

The Human Jesus (2)

by: Douglas Lockhart

The attempt to partially defuse the mythology of Jesus being literally God, the intellectual obfuscation used to stop him from becoming properly human, and the translation of Jewish Wisdom-language into that of the Logos-concept to circumvent the imagined threat of the feminine.

The Paragon Dismantled

In 'The Human Jesus (1)' we considered the humanity of Jesus and concluded that he had been a man like any other man. He was subject to anger, pain, thirst, weariness, sadness, fear and death. He was capable of making mistakes, which is to say that his knowledge was human knowledge, his belief system a reflection of the culture and time into which he had been born. He had no knowledge of modern physics. He was not aware of viruses or germs or the possibility of antiseptics. He knew nothing of the combustion engine and could not have told you that Mars followed an elliptical orbit. All in all, a diminution of what has been said about him by others - but not a dismissal. This man is not easily dismissed; his unique sense of things separated him from his religious peers. Definitely unusual; even unique among his kind - but *not* perfect or *all*-informed as Catholic theologians have suggested.

Catholic theologians tell us that Jesus had access to four levels of knowledge, and that these knowledge's precluded the possibility of his being ignorant on any level. The four knowledge's were: "Divine knowledge", "beatific knowledge", "infused knowledge" and "human knowledge". Divine knowledge was his because he was the "Son" part of a Father-Son-Spirit Trinity that was a unity in spite of being multiple; beatific knowledge because he was morally and ethically "perfect" and capable of interacting with the Father face-to-face; infused knowledge because angels

had access to infused knowledge and he had made the angels; and all human knowledge because there was nothing a human being could know that he, being such an extraordinary figure, did not already know.

If there was ever a window into absurdity, this is it; such reasoning affords us a glimpse of Catholicism's self-generated folly. The Jesus who emerges from this folly has been robbed not only of his humanity, but also of the originality of mind that so startled his contemporaries. *This* more than anything else is Catholicism's failing; we are left hoodwinked by forms of language made hostage to logical fallacy and pious fairy tales. The French Jesuit Diehard de Chardon may have admitted that a humble believer in the catechism was more likely to lead a life of real charity than he was, but that does not mean that such "believers" are to be viewed as better than de Chardon. The belief that "belief" is all that one requires for a spiritual life is, to say the least, an inadequate premise. The catechism's simple-minded summary of Christianity was, for de Chardon, not enough for a hungry soul to survive on, and that is the crux of the matter: one's God has either created a faith that defies reason, or we humans have created a faith that does not do that God justice. And there's a further catch: this God's truth is, as Jesus plainly showed, *ultra* simple, not in the sense of being simple-minded, but in the sense of being unexpectedly obvious: it has to do with being awake and aware and not much else: "Could you not watch one hour?" "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Western Christian religious practice is backed by doctrines so complicated, so obscure and so idiotic that belief in them takes every ounce of credulity believers possess. Credulity has reached truly sophisticated levels of expression, innocence of mind betrayed by a false simplicity. A morally perfect Jesus exhibiting perfect knowledge is no where to be found in the New Testament; *all* is conjecture in that respect. The attempt to explain Luke's statement that Jesus *grew in wisdom* (2: 52), or Mark's that Jesus, along with the angels, did not know the day or the hour of the earth's ending (13: 32), or Matthew's suggestion that Jesus thought God's kingdom would come during the lifetime of his

hearers (10: 23) is not properly dealt with. How does one explain that?

Mouthing the Creed does not guarantee a spiritual life, and prayers to a God capable of inventing and sustaining Christian orthodoxy must, by its very nature, be an exercise in futility. For imagine what such a God must be like? He must be like the clergy he is supposed to delight in. He must be like the Curia in Rome, all law and order, tradition and political nous; and he must, in some sense, be like all the papa's who have occupied St Peter's throne. He must be like John XXII who spent 63 percent of his resources on war; like Innocent III who inaugurated the Albigensian Crusade; or, say, like Boniface VIII, posthumously nominated by the French as a heretic. There is even a sense in which he must be like the Jesuit historian/novelist Malachi Martin whose dark, despairing and depressing vision would have us all end up burning in hell for eternity. Either that or he is not like any of these individuals, indeed, so removed from reflecting their concerns that if he appeared on earth and presented himself to them they would be incapable of recognising him.

