

The Human Jesus (2)

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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. And 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 was 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. Not easily dismissed this highly unusual man whose unique sense of God separated him from his religious peers. Unusual, yes, unique certainly, but not by any stretch of the imagination either perfect or all-informed in the sense eventually suggested by Catholic thinkers.

Until recently, such thinkers were telling us that Jesus had access to four levels of knowledge, and that these knowledges precluded the possibility of his being ignorant in any way whatsoever. The four knowledges were as follows: Divine knowledge, beatific knowledge, infused knowledge and human knowledge. Straight forward enough for the convinced Catholic mind to digest, this quadruple injection of knowledge into the earthly Jesus, but mind-bendingly awkward to anyone with even the vaguest sense of logic. Divine knowledge was his because he was in fact God in person (an idea which automatically annulled

his being fully human at a stroke); beatific knowledge was his because as perfect man he possessed the capacity to intercept himself as God in a face-to-face seeing (a right muddle of an idea in anyone's terms); infused knowledge was his because the angels had been so infused and he had made the angels (sheer sophistry); and ordinary human knowledge was his in plenitude because as God there was nothing a human being could know that he did not already know (an utterly silly idea which removed the necessity for even considering the other three).

Now if there was ever a window into the absurdity of Christian doctrine, this is it, for it is only when confronted by such obviously fabricated categories that we have a chance to intercept Christian folly at its most blatant. For the Jesus who emerges from this hustle and tussle of *non sequiturs* is a paradox not by reason of being Divine, but by way of human ingenuity and credulity pushed to their limit. We are being hoodwinked by language prostituted to the purpose of logical fallacy. We are being distracted from the possibility of a real spiritual life through the machinations of minds given over to fairy tales. Okay, so the French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin 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 read as better than de Chardin. All it means is that they are secure in their ignorance, and that their security of mind and heart helps the society remain secure in turn. Fine. But it should be realised that holding such a belief system has very little to do with being "spiritual" - it is just crowd control by another name. De Chardin was well aware of what was going on in such hearts and minds, that's why he refused to give in and said that his sophisticated faith was the only type of faith he could tolerate. And it is also why he thought this sophisticated faith of his exactly the kind of faith needed by these simple believers, for he knew by experience that the catechism's simple-minded summary of Christianity was not enough for a hungry soul to survive on.

And that is the crux of the matter, the decisive point which must in the end govern our response to de Chardin's remark, for either God has created a truth far too difficult for the bulk of human beings to take in, or human beings have created a truth far

too simple to do God's truth justice. But there's a catch in all of this, and the catch is that God's truth is in fact very simple, whereas man's truth has been complicated beyond belief. Now I mean that in the literal sense, not the metaphorical. I mean that Western Christian religious practice is backed by doctrines so complicated, so obscure and so idiotic that belief in them takes every ounce of credulity the believer is capable of. Which is to suggest that credulity has reached truly sophisticated levels of expression, and that innocence is being betrayed by a false simplicity. There is no sensible exegesis by theologians of New Testament texts to show that a Jesus having perfect knowledge does not accord with Scripture. There is no real attempt to explain Luke's statement that Jesus grew in wisdom (2: 52); 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 life time of his hearers (10: 23). How to explain such incongruities?

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. And 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 these individuals at all, and is perhaps so removed from such a hide-bound hierarchy that if he appeared on earth and presented himself to them they would be incapable of recognising him.

Now to suggest such a thing is not at all odd, daring, mischievous or misrepresentative - it is simply unavoidable. Why? Because in historical terms Christianity has squandered its inheritance and forfeited the right to pronounce on anything other

than, say, 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 hell, and that good works are in themselves 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 being awake to the fact that we are, mostly, not awake, but fast asleep on the face of reality. Fast asleep and proud of it. Eyes closed tight and proud of it. Minds closed down and proud of it. That is our state of being, and the Church has contributed more than her fair share to our condition; in fact it could be said without fear of contradiction that she has single-handedly initiated that condition through a prolonged programme of doctrinal distraction.

