The Council of Nicaea stipulated that Jesus was a direct, consubstantial expression of God, and that, as far as they were concerned, was the end of the matter. But it was not the end of the matter; it was the beginning of the terror. Frances Young describes the situation as rife with "inadequate arguments and distorted exegesis of scripture".<sup>7</sup> That is a telling summation. There would be no shortage of arguments for and against the idea of Jesus being literally God, but when all was said and done it would be the sword, and not words, that would rule the day.

## From Iconoclast to Icon

In *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk says that he is more interested in what Jesus thought about God's domain than in what Peter the fisherman and Paul the tentmaker thought about Jesus. He then interprets original sin as "the infinite capacity of human beings to deceive themselves", and tells us that the whole problem of the New Testament stems from the fact that the disciples turned Jesus the iconoclast into an icon. Unable to hold Jesus' vision in mind, they swapped the vision for the visionary and side-stepped the necessity to be visionaries in their own right.<sup>8</sup> That sums up the situation rather well: the Jesus of Nicaean conclusion is literally, figuratively and metaphorically, a very different being from the Jesus who inhabits the pages of the New Testament.

It was Arius who asked the all-important question: Was there a time when Jesus as the divine Word did not exist? Either Jesus had always existed, or he had been created like everything and everyone else. If uncreated, he was coequal with God; if created, he was separate from God. If separate from God, then undoubtedly a man like any other man in spite of his divine calling. But if coequal with God, then a mystery of unimaginable proportions in that he was both flesh and blood and eternal spirit. Arius lost the argument. From the Council of Chalcedon in 451 came the classical definition: as the Logos, Jesus had a divine nature *and* a human nature, two natures hypostatically united in one person. The problem had been solved. Jesus and God were one and the same being.

As a result of Nicean sophistry millions of human beings were killed in the ensuing centuries. Excusing its acts of mass butchery as due to *the tenor of the times*, the Church ignored the fact that its claim to possess a superior spirituality through Jesus Christ *as* God annulled this kind of excuse. For how can one claim natural ignorance in one breath, and God-inspired insight in the next? It can't be done. Either one is intolerably naive, or telling lies. As a lying Church is a contradiction in terms, one can only assume that an intolerable naivety has suffused the Church for the last fifteen hundred years.

Karl Rahner's demands in his theological investigations that we not throw away fifteen hundred years of classical Christology undermines Bultmann's and Funk's attempt to update Christianity's perception of Jesus. Try as he might to embrace a more realistic approach to the question of Jesus' nature and identity, Rahner forever steps backwards as he seems to step forward. All is impasse and stalemate. The shadow of Nicea looms large. Jesus is "unsuperedable", and as such is as much a paragon of the theological imagination as ever.<sup>9</sup>

The radical theologian and philosopher Don Cupitt is more courageous. He argues that the whole idea of incarnation does not belong to the essence of Christianity, but only to a period of Church history.<sup>10</sup> Cupitt

describes the worship of Jesus as a 4th century phenomenon, so making Christocentric piety and theology no more than a reaction to Arius' claim that Jesus was just a man; albeit a man visited upon by God. With the Nicæan formula in place, the "new orthodoxy" prayed to Jesus *as if* he were God. In that moment God was usurped by a human being and, as a consequence, anthropomorphised into the image of an elderly man lounging on a cloud. The darkness of God had been illuminated by the supernatural light of the "Son", the unportrayable nature of God changed into a graspable image.

### The Language of Myth

Christianity is christocentric, not theocentric; it has sold out to the graspable image. In this sense the present orthodoxy with its almost alarming conservatism is no more than a 4th century faction that has gained the upper hand. Triumphant over Arius, this faction systematically stamped out all opposition and helped set up a system that looped back into itself for verification. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit had planned the faction's triumph since before the foundation of the world. Rejection of the faction's view of Jesus was to question the divine will. Even if you were outside of the circle, you were part of the circle, for the whole universe hinged on the faction's point of view. Truth was what the faction nominated to be the truth, and this truth, by its very nature, confirmed the faction's right to make such a claim. The only problem with all of this was that the faction's claim to truth and authority lay in a naive interpretation of the New Testament myth.

When dealing with Bultmann's conception of myth, Friedrich Schumann says:

Thus the New Testament - including it would seem Jesus himself - seizes upon a language which may be called that of 'mythology' as the best available means of expressing its subject-matter. It is true that in a certain sense this language presents 'unworldly' truths objectively, as if they were 'worldly' realities. But it must not be supposed that in adopting this imagery the New Testament does so naively, unconsciously or uncritically."<sup>11</sup>

Schumann's realisation was that there is nothing primitive in the New Testament's use of mythological language. Myth is not to be equated with fairy tales - it is a "higher order" language. The Gospel's best convey their message of transcendence in this language, and the symbols of transcendence within the Gospels should not be forced to function as literal events.

This presents us with a problem, for if the symbols of transcendence used are dependent on the language of myth, then how can we demythologise the text without undermining its transcendent meaning? The answer is deceptively simple: by remembering at all times that the writers are *objectivising an unworldly reality and making it worldly*.<sup>12</sup>

In the final analysis, myth alone can act as an adequate container for truth, for as Schumann admits, theological exegesis and exposition can only result in a technical understanding of myth's role in the New Testament; it cannot result in an absolute, universal grasping of what such a myth means in its entirety.<sup>13</sup> The day of the graspable image has gone for ever - we are not being asked to accept as literally true a list of miraculous events, we are being asked to penetrate beneath the surface of these events.

### References:

- 1) Schumann, Friedrich, K., *Kerygma and Myth*, S.P.C.K, London, 1960,p. 187.
- 2) Ibid, p. 12.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Carmody, John and Denise, *Contemporary Catholic Theology*, Harper & Row, Sanfrancisco, 1985, p. 43.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ibid, p. 44.
- 7) Young, Francis, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, an essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick, C.S.M Press, Ltd., 1977, p. 23.
- 8) Funk, Robert, *Honest to Jesus*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996,p. 21.
- 9) Rahner SJ, Karl, *Theological Investigation*, Vol 17, Darton, Longmand & Todd, London, 1981, p. 37.
- 10) Cupitt, Don, *The Christ of Christendom*, an essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick, C.S.M. Press, Ltd., 1977, p. 134.
- 11) Schumann, Friedrich K., *Kerygma and Myth*, (as above) p. 188.
- 12) Ibid, p. 190.
- 13) Ibid.