To suggest such a thing is not at all odd, daring, mischievous or misrepresentative; it is unavoidable because in historical terms Christianity has squandered its inheritance and forfeited the right to pronounce on anything other the stock market. And this is not to overlook the Church's good works and her good intentions; it is to remind her, in her own words, that good intentions are the paving stones to *her* hell, and that good works are not enough when it comes to measuring the authenticity of a life. A life is more than doing or saying the right thing; it is about being awake and aware to the fact that we are, mostly, not awake or aware, but rather fast asleep on the face of reality. *That* is our general state of being, and Christianity has contributed more than its fair share to the sustaining of that condition.

The Church's exalted "Christ" figure was a man like any other man; albeit a man with his eyes wide open. That was the only difference between Jesus and those he had to deal with; he was "awake" *while* awake. But just as it is possible to consciously wake up *inside* a dream yet not be able to escape the dream's story -

lucid dreaming in psychological parlance - so too was Jesus caught up inside the structure of his time and culture - he had no option but to see his dream reality through to the end. Ultimately, there was no escape from his existence story *even* when awake and aware. He may well have transcended his existence story through meditative prayer, but when he opened his eyes he was still in first century Palestine. Nothing would have changed. The "rigorists" Jews would still have been holding forth, their Roman butchers still similarly engaged. Two thousand years plus have passed and Jesus' promised return has still not eventuated, the Holy Spirit's replacement guidance for the Church a travesty of what should have been the case, the promise of peace on earth and good will towards all men as tinselly as the Christmas decorations that now announce it. *Lies* all of it; but what an attractive untruth.

Peter Kelly, a committed Catholic, ex-priest and author of *Searching for Truth* speaks of the Christian mind forsaking the human Jesus and destroying all hope.¹ So says the flyleaf of his book, Kelly's appreciation of Jesus' physicality high on his agenda of spiritual realisations. To lose sight of Jesus humanity is to lose spiritual focus, he tells us, Jesus' humanity, his physicality, his flesh and blood reality that which connects us to spiritual truth. Then, straying from this conclusion, we are informed that Jesus' resurrection body was transformed in substance; he could suddenly walk through walls and appear in more than one location simultaneously. From being fully human Jesus is again spiritually inscrutable - or, to be more exact, unscrutinisable. Jesus' "body" has again been pushed beyond space and time, his existence as a human being turned into a theological Indian rope trick.

The Profoundest Mystery

The arguments for and against Jesus being described as "this" or a "that" are handled well by Peter Kelly; he makes a real effort to assess the stages of thought involved, but in the end he falls back on mystery and leaves the paragon intact. Well, not quite; the paragon has undergone modification and taken on an air of mystery not aligned with the mystery we are used to. Jesus is not

quite as he was, and Christians reading Kelly's examination of the issues involved might be shocked to detect a lessening of traditional values. But again that is not quite the case, for many ideas held by Christians about Jesus are not traditional at all; they are a reflection of the historical stages Jesus has been subjected to. In this sense does Kelly deconstructs and rebuild Jesus' image, and it is in this sense that we will attempt to reassess his character, personality and ultimate identity.

Peter Kelly's opening gambit is as follows:

The statement that Jesus is God is false if it is taken as 'real identification'; that is, if it is taken to mean that in his being, his substance, his physical existence, his flesh and blood, his essential reality, in what he is in his own self ... he is other than a man. Jesus is not God in the sense that he is a man; that is, 'is' has a different meaning in the two assertions.²

That is a flying start, but Kelly's next statement annuls the first and adds a note of confusion: Jesus was God's chosen vehicle to the exclusion of all others. Jesus is not God, but in some inexplicable sense he is God because "in him alone, and in him completely, was God's self-communication made to man; and in him alone was (and is) God's full and irrevocable giving of himself, God's sending of his spirit to the world."³ The Dean of Litchfield (Tom Wright) could not have put it better; he too suffers from bouts of epistemological panic. There is however no warrant for this view of Jesus in the New Testament; not unless you construe Jesus' "I and the Father are one" statement as proof that he was Israel's God walking around in a human body when, more plausibly, he was describing a contemplative experience of depth and quality. Given that he was *literally* "human", is that not the more likely interpretation? What has to be remembered is that Jesus perceived himself to be Israel's *Messiah*, and that role carried the sobriquet "Son of God", signifying not status, but approval. If you claimed to be the Messiah and were accepted as such, then

you were perceived in this elevated fashion, if not, then perceived as a false Messiah and accused of blasphemy. That, as things turned out, was what Jesus was accused of, his status as Nazarene Messiah and Son of God rejected by orthodox Jews, but taken up by Rome's Christians as a result of misunderstanding Paul's elaborate conception of the mystic Christ.