The problem has been, from the very beginning, that the Christ figure the Church is founded on was just a man like any other man; albeit a man with his eyes wide open. That, in real terms, was the only difference between Jesus and those he had to deal with. But just as it is occasionally possible to wake up inside a dream and know that we are dreaming ('lucid' dreaming), yet not be able to escape from the structure of our dream, so too was Jesus caught inside the structure of his time and culture - we have to see our dreams through to the end. Ultimately there is no escape from the dream of existence. Pray intensely, indeed transcend himself Jesus may well have done, but when he opened his eyes he was still in first century Palestine, not twentieth century Britain or America. And if he had managed to awaken in twentieth century Palestine? Well, what a shock - nothing would have changed much. The rigorist would still have been holding forth, the liberals doing likewise. The killing and the butchering and the torture would not have stopped. And that in spite of his having been here, in spite of 2000 years having passed during which his Grand Return from heaven was at first expected imminently, then shelved. Heaven itself ravaged by war a long, long time before, the New Testament's much vaunted promise of peace on earth and good will towards all men as tinselly as the Christmas decorations that now announced it. Lies all of it, but what an attractive untruth.

And all part of God's plan for the human race, this fiasco of a religion with its constant mistranslation of his wishes. The killing and the torture and the lies all due to human weakness in spite of the Holy Spirit's instructions and the claim of one man to be God's virtual mouthpiece in the world. In spite of the horror, the carnage, the bloodlust, God ruling the world with clear-cut decrees through his priesthood, through the man Jesus, from Heaven, who was not actually a man at all but God perfectly imitating a man for purposes theologically oblique. Confusion built on confusion as this God's dark purpose matured in an equally dark world and the human heart underwent a breaking and a tearing. Mountains of theology. Vast tracks of intricately worded commentary on what God wanted, or did not want. Self-assured clerics bustling, like black crows, across the world's surface to herd the damned into God's earthly kingdom. And all done with the best of intentions, one has to presume, with the belief that "belief" was all that mattered. So what a catastrophe when it is shown that "belief" is not only not enough, but tantamount to having done nothing at all with one's spiritual talents. Or, to rearrange the problem and put it into an ex priest's words: "Once the "Christian" mind forsakes the human Jesus who lived on our earth, then it breaks the connection between his work and us, and ultimately destroys all reason we have for hope."¹

The writer of these words was Peter Kelly, a committed Catholic, ex-priest and author of *Searching for Truth*, a book which attempts to reconcile contemporary critical biblical scholarship and Church history with spiritual belief. So says the flyleaf, and the book bravely tries to live up to its description, Kelly placing an appreciation of Jesus' physicality high on his agenda of spiritual realisations. For if Christianity is our chosen paradigm, and we lose sight of Jesus humanity, then we have lost spiritual focus. This is to say that Jesus' humanity, his physicality, his flesh and blood reality is something we must come to understand as connecting us to spiritual truth. But Peter Kelly goes on to talk of Jesus' resurrection body as "transformed" in substance - that is, as different from, say, the bodies of Lazarus or Jairus' daughter when brought back from the dead by Jesus, and as he seems to accept that Jesus could suddenly walk through walls due to his

resurrection experience, and even appear in more than one location simultaneously (biolocation), his view of Jesus reflects traditional overtones in spite of his insistence that the pre-resurrection body of Jesus was fully human. From being fully human, Jesus again takes on paragon status.

Now this shows a certain naivety of approach, for if one accepts the miracle aspect of Jesus' ministry in literal vein, then one automatically blurs his humanity with a divine aspect. And as the divine aspect inevitably overpowers the human aspect, one is left with a hybrid Jesus to whom the body was no more than a disguise. Once again the resurrected body of Jesus is pushed beyond space and time, his previous existence as a man, as a human being, turned into an unrepeatable theological trick. So what to do? How to rescue the man Jesus from out of his God image? And to what end this rescuing of his humanity? Why bother if Jesus the "man" is later going to give way to the unimaginable?

The Profoundest Mystery

The arguments for and against Jesus being described as a "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 falls back on "mystery" and leaves one with the paragon intact. Well, not quite. The paragon has now undergone modification and taken on a curious air, an air of mystery not altogether aligned with the mystery we are used to. Yes, we're back to square one, but the journey has not left Jesus unscathed; he is not quite as he was, and many a Christian reading Kelly's examination of the issues involved might be shocked to detect a lessening of traditional values. And again that is not quite the case, for many ideas held by Christians about Jesus are not strictly traditional at all, but folksy in the sense that they reflect different historical stages of thought about Jesus. It is in this sense that Kelly deconstructs and rebuilds Jesus' image, and it is in this sense that we will now approach Jesus as we too attempt to reassess his character, personality and ultimate identity.

