

# Some Major Challenges for Christology

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*God brought forth the Word,... as a root brings forth a shoot, a spring the river and the sun its beam. Tertullian, Adversus Praxean, 8.*

*You preach to me God, born and dying, two thousand years ago, at the other end of the world, in some small town I know not where; and you tell me that all who have not believed in this mystery are damned. J.J. Rousseau, Emile.*

In the light of Christian faith, practice and worship, that branch of theology called christology reflects systematically on the being and doing of Jesus of Nazareth (c. 5 B.C. - c. A.D. 30). In seeking to clarify the essential truths about him, it investigates his person and being (*who* and *what* he was/is) and work (*what* he did/does). Was/is he both human and divine? If so, how is that possible and not such a contradiction in terms as being a 'married bachelor'? Should we envisage his revealing and redeeming 'work' as having an impact not only on all men and women of all times and places, but also on the whole created cosmos? In any case, can we describe or even minimally explain that salvific 'work'?

In facing and tackling these and other such questions, historical, philosophical and linguistic considerations play a crucial role. They can be distinguished, if not finally separated.

## **History**

How do we know who Jesus was/is and what he did/does? Not only for those who believe in him but also for those who do not give him their personal allegiance, obviously the first answer must be: We know him and know about him from human history and experience.

The quest for an historical knowledge of Jesus will make us examine, at the very least, his background in the story of Israel, his earthly career, his influence on the origins of Christianity, and the subsequent development of christological

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thinking and teaching. Those who have attempted to write the history of anyone and, even more, their own history will recognize just how difficult it proves to express fully through a text any human life. To transcribe adequately the story of Jesus is an impossible dream. As the appendix to John's Gospel observed centuries ago, 'there are also many other things which Jesus did. If they were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (John 21,25).

Nevertheless, we need to come up with some historical account of Jesus. Unless it is going to remain outrageously inadequate, any historical account of Jesus must attend not only to such events of his life and death that we have access to but also to his antecedents in the history of Israel and to the response he evoked, both in the short term and in the long term, through his death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit. Hence, in pursuing the reality and meaning of Jesus' person, being and work, we will examine some themes from Jewish history and from the origins of Christianity and, in particular, from the development of christological reflection and teaching.

As regard the 'things which Jesus did', let me note that he left no writings and lived in almost complete obscurity except for the brief period of his public ministry. According to the evidence provided by the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), that ministry could have lasted as little as a year. John implies a period of at least two to three years.

Such non-Christian sources as the Roman writers Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny the Younger, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (whose testimony suffers from later interpolations) and, later, the Cynic philosopher Lucian of Samosata and the Babylonian Talmud yield a little data about Jesus: he was put to death by crucifixion under the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius; some Jewish leaders in Palestine were involved in the execution; his followers called him 'Christ' and regarded him as the divine founder of a new way of life.<sup>1</sup>

The letters of Paul of Tarsus, which were written between 51 and 64 (or 67) and hence before the four gospels, provide some details. Jesus was born a Jew (Gal 3,16; Rom 9,5), a descendant of King David (Rom 1,3); he exercised a ministry to the people of Israel (Rom 15,8); he forbade divorce (1Cor 7,10-11); he celebrated a 'last' supper 'on the night he was betrayed' (1Cor 11,23-25); he died by crucifixion (Gal 2,20; 3,1; 1Cor 1,23; Phil 2,8); as risen from the dead, he appeared to Cephas (= Peter), 'the twelve', over five hundred followers, James (a leader of the Church in Jerusalem), and Paul himself (1Cor 15,3-8; see 9,1 and Gal 1,12.16).

1. For details, see C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (SPCK; rev. ed. London 1987) 14-16. 277-8; J.P. Meier, *NJBC*, 1317; J. Stevenson and W.H.C. Frend, *A New Eusebius* (SPCK; London 1987), 1-3.18-20.128-30.

Other books of the NT occasionally allude to the story of Jesus. These fleeting references mainly concern his suffering and death (e.g. 1 Pt 2,24; Heb 6,6; 13,12). For our (limited) knowledge of Jesus' life and work we are almost totally dependent on the gospels.