Quoting R C Rayner, Peter Kelly refers to Jesus as "the profoundest mystery", and with a further twist tells us that the sense in which Jesus is God "rests not on such real identification but on an entirely singular unity of separate realities, between which an infinite distance always exists, a unity met nowhere else". Nowhere else indeed; such a statement is a profound mystery in its own right. One can be "trained" to perceive Jesus in this way, but the premise on which such training rests is a hindsight imposition of faith-based beliefs; it is a runaway interpretation of Jewish archetypal thinking rendered blasphemous through literalisation.

When talking of Christians *before* they came to be called Christians at Antioch,⁴ Peter Kelly perceives James' Nazarene community to be identical to Paul's community of "saints", and in doing so commits James and his sectarian followers to believing that their Messiah was literally God, something these Nazarenes are now known to have vehemently rejected. Hedged in by historical and epistemological absurdity, Kelly proceeds to talk of Jesus' unity with Israel's God as something "We can no more know ... than we can know what God is". A stunning argument in anyone's terms, and followed by an equally stunning summation: "We do not know therefore what positively it means in itself to say, 'Jesus is God'; but in a true sense he is."⁵

Peter Kelly goes on to describe God as the ultimate meaning of the universe, makes Jesus the disclosure of that meaning, and in doing so equates Jesus with God in the sense of his having been a perfect conduit for the will of God. That is a legitimate way of talking about Jesus, but he pushes on with his argument and the result is a subtle literalisation of Jesus back into being God. This is the tenor of everything Kelly writes about Jesus, and although a

serious attempt to wrest Jesus away from pagan-imbued notions of the same, we are nevertheless left with an utterly incomprehensible Jesus whose humanity, personality, character and identity are in constant jeopardy. With nothing but verbal dexterity at his disposal, Kelly bends Jesus' temperament away from the human, and the result is an inhuman Jesus teetering on the edge of theological disaster. Yet still fully human in the sense that Jesus was the Second Person of the Trinity, another statement of dizzying proportions. But qualified with the words "so long as it is rightly understood that 'God took flesh in him'"; which is not to be interpreted as meaning that God literally became man - such a view is "fraught with perils of serious misunderstanding."⁶ Peter Kelly may be "at odds with the Church's official self-designation as expressed in ecclesiastical documents", but to my mind he is not better off.

But let's be fair; Peter Kelly is in good company when it comes to such reasoning - he is following a path of theology developed by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, Rahner being of the opinion that Christians "cannot leap over fifteen hundred years of Classical Christology or push it aside as if it were a matter of indifference."⁷ This cannot be done if there is "an enduring Gospel of Jesus Christ as the One who gives us an ultimate trust and an ultimate hope for the eternal significance and final validity of our existence".⁸ Why is this so? Because "for almost two thousand years Christianity has acknowledged this Christology and lived according to it."⁹ There is a steady tradition of interpreting Jesus as God and that tradition cannot be thrown aside just because historical study has complicated Jesus' nature, status and calling. The Church's Christology still has meaning for today; it is comprehensible in spite of changes to the boundaries of knowledge. So says Rahner, and his carefully worded prose informs us that "cheap" and "hasty" rejections of Classical Christology will not do.

He is nevertheless aware that not all is in the Christological camp; there are problems to be overcome, historical pre-conditions and premises that make it more difficult to accept the

old idea-formulations. Such difficulties, however, should not be allowed to generate a new Christology divorced from the original blue-print - any new vision must be intrinsically related to the history of the Christian faith. There is, as C S Lewis suggested, a *basic* Christianity, and we ought to stay connected and true to this basic vision - the "fashionable" ought to be penetrated to reveal its paltry limitations. The old Christological arguments may sound strange to modern, educated ears, the route resulting from them appear "long and winding",¹⁰ but these old ways of seeing and interpreting Christ's worth are still binding and beneficial because they force us to meet God at a radical level, and in a unique manner. Jesus was objectively a man; but he was also the unsurpassable Word of God. So we can talk "paradoxically", "analogously" or "dialectically" about Jesus and God without fear of being thought old fashioned.

How convenient.