The first adjustment to our thinking is couched thus:

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

This is a flying start, one would think, but Kelly's next statement annuls the first and adds a note of confusion, a confusion which rapidly deepens due to the superimposition of Christianity's principle prejudice - that Jesus was God's chosen vehicle to the exclusion of all others. As a man 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 If given the chance the Dean of Litchfield (Tom Wright) could not have done a better job of this, methinks; it is perfect example of what a friend once described as epistemological panic. And there is no warrant for it in Scripture either - unless one is willing to return Jesus to his Jewish fold and see him through Jewish eyes. But to do so is to step out of the Christian dream of superiority and land oneself in the twilight zone of archetypal happenings, and as it is this very zone that has been borrowed by Christianity and turned into a fleshly conundrum concerning deity, it is an inadvisable move if one wishes to retain the illusion of Jesus as a Christian, rather than a Jewish Messiah.

Quoting R C Rayner, Peter Kelly then refers to Jesus as "the profoundest mystery", and with a further twist of language 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 meaningless and is a "profound mystery" due to its lack of meaning. True it may be that one can be trained to think in such a fashion, but the premise on which such training rests is itself a

dream without substance, an interpretation of Jewish archetypal thinking rendered blasphemous through literalisation. And he has a problem, too, with his history, for when talking of the Christians, even before they were called Christians,⁴ he construes James' community to be identical to Paul's community, and commits James and his followers to believing that Jesus was literally God, something the Nazarenes did not at any time believe, and are known to have vehemently refuted for centuries. And no wonder, for when talking of Jesus' unity with God Kelly tells us that "We can no more know what that is 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

But there's more. Describing God as the ultimate meaning of the universe, Peter Kelly 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. Now this is a legitimate way of attaching Jesus to God, but Kelly cannot resist pushing the metaphor too far and the result is a subtle literalisation of Jesus back into being God in some sense not properly disclosed. This is the tenor of everything Kelly writes about Jesus, and although it is a serious attempt to wrestle Jesus away from the pagan-type literalisations indulged in by many Christians, we are nevertheless left with an utterly incomprehensible Jesus whose humanity, personality, character and very identity are constantly in jeopardy. With nothing but verbal dexterity at his disposal, Kelly continues to bend Jesus' temperament away from the human, and the result is an inhuman Jesus ever teetering on the edge of theological disaster. Yet still fully human according to Kelly in the sense that Jesus was the Second Person of the Trinity, another obfuscation of dizzying proportions. And 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 A search for the truth? Surely. But a search carried out blindfolded in spite of the book's flyleaf stating that Peter Kelly is "at odds

with the Church's official self-designation as expressed in ecclesiastical documents."

But let's be fair, Peter Kelly is in very good company when it comes to such reasoning; he is following a well thought-out line of theology developed by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner. For Rahner is 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 He is adamant. 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? 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 reflected in the world, and that tradition cannot be thrown aside just because historical study has complicated Jesus' nature, status and calling. The Church's present Christology has meaning for today; it is still 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.

But he is nevertheless aware that all is not well in the Christological camp; there are problems to be overcome, historical pre-conditions and premises which make it more difficult to accept the old idea-formulations. However, such difficulties, real as they might be, 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 a bit strange to modern, educated ears, and 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. Why? 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. And 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*, Dr Hugh Schonfield replies to such a claim thus: "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*, and our tendency to veer away from ultimate *other* has resulted in mechanisms of fear reduction, in comforting stories, 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 then a radical point of contact with God, this Jesus, this sectarian Jew of the first century, more a point of departure, a point of severance from the depths of being construed as a connection.

But not for Karl Rahner. To this theologian "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 statements 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 also suggests, that the quite separate communities of James and Paul believed the same thing, and that they each held identical views as to Jesus' nature and identity. But as is now well known, 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 history and rely instead on the over-developed imagination of Church Councils. Yes, notions similar in kind to classical Christology did exist in first century Palestine, but they were at root Jewish-cum-Nazarene conceptions of Messiah as Archetypal Man and even at their most theologically daring did not topple over into the overt belief that Jesus was God. A divine being in terms of Messiahship, but not literally God in any shape or form. And 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 - a substantial proof in itself that such an heretical notion was not being bandied about by the Jerusalem community. So yes, let's penetrate the "fashionable" and reveal its paltry limitations; but while we're at it, let's also penetrate the

theologically inflated Christology developed by the fourth century Roman Church and attempt to right 1,500 years of Classical misinterpretation.