As regards what I have called 'the response he evoked', the history of Jesus includes not only the NT scriptures but also all the different items that go to make up the whole Christian tradition: creeds and other official doctrines; liturgical worship in its great diversity; millions of lives which have taken their inspiration from Jesus (and, in particular, the lives of those who teach us by their shining, saintly example); preaching and theological reflection on Jesus (right down to twentieth-century scholars and documents produced by the World Council of Churches and the International Theological Commission); private prayer and personal experience of Jesus; the art and literature that have come into existence around him. Let us acknowledge also the response he has evoked in Jews, Moslems, Hindus and other non-Christians. Those who have volunteered an answer to the question 'who do you say that I am?' (Mark 8,29) have included not only disciples committed to Jesus but also members of a wider public, others who did not or do not surrender fully to his spell and yet have wanted to say something about his reality and meaning for them.

### ***Philosophy***

Putting down this list of historical and experiential sources in an attempt to summarize where we might go looking for answers to our questions about Jesus' 'being' and 'doing' (including the response they have provoked from the first century right down to the present) raises a whole range of questions of a more or less *philosophical* nature. What is the status of experiential knowledge? Can it supply any reliable information or evidence about Jesus? Where personal testimonies differ, whose experience counts? The whole Christian tradition about Jesus (and, for that matter, non-Christian traditions about him) can be seen as recording and interpreting various collective and individual experiences of Jesus. But why privilege and emphasize certain voices in that tradition over against others? Why find normative and reliable guides in mainline creedal and liturgical texts, as well as in the conciliar teaching of Nicaea I (325), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), over against what Arius (c. 250 - c. 336), Apollinarius (c. 310 - c. 390), Nestorius (died c. 451) and Eutyches (c. 378-454) actually taught or were alleged to have taught?

Elsewhere I have explained what I hold about experience and its evidential status.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, I have offered some guidelines for finding the (reliable and

2. See my *Fundamental Theology* (Darton, Longman, & Todd; London 1981) 32-52. See also C.F.

normative) *Tradition* (capitals) within the mass of traditions, as well as joining H.G. Gadamer and others in recognizing traditional data as an indispensable help for interpreting the biblical texts.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, present experience and past (Christian) tradition can never justify refusing to return to the gospels themselves. What do we know about Jesus from these sources? How do we know that we know something about him from these sources? What level of certainty do we have in our historical knowledge of Jesus? How much do we need to know about him to support our Christian faith and theology (including christology)? Or, in other words, as believers and theologians what is the nature of our dependence on an historical knowledge of Jesus?

Some answers here have taken extreme forms. Although obviously they could not face these issues in a modern sense, from the second to the fourth century the authors of the apocryphal, non-canonical gospels responded in a maximalist fashion. They often embroidered and supplemented, as well as revising, what the canonical gospels tell us of Jesus' birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'lives' of Jesus, not to mention sermons and meditations on the gospels, have encouraged a similar tendency to 'know' too much about the dating and details of Jesus' career, as well as about his motivation, feelings and whole interior life. Classic films about Jesus like Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* have also catered to the desire to 'know' too much about the history of Jesus. Those who in such ways 'enlarge' our available historical knowledge of Jesus can finish up partially depending (in their faith and theology) on what they themselves have produced.

At the other extreme from the maximalists are such writers as Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), who have notoriously given minimalist answers to the historical questions about Jesus.

As an historian Bultmann was by no means a thorough-going sceptic. In *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (German original 1921)<sup>4</sup>, *Jesus and the Word* (German original 1926)<sup>5</sup> and *Theology of the New Testament* (German original 1948 and 1953)<sup>6</sup> he accepted quite a range of conclusions about the actual life of

Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Clarendon Press; Oxford 1989).

3. See my *Fundamental Theology*, 208-24. 249-59.

4. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, (trans. J. Marsh) (Blackwell; Oxford 1963).

5. *Jesus and the Word*, (trans. L.P. Smith and E.H. Lantero) (Scribner; 1958).