In *Those Incredible Christians*, Hugh Schonfield offers his perspective: "Christian thinking, instinctively as it would seem, shapes itself to a pattern involving the apprehension of God through the personality of a man. There is still a primordial fear of an Otherness beyond the grasp of human definition and explanation."¹¹ I like that as a statement; it captures the essence of the problem - God as *alien other*. The tendency of the human mind is either to doubt or deny the existence of God because it draws the mind too near to the darkness of ultimate *other*, our tendency to veer away from ultimate *other* resulting in mechanisms of fear reduction, in comforting stories, and in an imagined descent of God as *other* into time and space for our individual benefit. Comforting indeed, but riddled with problems at the epistemological level; and paradoxical beyond all sensible systems of belief when translated into Christological formula. Forced to meet God at what Rahner calls the "radical level" (the interstices of *otherness* and the human), Jesus the man becomes for us the Christ of God, and in that moment the hostile *otherness* of existence is cancelled out in love. Schonfield terms this envisioned relationship between God and man "attractive", likens it

to the relationship between father and child, but in the end shows himself unconvinced that the alien *otherness* of God can be so easily contained. "After all," he says, "we have not so far succeeded in accepting Otherness as congenial even within the limited framework of our own species."¹² And he had good reason for thinking along such lines, for in relation to Christian rejection of his Jewish-oriented scholarship with its insider comprehension of Jesus, his status and his times, he noted that the much vaunted love of Christians for their fellow man was conspicuously absent in his case.

The point is well made by Schonfield in relation to our fear of an otherness "beyond the grasp of human definition and explanation". Any hint of ultimate otherness and we ricochet back towards the comfort zone of New Testament myth and marvel, or towards a vacuous denial that the boundary of Being scares us more than we care to admit. And if bound to the Christian myth, then locked into the human rather than the divine because the divine, by definition, has been recast in human mold. So in a sense we are bereft of the divine because the divine has been rendered comfortably human in Jesus, the radical point of contact between the two being loaded, not towards the incomprehensible darkness of God, but towards the light-filled explanations of men.

Not for Karl Rahner. To him "Jesus was crucified and is risen into the incomprehensible darkness of God",¹³ so creating a way into God not previously open to human beings. The gap between God and man has been cancelled out, the alien otherness of God breached by the love of God declared through Jesus as the Word of God. But Rahner's complex theology harbour the unspoken assumption that classical Christology accurately reflects not only first century notions about Jesus, but also the will of God before the foundation of the world. This is to suggest, as Peter Kelly suggests, that the quite separate communities of James and Paul believed the same thing, and that they each held identical beliefs in relation to Jesus' nature and identity. As is now well known, however, they did no such thing. And to talk of an "enduring Gospel of Jesus Christ" as if these communities were one and the

same, is to gloss over the facts of Jewish history and rely instead on the imaginings of Church Councils. Jewish-cum-Nazarene conceptions of the Messiah as Archetypal Man were theologically daring, but they did not topple over into the belief that Jesus was Israel's God. Divinely appointed and approved of in terms of Messiahship, yes, but not literally "divine" in any shape or form. For the early Apostolic community under James, safe enough a vision for thousands of orthodox Jews to join Nazarene ranks prior to the Roman invasion - proof in itself that such an heretical notion was not being being bandied about by the Jerusalem community. Penetrate the fashionable and reveal its paltry limitations by all means, but while you're at it, penetrate also the theologically inflated Christology developed by the 4th century Roman-based Church.

For Christians, the problem in doing so is to be found in the idea of Jesus having no spiritual equal; he is felt to have been spiritually unique and unsurpassability in spiritual quality. There has been modification to the idea of Jesus being literally God *in the flesh*; but this idea continues through paradox, analogy and dialectical argument, Jesus being, to quote Peter Kelly quoting Gunther Bornkamm: "*the* Word of God to the world; Jesus himself, prior to and in all his works *the* work of God in the world; Jesus himself prior to and in all the stories the decisive and final history of God in the world".¹⁴

Karl Rahner admits that such language reflects a long and winding road unconnected to the simple Gospels of the New Testament. He is right about that; it is not connected. The connection is imaginative; it is enthusiasm gone berserk. Classical Christology with its tendency to mingle the divine and the human is again on the loose, and Rahner, to give him his due, is aware of the dangers. At the end of his chapter on old and new Christologies he bites the bullet and explains: "But every concept of the incarnation which views Jesus' humanity, either overtly or implicitly, merely as the guise God takes upon himself in order to signalise his speaking presence, is and remains a heresy."¹⁵ In classical Christology the "is" in Jesus *is* God "does not mean

identity between subject and predicate ... it only means a unity and link."¹⁶ What this boils down to Jesus having a "unique relationship" with God. But like Peter Kelly the idea of a "unique relationship" does not stop Rahner from making the baseless assertion that because of this relationship Jesus is therefore "the un-supersedable Word of God for us ... which involves God himself, bringing him into our history."¹⁷ A subtle adjustment in Rahner's position is detectable in this statement, but it is not sustained. Once again the *fact* of Jesus' humanity power-glides him away from. It is all downhill from there as Rahner and Kelly attempt to have the best of both worlds and Jesus' humanity is whittled away sentence by sentence. Compelled to do so because, "the Christian faith ... is inconceivable without at least an ultimate continuity of genuine historical tradition".¹⁸ In saying so, Rahner reveals the sheer artificiality of his argument.