The problem in doing this, for Christians, is of course the idea that Jesus the Nazarene had no spiritual equal - he is felt to have been spiritually unique. That's where the problem lies. And it is there, in this idea of uniqueness and unsurpassability that we find the old classical root allowing Jesus to be somehow God in the flesh continuing in new form. Yes, there has been modification to the idea of Jesus being God literally in the flesh; but the notion continues through paradox, analogy and dialectical argument that Jesus was, as Peter Kelly puts it (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 This is of course pure hyperbole, it is exaggeration, it is inflation, and it is full of danger.

As Karl Rahner is compelled to admit when speaking in a similar manner, such language reflects a long and winding road that does not seem connected to the simple Gospel of the New Testament. He is right. It is not connected. The connection is purely imaginative. It is enthusiasm gone berserk. It is the old classical Christology with its tendency to mingle the divine and the human again on the loose. And Rahner is well aware of the dangers, for at the end of his chapter on old and new Christologies he names the name of the game by saying "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 And he goes further. 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 And what does this boil down to? It boils down to Jesus having a "unique relationship" with God. But like Peter Kelly this idea of a "unique relationship" between Jesus and God does not stop Rahner from making the baseless assertion that because of this relationship Jesus is therefore "the unsuperedable Word of God for us . . . which involves God himself, bringing him into our history."¹⁷ The jump in logic at this

point is remarkable, unfounded, and gratuitous. Once again the *fact* of Jesus' humanity is thrown aside in a statement which power-glides him away from, rather than towards, humanity. From there on it's all downhill as Rahner and Peter Kelly attempt to have the best of both worlds and end up with a hybrid Jesus whose flesh and blood humanity is whittled away sentence by sentence on behalf of an epistemological game. And why do these writers feel so compelled? Because, "the Christian faith . . . is inconceivable without at least an ultimate continuity of genuine historical tradition".¹⁸ So says Rahner, and so he reveals the sheer artificiality of the situation.

As mentioned at the end of my book *Jesus the Heretic* (1997), the rank of *Insan Kamil* (Complete Man) is given to Jesus by Moslem mystical writers, and this term seems to signify a unique and sustained level of consciousness. Now this is a very different approach from that of Christian writers, for whom the word "complete", in relation to Jesus, is replaced by the word "perfect", and connotes a sinless condition. And 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 whatsoever of divinity in the title *Insan Kamil*; such an individual may have reached a level of moral perfection, but this does not preclude him from having been morally ordinary at an earlier period of his life. Or, as Karl Rahner puts it in a slightly different context, "Jesus also believed, hoped, searched and was tempted",¹⁹ This statement substantiates the classical Christological position on Jesus as "true and perfect man", for there is no doubt that he found himself in possession of a perfect human nature in the sense of his being *perfectly ordinary as a human being*, not in the sense of his nature being, from the start, perfect. In this sense it is again Rahner who comes to our rescue, for he states that Jesus was subservient to "the sombre facts of historical existence with its limits, dependency and baseness", and adds for good measure that there could be "no true and full humanity" in relation to Jesus unless this were the case.²⁰

But speak like this as they will, writers like Rahner and Kelly do not actually mean what they say, for in the next breath both thinkers elevate Jesus beyond any such influence, and the result is

a Jesus so utterly removed from human limitation that their very coining of the words is no more than a joke - a joke at our intellectual and spiritual expense. Their so carefully constructed sentences and meanings crash like Erick von Daniken's chariots, and the result is not, as they seem to think, God as man in any real sense, but rather man managing, through theological trickery, to divinise himself by proxy through Jesus. In this sense, Jesus is turned into an inappropriate myth; and even if once a myth which was appropriate, not to be considered indefinitely significant, surely. For as Don Cupitt states in his telling essay *The Christ of Christendom*, "the suggestion that the classical doctrine of the incarnation belongs, not to the essence of Christianity, but only to a certain period in church history, now ended, will certainly startle many people. Nevertheless, I believe it is true."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. Which is to say that a human image, of sorts, has got between us and God, and try as we might, we cannot rid ourselves of this image. It is a bit like 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 not this God. Jesus is God, God is Jesus, and Jesus, as it just so happens, is also a human being.