6. *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (trans. K. Grobel) (SCM Press; London 1956 and 1958). See also Bultmann "The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus", in C. Braaten and R. Harrisville (eds.), *The Historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ* (Abingdon 1964) 15-42.

Jesus. It was as believer and theologian that Bultmann showed himself a radical reductionist, claiming that we neither can nor should found our christian faith and theology on any supposedly 'objective' basis in history — apart from one objectively historical event, the crucifixion. We need to do more than affirm the *dass*, the mere fact *that* Jesus existed and was crucified, without enquiring about the *was*, *what* Jesus was in his own history. Bultmann argued that he was supported by Paul and John, who both present us with the essential kerygma without entering into the historical detail that we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Apropos of Paul, Bultmann wrote:

Paul proclaims the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord; that is, his kerygma requires only the 'that' of the life of Jesus and the fact of his crucifixion. He does not hold before his hearer's eyes a portrait of Jesus the human person, apart from the cross (Gal 3,1), and the cross is not regarded from a biographical standpoint but as saving event. The obedience and self-emptying of Christ of which he speaks (Phil 2,6-9; Rom 15,3; 2Cor 8,9) are attitudes of the pre-existent and not of the historical Jesus... the decisive thing is simply the 'that'.<sup>7</sup>

But what would a simple 'that' mean apart from the 'what'? Jesus would be reduced to mere cipher. Why should we find the saving event in the crucifixion of someone about whom we refuse as believers and theologians to 'know' anything further? If no historical detail of Jesus' story matters other than his sheer existence and crucifixion, why should we not look for the saving event in one of the thousands of others who died at the hands of the Romans by this sadistic form of execution?

As regards Paul, we have seen above how such details about Jesus as his Jewishness and his ministry to Israel do matter to the apostle. Paul's kerygmatic message goes beyond the mere crucifixion of Jesus to include his last supper (1Cor 11,23-25), his burial and his appearances to Cephas and the twelve (1Cor 15,3-5). As regards its concern to say something about Jesus' human story, John's Gospel is considerably more interested in historical detail than Bultmann would like to admit. Where the Synoptic Gospels seemingly present the ministry as lasting for about a year and including only one (final) journey to Jerusalem, John corrects that impression by having Jesus attend three Passover feasts in Jerusalem (John 2,13; 6,4; 11,55) and making four journeys there (John 2,13; 5,1; 7,10; 12,12). Such a prolonged exposure to the Jerusalem public explains more plausibly the hostility towards Jesus shown by the authorities in the capital — something that belongs to John's presentation of Jesus' final destiny. This is just one example among many

7. Ibid., 20.

of how the 'what' matters to John, and not merely the sheer 'that' of Jesus' crucifixion.

After the criticisms mounted by Ernst Käsemann and others Bultmann's veto against detail from Jesus' human history being relevant for proclamation, faith and theology has been widely ignored. The wonder is that this veto on historical knowledge was taken so seriously and for so long.<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard's classic reduction of the historical knowledge required for faith was phrased as follows:

if the contemporary generation had left nothing behind them but these words: 'We have believed that in such and such a year God has appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died,' it would be more than enough.<sup>9</sup>

Here the incarnation ('God has appeared among us') and its hidden character ('in the humble figure of a servant') bulk large. The crucifixion, not to mention the resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit, is passed over in silence. So too are any details about Jesus' teaching; it is simply stated that he 'taught in our community'. Kierkegaard's reductionism differs from Bultmann's in that it is, or at least is phrased, hypothetically and theoretically ('if'). In fact the contemporary generation via the evangelists in the second generation has left us much more than the words proposed by Kierkegaard. Here, as elsewhere, it seems more profitable to reflect on what we have actually received rather than on what we might possibly have received under different circumstances. In brief, let us begin from matters of fact, rather than from matters of principle.

Lessing's critique of the role (or rather non-role) of historical knowledge took a general two-pronged form.