As mentioned in my book *Jesus the Heretic* (1997), the rank of *Insan Kamil* (Complete Man) is given to Jesus by Moslem mystical writers, a term signifying a unique and sustained level of consciousness. This is a very different approach from that of Christian writers, for whom the word "complete" is replaced by the word "perfect", meaning *sinless*. As the Moslem idea of completeness constitutes a rank as well as a condition of consciousness, the difference between the approaches looms large. There is no suggestion of divinity in the title *Insan Kamil*; an individual may have reached a level of high moral capacity, but that does not preclude him from having been morally ordinary at an earlier period of his life. Or, as Karl Rahner puts it in a different context, "Jesus also believed, hoped, searched and was tempted",¹⁹ a statement that substantiates the early Christological position of Jesus being "true and perfect man" in the sense that he was perfectly human nature in the sense of his being "perfectly" *ordinary*. And again Rahner comes to our rescue, stating that Jesus was subservient to "the sombre facts of historical existence with its limits, dependency and baseness", adding for good measure that

there could have been "no true and full humanity" for Jesus if this had not been the case.²⁰

Speak like this as they will, however, writers like Rahner and Kelly do not actually mean what they say, for in the next breath they elevate Jesus beyond any such influence and remove him from the taint of human limitation. Their carefully constructed sentences crashing like Erick von Daniken's chariots, Jesus is turned into an inappropriate myth that Don Cupitt describes as "not [belonging] to the essence of Christianity, but only to a certain period in church history, now ended, [an idea that] will ... startle many people".²¹ The historical facts speak for themselves, and no amount of verbal chicanery can alter these facts.

The Essence of Christianity

Classical Christology has humanised deity - God is now perceived, however tentatively, as an elderly, bearded man; or, bizarrely, as a human hand emerging from a cloud. This is to say that a human image, of sorts, has got between us and any conception of God we may have, and try as we might, we cannot rid ourselves of this intrusion. It is a bit like the Jesuit historian Malachi Martin suggesting that possessed people cannot stop cursing God in their heart of hearts - we, so it seems, cannot stop ourselves from sensing God as a human being. He is up there somewhere, he is male, and Jesus in some incomprehensible manner is this God, yet simultaneously the "Son" and not this God.

The essence of Jesus' teachings was not that he himself was God, but that God, as alien *other* beyond human comprehension could nevertheless be approached - there was a way to enter the alien otherness of God and survive, not in some Daddy-in-the-sky sense, but in the poetic sense of *father* when the transcendent nature of God was properly intuited. God as "father" was not to be understood in projected human terms, but as that within which all things moved and had their being.²² Rote prayers and the niceties of the Law were useful centering mechanisms, but when all was said and done the essence of the religious life was not

"supplication", it was the *application* of "awareness" as *practice*. *That* was the challenge facing all of us, and as we learned to draw near to this otherness and bear the "presence of its absence", everything changed.

Karl Rahner expects his fellow Christians to juggle God and Jesus within the same conceptual space, an expectation requiring prodigious intellectual capacity. Word-bridges of ever greater subtlety are to be digested in the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. In her 1977 essay 'A Cloud of Witnesses', Francis Young, a lecturer in New Testament studies, admits that there are "two stories ... which cannot be fitted together in a literal way";²³ but she does not, as a result, feel the need to make these stories fit together by some non-literal method. Young's approach, although similar to Rahner's and Kelly's at first glance, is in fact the more honest attempt, for she is able to say that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, but feels no compulsion to spell out such an idea in terms of a literal incarnation. Two stories, yes, but she admits that the unique focus she chooses when perceiving Jesus as a reconciling force is not due to some unplumbable mystery, but simply the result of her consciously choosing to do so. It is a fully conscious, intelligent decision bereft of obscure, superstitious nudgings - this woman is not engaged in an epistemological conjuring act. The myth of Christ is still evocative of "truth", not because of a single event in history, but because of repeated events of forgiveness throughout history. There is, ultimately, no obvious reason why forgiveness, as a conscious act in relation to suffering, should exist in our world at all, and the fact that it does is more startling than any single event in any single century. To truly forgive someone is to exhibit a quality of consciousness quite beyond explanation.