But the essence of Jesus' teachings was not that he himself was God, but that God was open to approach. Jesus' message was that God could be approached as *father* - there was a way to enter the dark, alien otherness of God and survive. But not in some personal, Daddy-in-the-sky sense - this was not a literal fact, it was a poetic truth which had to be understood as such.²² Rote prayers and the niceties of the Law were useful mechanisms, but when all

was said and done the essence of the religious life was not dogma, or belief, or mechanical supplication of the ego through the ego, but surrender to God. Surrender was the essence of the spiritual life, not mental constructs about God and his purposes. There was a darkness at the heart of consciousness, at the heart of matter, at the heart of what mattered, and this darkness had to be stepped into come what may. Death was part of this darkness, but it was better not to wait for the darkness to overtake one, but willingly to enter the darkness while alive and strong. This was the challenge facing all of us, and as we learned to draw near to this darkness and bear the terrible pressure of its presence, or the presence of its absence, everything changed.

The tendency for many Christian thinkers, however, is to attempt what Karl Rahner demands and hold on to the Church's ancient Christology while juggling incomprehensibly with Jesus as a man of flesh and blood. That is, Christians learn to hold both views simultaneously and simply ignore the fact that these diametrically opposed conceptions of Jesus cannot be amalgamated. Or they pretend that they can be amalgamated through the construction of word-bridges utterly devoid of meaning - bridges for which meaning can only be claimed due to a collapsing of categories. In his 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. No, 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.

But what of God in all of this? If Jesus is not God, then who or what is God? If Jesus is not the Second Person of the Trinity, then how do we describe or approach God? Francis Young captures our dilemma when she says that to talk of God introduces an "unknown, or only dimly known, quantity into the situation." From there on in what we say and think "enters the realm of analogies which are only half-adequate".²⁴ This in turn leads to the realisation that all statements about God must by necessity be expressed in "here and now" terms, in the language of inadequacy. Shorn of literalisms, however, God regains the safety of mystery and recedes from conceptual view; for in a sense he was never really there at all, merely believed to have been there through some intricate theological footwork. With Jesus dismantled, however, he again takes on darkness as his mantle and ceases to *be* in any concrete sense; that is, the illusion that we have captured God inside an idea or image evaporates. And so we are back, not to square one as many a theologian might think, or fear, but to that ever renewable point in history where God is stripped of projections. Hard it may be for the Christian Churches to accept such a challenge, heretical it may seem to those whose spiritual focus is lodged, by default, in flesh and blood, but for those who manage to shrug off Jesus' inflated persona, a relief beyond description.

The Crunch Point

The crunch point in Christological thought is to be found in a basic disagreement between Karl Rahner and Francis Young. Rahner is of the opinion that a person who acknowledges Jesus cannot do so individually, 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. Yes, there are those who continue to believe what they were taught as children, but there are also those who make the faith their own through obedience to their gut-centre. This exactly describes what the radical Gnostic Christians did - theory turned towards the incomprehensible darkness of God and jettisoned the light of mere men. But as seen earlier, Rahner will not allow 1,500 years of classical Christology to be pushed aside - the traditional Gospel of Jesus is an enduring Gospel and should not be abandoned. 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. Why? 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, to say the least, overblown.

Francis Young's rebuttal of such thinking is worth looking at closely. In a single paragraph she sinks the notion of Jesus as the only way to God by noting that certain credal definitions create heresy. Now this is not how Rahner would define the situation. He would argue, I think, that credal definitions "highlight" rather than "create" 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 Meaning what? Meaning simply that a fanatical adherence to what one believes to be unchangeable truth is divisive and dangerous. To believe that we have the truth all wrapped up and neatly packaged is spiritual arrogance. And so Young directs us away from arrogantly dogmatic claims towards claims which are healing and constructive, and in doing so sets the pace for a complete re-evaluation of the creed - a re-evaluation closely tied to the fact that classical Christology was culturally

inspired. For when all is said and done, 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, and the result was God's promises viewed as *embodied* in Jesus. In this sense, "embodied" does not mean "incarnated", it merely 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 by way of out of context speculation. Showered with high-sounding titles which he at no time claimed for himself, the Jesus of the New Testament's Son of Man self-designation 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"; Jesus preached the "Kingdom of God".

More important still, however, 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". And then she spells it all out in a rush: "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 with which Jesus has consciously identified. The Wisdom-language, 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 invest a delicate theological idea with flesh and blood, and the result will be a phantom Jesus of ever-growing proportions. And the proof that this figure is a phantom is to be detected in the fact that this figure eventually overpowers God and makes him disappear, not into darkness and mystery, but into mental oblivion - the human has successfully usurped the divine while claiming to do exactly the opposite.