If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths... Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.<sup>10</sup>

8. See my *Foundations of Theology* (Loyola University Press; 1971) 176-85; and J.S. Kselman and R.D. Witherup, 'Modern New Testament Criticism', *NJBC*, 1137-42. For the nature of Christian faith's dependence on history and historical knowledge, see my *Foundations of Theology*, 65-101 and *Fundamental Theology*, 71-6 and 156-60.
9. S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, (trans. D.F. Swenson) (Princeton University Press; Princeton 1936) 87.
10. G.E. Lessing, *Theological Writings*, (selected and trans. H. Chadwick) (Stanford University Press; Stanford 1967) 53.

Against this one can very well argue that, although they cannot be demonstrated by mathematical calculations, repeated scientific experiments or philosophical logic, historical truths can certainly be established beyond any reasonable doubt. Mathematical calculations cannot demonstrate the existence and career of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. But the converging historical evidence would make it absurd to deny that he lived to change the political and cultural face of the Middle East. We cannot 'run the film backwards' to regain contact with the past by literally reconstructing and repeating the assassination of Julius Caesar in the first century B.C. or the crucifixion of Jesus almost a hundred years later. Such historical events cannot be re-enacted in the way we can endlessly repeat scientific experiments in a laboratory. But once again only the lunatic fringe would cast doubt on these two violent deaths. A priori logic cannot demonstrate the existence of Augustine of Hippo (354-430). But to deny his existence and massive impact on subsequent European thought and culture would be to exclude yourself from normal academic discussion about the history of Western ideas. The available data lets us know a great deal that went on in the past, including the ancient world, even if from the nature of the case we cannot (and, in fact, should not try to) demonstrate our conclusions along the lines appropriate to mathematics, the natural sciences and philosophy. There are very many historically certain truths from which we can argue and draw conclusions.<sup>11</sup>

The main thrust of Lessing's case comes, however, in his second assertion: 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason'. Even if we know with certainty many historical truths, they always remain contingent or accidental. These historical events, the truth of which we have learned and established, neither had to be nor had to be precisely the way they were. In principle things could have gone differently in the life and career of Alexander the Great, Augustine, Jesus and Julius Caesar. As such, historical truths neither enjoy the status of necessary, universal truths of reason, nor can they prove such truths of reason. But is that so tragic? In terms of this study in christology, is it a fatal admission to grant that our knowledge of Jesus' career does not rise 'above' the level of contingent truths. Strictly speaking, he could have done, said and suffered different things. Only someone like Lessing who was/is bewitched by the pursuit of necessary, universal truths of reason would deplore this (historical) situation. In the strictest sense of the word, '*necessary* truths of reason' are tautologies, mathematical truths and other a priori deductions that are in principle true always and everywhere without needing the support of any empirical evidence. But how many people would base their lives on such truths? Historical experience and contingent truths have a power to shape and change human existence in a way never enjoyed

11. On this see P.F. Camley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, (Clarendon Press; Oxford 1987) 104-7, 133-5.

by Lessing's timeless, universal truths of reason. In particular, 'accidental' truths from the story of Jesus and his most heroic followers have played a crucial role for millions of Christians. They have looked at the life of Jesus and those of his more saintly disciples and found themselves awed, moved and changed. Both within Christianity and beyond, the concreteness of history repeatedly proves far more persuasive than any necessary truths of reason.

In the end, however, Lessing's classic assertion could be usefully modified and pressed into service in this study. For christology we need *both* the data and truths of history *and* the help and truths of philosophical reason. Apropos of our empirical knowledge of the world, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) observed: 'thoughts without content [= empirical content] are empty, intuitions [= experiences?] without concepts are blind'.<sup>12</sup> This remark might be adapted to read: 'Metaphysical thoughts without empirical historical content are empty, historical experiences without philosophical concepts are blind'. Or perhaps it is better not to risk doing violence to the positions of either Lessing or Kant and simply to point out that christology requires both some historically credible information and some philosophical structure. Right from the second century christology has rightly drawn on metaphysical reflection, as well as historical experience.

We have just seen how philosophical considerations necessarily turn up when christology raises questions of hermeneutics (e.g. the role of tradition in the work of interpretation) or of epistemology (e.g. the dependence of Christian faith upon historical knowledge). Yet the contribution of philosophy to christology goes beyond just these two tasks.