Francis Young captures the heart of the problem when she says that to talk of God introduces an "unknown, or only dimly known, quantity into the situation." What we say and think about this *unknown* "enters the realm of analogies which are only half-adequate".²⁴ This leads, in turn, to the realisation that *all* statements about God must by necessity be expressed in "here

and now" terms, in the language of inadequacy, and that ought to warn us of impending danger. Shorn of such literalisms God regains the safety of mystery and recedes from conceptual view; in a sense he was never really there at all. With Jesus' imposed divinity dismantled, however, God again takes on "otherness" as a mantle and is reinstated; that is, the illusion that we have somehow captured God inside an idea or an image, evaporates. Difficult as this may be for those whose spiritual focus is lodged in a flesh-and blood-based idea of transcendence, others may find the chance to shrug off Jesus' inflated human persona a welcomed relief.

The Church, the Church, the Church.

A critical point of departure in this discussion is to be found in a disagreement between Karl Rahner and Francis Young. Rahner is of the opinion that a person who acknowledges Jesus cannot do so individualistically, but only through the faith of the Church. It is the Church that has passed the Gospel of Jesus on to him, and it is the proclamation and theology of that Church which must stand as guide and mentor in the Christological debate. Young, on the other hand, argues that genuine faith in Jesus takes many different forms. There are those who continue to believe what they were taught as children, and there are those who make the faith their own through obedience to their gut-centre. This exactly describes what the radical Gnostic Christians did - they turned towards the incomprehensible darkness of God and jettisoned the light of mere men. As seen earlier, however, Rahner will not allow 1,500 years of classical Christology to be abandoned; he sees the traditional Gospel of Jesus as an enduring Gospel. Young counteracts with the observation that a faith reduced to a set of definitions and propositions is a distortion, and adds that "attempts to produce creeds are inevitably divisive or compromising".²⁵ She then notes that Eusebius of Caesarea signed the creed of Nicaea for the sake of church unity, but that he was not at all happy about it. Rahner refutes such an approach and demands that we make classical Christology binding on ourselves because it is only through Jesus

that we can find "an ultimate trust and an ultimate hope for the eternal significance and final validity of our existence."²⁶ Really? To my mind such a statement is overblown.

Francis Young's rebuttal is worth looking at; in a single paragraph she sinks the notion of Jesus as the only way to God by noting that certain creedal definitions *create* heresy. This is not how Rahner defines heresy; he argues for creedal definitions "highlighting" rather than "creating" heresy. There is a fundamental set of truths, these truths have been defined and guarded by Christians down the centuries, and any weakening of their substance divorces present-day Christianity from its ancient roots. Young counter-attacks with a question: "How far ought we to discriminate between orthodoxy and heresy?"²⁷ A fanatical adherence to what one believes to be unchangeable truth is, she believes, divisive and dangerous in itself. To believe that one has ultimate truth cornered is spiritual arrogance. Young directs us away from dogmatic claims towards those that are healing and constructive, and in doing so she sets the pace for a complete re-evaluation of the creed closely tied to the fact that classical Christology was culturally inspired. The Jesus of classical Christology is not based on the actual figure of Jesus, but on a figure *created out of* the promises of God as found in the Old Testament. There were many different promises, and Young notes that "different promises were valued by different people, and expectations revolved around different speculative figures constructed out of the promises."²⁸

In Jesus' case, however, all of these speculative figures seem to have collapsed into one, the result being that all of God's promises end up being viewed as *embodied* in Jesus. In this sense, "embodied" does not mean "incarnated", it means as *applied* to Jesus by others. Identified as all of these speculative figures, Jesus first emerged in the Christian mind as such an embodiment, and only later evolved into a literal incarnation of divinity. Showered with high-sounding titles which he at no time claimed for himself, the New Testament's "Son of *Man*" designation for Jesus was ignored - particularly when, as in Mark's Gospel (8: 38), he seems

to be referring to someone else. Francis Young allows for there having been some continuity between the Church's view of Jesus, and Jesus' view of his own mission, but she is doubtful that the two views were in any sense identical.²⁹ The Church preached "Jesus", whereas Jesus preached the "Kingdom of God".

More important still, perhaps, is Young's observation that in the Pauline writings the idea of a pre-existing Jesus-type figure began to develop. Described as having existed from the very moment of creation, this figure was conceived of as having been sent from God. But as Young is quick to point out, Paul nowhere identifies this figure with God, and makes plain that the relationship of this figure to God is one of "delegated authority" and "perfect obedience". She then spells things out: "Indeed, he is the archetypal man and the archetypal Son of God," the man "who will bear the image of the man of heaven."³⁰ The man *of* heaven is *not* Jesus; he is the archetype or image with which Jesus consciously identified. The language of "hypostasis" developed by the Jews will be pressed into service by the Christians, and the result will be the heresy of the Nicene conclusion. Translating "Jewish Wisdom-language into the Logos-concept of contemporary philosophy,"³¹ Christians will clothe a delicate theological idea with flesh and blood, and the result will be a phantom Jesus of ever-growing proportions, the proof that this figure is a phantom detectable in the fact that this figure eventually overpowers God and makes him disappear: the human has usurped the divine.