Yet the New Testament evaluation of Jesus cannot be entirely out of character according to Francis Young - there must have been something about Jesus to have elicited such a positive response from his disciples. Something powerful was going on in this man, and this "something" caused his followers to believe that God had been disclosed to them in a unique manner. But as Young is quick to point out, does it really matter how we perceive this disclosure? Must there only be one way of talking about Jesus? Surely not. For as God is only but dimly known to the human mind, how then can we say with certainty that we fully understand this disclosure of God in a human life? Jesus was not understood then, and he is not understood now. Nothing has changed. Everyone has a different opinion of him, and these opinions form a multiplicity of Christologies which deepen rather than weaken the case for his importance.

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 whatsoever with the idea of Virgin Birth, that it was a title for Israel and the true Messiah, and that it was Paul who took this title and transformed it *against* Jewish interpretation into a "fresh understanding of Jesus."³² And 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 On God's side of the equation? What exactly does that mean? Does it have any other meaning beyond that of the obvious? Does it somehow 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 goes on to say: '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?

Dr 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, I think; and coming from a highly regarded Jewish scholar with a life-long interest in Christianity, cannot be ignored. But it is when speaking of the juxtaposition of Nazarene Christianity, Pauline Christianity and orthodox Catholic Christianity that Schonfield really makes his mark and reveals what has been glossed over by countless Christian scholars. With regard to the Nazarenes he says, "This Christianity in its teaching about Jesus continued in the tradition it had directly inherited, 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 I think that states quite 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 simply means "Messiah", "as though it was a divine title."³⁷ To understand what is going on we have to realise 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 The possibility? Might? I thought it was all fixed up that that was *exactly* how he thought of himself? Apparently not, for later Wright lets us in on a little secret: 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 of

course "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 what to do when the Dean, at the beginning of his fascinating and courageous analysis of Christianity, clearly misuses early Jewish thinking on *Shekinah* (the presence of God), and calls Jesus "the true *Shekinah*", so changing what was understood by Jewish scholars as a "reflection" of God into a physical entity to be identified with Jesus? Is this permissible? I think not; and that in spite of some nifty 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.⁴¹ Fine. Okay. But as *Shekinah* was interpreted by Jewish thinkers as the "reality or basis behind all being revealed to human beings as an experience", and was not in any sense a license to make a human being into God, it appears that yet another Christian thinker is to be found wanting. The Pharisaic mystics identified *Shekinah* or Glory with "Wisdom" (the ineffable *female* emanation of God), the son with peace - hence "Prince of Peace" as applied to Jesus. The personification of Wisdom in Judaism is female, not male; it was *Sophia*. And so we have the attempt by some feminist Christians to retrieve *Sophia* as a female image of God.

The problem that arises here is that most Protestant theologians know very little about *Sophia* outside of obscure Gnostic evocations of this figure, and to most Catholic thinkers, *Sophia* has been associated with Mary because the Wisdom texts (prior to Vatican 11) were read on Marian feasts. In an excellent article, '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)." From there on in 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 word 'substitution' clarifies the situation enormously, 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 this interpretation is based on a series of theological blunders and does not capture the original 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), that it lorded it over the creation and that the "mother" had to wait for recognition. It would appear that 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, human nous eventually finds a way to right the balance.

Wright's thinking on this matter is necessarily orthodox, and as a result distorts early Jewish speculations about Sophia; it pushes a point of view rejected to this day by Judaism, and underscores the move made by the later Church towards long-range theological error. In relation to Jesus as the "Logos", the ifs, buts and maybes in his text show such a conception of things to be an utterly impossible vision to either substantiate or make clear when the chips are down, and taking refuge behind "paradox" and "ambiguity" is simply not good enough, not when what you are actually talking about is *confusion*. And so we have to question the stand of a Karl Rahner, a Peter Kelly or a Tom Wright when they help perpetuate the old systems of thought in new guise, and through the open inquiry of a Francis Young and a Hugh Schonfield attempt to pull Jesus back into living focus. For in its attempt to cancel the problem of how a transcendent God could relate to the physical world, Christianity created a quasi-divine being out of Jewish-sectarian thinking, and the result was theological impasse and endless suffering. Through inadequate argument and distorted interpretation of Scripture, the early Fathers promoted a Jesus who never actually existed, and it is only fear bred of long-term theological misunderstanding that stops many of us from admitting that that is the case.

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