The Final Picture

In his book *Who was Jesus?* the Very Reverend Dr Tom Wright, Dean of Litchfield, picks up on the Christological problem and states that the term "Son of God" has no connection with the idea of Virgin Birth, that it was a title for Israel and the true Messiah that Paul transformed into a "fresh understanding of Jesus."³² Then comes an illuminating remark: "He [Paul] clearly held the view that, as well as being a fully human being, Jesus was also, in

some sense, on God's side of the equation as well."³³ What exactly does that mean? Does it go beyond the idea of Jesus being on God's side to that of Jesus being so lodged on God's side that he was somehow understood to be God? Is that Wright's insinuation? Apparently not. He adds: "But 'Son of God' didn't get the full meaning that it now has within Christianity until much later."³⁴ How much later? Around the fourth century, perhaps?

Hugh Schonfield's scholarship is a little more forthright; he tells us that "Catholic Christianity had good reason to seek to discredit the Nazarenes and to brand them as heretical. For one thing, it was fatal to the doctrine of the deity of Jesus that his own Apostles and the Christian members of his own family had held that he was no more than man".³⁵ That is straightforward enough, and it comes from a Jewish scholar with a life-long interest in Christianity. When speaking of the juxtaposition of Nazarene Christianity, Pauline Christianity and orthodox Catholic Christianity, however, Schonfield reveals what has been glossed over for centuries by Christian scholars, namely, that with regard to the Nazarenes, "[Their] teaching about Jesus continued in the tradition ... and could justifiably regard Pauline and catholic Christianity as heretical. It was not, as its opponents alleged, Jewish Christianity which debased the person of Jesus, but the Church in general which was misled into deifying him."³⁶ That states clearly what took place by the end of the 1st century, and I think it throws the idea of Jesus being "lodged on God's side" into a less woolly context.

The Dean of Lichfield states that the most persistent mistake over the last two hundred years has been the use of "Christ", which means "Messiah", "as though it was a divine title."³⁷ What we have to realise is that "If Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah, this is a completely different matter to the possibility ... that he might have believed that Israel's God was active in and through him in a unique way."³⁸ A different matter? Wright explains: Jesus simply picked up on the mood of the times, on the "massive expectation - and *applied it to himself*."³⁹ The italics are

Wrights, not mine. This did not mean "that he was an egoist, or that he imagined himself to be playing at being "God" in some high-and-mighty sense.⁴⁰ Fine. But Dean then borrows early Jewish thinking on *Shekinah* (the presence of God), calls Jesus "the true *Shekinah*" and changes what was understood by Jewish scholars as a "reflection" of God into an entity that he identifies with Jesus. In spite of some clever footwork around the Essenes (who are not supposed to have anything to do with anything), a plea to see Jesus as the *place* where Israel was to meet her God, and a reference to the Torah (God's Law) as an "entity" in existence before the world was made, we are again left with a Jesus figure teetering on the edge of . . . well, who can say what?⁴¹ *Shekinah* was interpreted by Jewish thinkers as "the reality or basis behind all being revealed to human beings as an experience"; it was not a license to verbally inveigle a human being into something more than these ancient texts allowed. Protestant theologians know very little about Sophia outside of Gnostic evocations; Catholic thinkers associate Sophia with Mary because the Wisdom texts (prior to Vatican 11) were read on Marian feasts. In 'The Wisdom of God: Sophia and Christian theology', Leo Lefebure points to the fact that the Gospel of John "uses the language of Sophia to describe the Word (Logos)." Everything said of the Logos belongs to Sophia "except for the identification of the logos as God. The substitution of the masculine "Logos" for the feminine "Sophia" may have been inspired by the maleness of Jesus".⁴² So says Lefebure, and his use of the term "substitution" clarifies the situation, for as Francis Young notes, the problem of Jesus' relationship to God the Father was solved through "the translation of Jewish Wisdom-language into the Logos-concept". Athanasius may have argued that as the Son is the offspring from the Father's substance, then he is both Sophia (Wisdom) and Word (Logos), but that is a theologically forced interpretation that defies the delicacy of Pharisaic and sectarian-Nazarene-cum-Gnostic insight. The Gnostic approach was to say that Sophia, or Wisdom, was no longer acknowledged by the male creator God (the human ego-personality projected into the heavens), that it lorded it over the creation and that the

"mother" had to wait for recognition. We are still waiting. For reasons multifarious and nefarious, Sophia has fallen into general neglect in the West, and this has led to a feminist interest in Gnostic forms by way of a backlash. As always, when psyche is denied expression, psyche finds a way to right the balance.

Tom Wright's thinking on such matters is necessarily orthodox, and this results in a distortion of early Jewish speculations about Sophia in spite of concessions made around the words "Christ" and "Messiah". Pushing a point of view rejected by Judaism, he upholds later Church thinking and strains towards Jesus being the "Logos" of God in terms of locus, or "place", *place* signifying Jesus' *physical* being. Jesus was not "playing at being God", he tells us, he was manifesting God in some sense that is beyond our comprehension, but not beyond our *noticing*. The "ifs", "buts" and "maybes" in Wright's text confirm this conclusion, but they at the same time come to rest on the side of Jesus being much, much more than he seemed, a conclusion that Wright *insinuates*, but does not actually state.

Others are not so backward; they announce grandly from pulpits throughout Christendom that Jesus is consubstantial with Israel's God, meaning that he was both human and divine and not a *created* being. Hence the "virgin birth" and other necessary embellishments. Karl Rahner, Peter Kelly and Tom Wright seem to hedge their bets on such questions, but when all is said and done their veiled conclusions are that Jesus defies all human categories of understanding. He is *unsurpassable*. Through open inquiry, however, Francis Young, Hugh Schonfield and many others have attempted to correct Jesus' historical image, but apart from atheists and don't carers their efforts have fallen mostly on deaf ears. And it is not that these thinkers are trying to destroy Jesus; quite the opposite, in fact. They are, ironically, trying to *save* Jesus from himself - a "self" so distorted by hindsight evaluations that he has ceased to properly reflect his nature and his culture: Jesus is no longer *Jewish* or *human* in any sense that makes sense - he has been robbed of family, culture, citizenship and gender. Suspended in the public imagination as a moral and ethical paragon whose every move was an indication of inherent divinity, he has been

rendered mute *even* when speaking his own truth. Bereft of Jesus' Jewish background and the sectarian ambitions of his family, Roman Christianity and its Protestant offshoots have created and sustained a being reflective of the Roman emperors at their worst and left the *real* Jesus stranded and alone. But his *return* is imminent, not in Glory and attended by angels, but in his humanity recognised - *that* is what must happen if we are to move on.

References and Notes:

- 1 Kelly, Peter, *Searching for the Truth*, Collins, London 1978, p. 120.
- 2 Ibid, p. 142.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., p. 143.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid, p. 144.
- 7 Rahner SJ, Karl, *Theological Investigation*, Vol. 17, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1981. 1981, Vol. 17, p. 25.
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid, p. 26.
- 11 Schonfield, Hugh, *Those Incredible Christians*, Element, Shaftsbury, Dorset UK, 1985, Intro. xv.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Rahner SJ, Karl, *Theological Investigations* (as above), Vol 17, p. 33.
- 14 Kelly, Peter, *Searching for the Truth* (as above), p. 143.
- 15 Rahner SJ., Karl, *Theological Investigations* (as above), Vol. 17, p. 38.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid, p. 37.
- 18 Ibid, p. 26.
- 19 Ibid, p. 28.
- 20 Ibid, p. 29.
- 21 Cupitt, Don, Essay, *The Christ of Christendom, /The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick, CSM Press, London 1977, p. 134.
- 22 Young, Francis, Essay, *A Cloud of Witnesses /The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick, (as above), p. 34.
- 23 Ibid, p. 37.
- 24 Ibid, p. 40.
- 25 Ibid, p. 38.
- 26 Rahner SJ., Karl, *Theological Investigations* (as above), Vol. 17, p. 25.

- 27 Young, Francis, Essay, *A Cloud of Witnesses/The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick, (as above), p. 39.
- 28 Ibid., p. 18.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid, p. 21,
- 31 Ibid, p. 24.
- 32 Wright, N.T, *Who was Jesus?* SPCK, London 1994, p. 79.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Schonfield, Hugh, *Those Incredible Christians* (as above), p. 117.
- 36 Ibid., P. 118.
- 37 Wright, N.T., *Who was Jesus?* (as above), p. 57
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid, p. 100.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid, p. 49.
- 42 Lefebure, Leo D., *The Wisdom of God: Sophia and Christian Theology*, Christian century Vol 111, No 29, October 19, 1994.