Where historical claims are tested primarily by the way they correspond or fail to correspond to the available evidence, philosophical clarification comes by testing the coherence of some belief in the light of our most general principles (e.g. those which concern the nature of human and divine existence). Is it, for example, possible for someone to be simultaneously fully human and fully divine? Or is this as impossible as calling someone a married bachelor? To reach a reasoned position here, one needs to clarify the notions of humanity and divinity. What counts as being, in the strict sense of the word, human and/or divine? What do a human nature and a divine nature mean and entail? How could one person be at the same time fully human and fully divine? What does personhood mean?

This last paragraph illustrates the role of philosophy in clarifying concepts and testing possibilities. It is not philosophy's task to say whether some possibility (e.g. a person who is simultaneously fully human and fully divine) has been actualized in history. Philosophy comes into play in hammering out concepts that have a

12. *Critique of Pure Reason*, (trans. N.K. Smith) (Macmillan; 1963) 93.



certain clarity and in examining whether some claims are coherent or at least not blatantly incoherent to the point of impossibility.

My examples above come from questions about the person and being of Christ. Philosophy has its role also in clarifying concepts and testing coherent possibilities that concern Christ's redemptive 'doing'. How could redemption (e.g. expiation of sins) work? What are the appropriate terms to use here and what could they mean? Sacrifice? Propitiation? Liberation? What does it mean to speak of Christ's representation? How could one person represent the whole human race and have a beneficial effect on all men and women everywhere?

### *Language*

Traditionally the redemptive 'doing' of Christ has been expressed largely through such biblical terms as expiation, love and conquest which have been more or (often) less satisfactorily clarified. Much biblical language about Christ's being and doing has strongly been symbolic: he is the bread of life, the good shepherd, the light of the world, the vine, the suffering servant, the head of the body or the last Adam. At times the symbolism can be subtler and less obtrusive as when he is called Lord, Mediator, Messiah, Redeemer, Saviour, Son of God, Son of Man, or Word. The primary, biblical language of christology is analogical and symbolic. The post-biblical language has often been less blatantly symbolic (e.g. one divine person in two natures, the primordial symbol of the Father, the second person of the Trinity, or the Pantocrator), but not always so (e.g. the Sacred Heart).

To recall such terms and titles is to suggest the difficult question of the function and limits of religious language. How far can our language (and, for that matter, our thinking) go in expressing Christ, God and, in general, other-worldly realities? In religious worship, practice and reflection, language gets used in extended or special ways. We may speak analogically, applying such common terms as bread, light, shepherd and priest to Christ, who is both like and unlike the bread, light, shepherd and priests of our human experience. His own symbolic language about a lost coin, a lost sheep and a lost son (Luke 15,3-32) 're-present' and perceptibly express truths about the invisible God and the divine designs in our regard. In the Exodus narrative the crossing of the Red Sea and the Sinai covenant, the roles of Pharaoh and Moses, and the water and manna in the desert work, respectively, as actions, persons and things that symbolize God's saving purposes. Putting together various particular symbols, the whole Exodus narrative functions as a myth or symbolic story, in the which basic truths about God and our existence vis-à-vis God get imaginatively expressed. We are guided towards the ultimate realities not only by abstract concepts but even more by symbolic, mythical language.

In christology, as in other branches of theology, we explore the meaning of and test the truth of various religious claims in which history, philosophy or language may be, respectively, more to the fore. But there is this frequent difference. In the area of religious claims of an historical nature, truth will be more a matter of correspondence to the available data. When the claims are of a rather philosophical nature, coherence will be the primary test. In the case of linguistic claims, the truth quality of the language used will be judged by its disclosive, illuminating success. Truth comes across, respectively, as corresponding, cohering or disclosing.

Talk about truth should not, however, be allowed to encourage a facile optimism in christology or in the rest of theology. To what extent can history, philosophy and language really show us how things are with Christ, God and the divine-human relationship? We should never claim to know or say too much. Of course, there is the task of reflecting, clarifying and making sense of things. But at our peril we forget that in christology, as in other branches of theology, we are dealing with mystery, the mystery of the ineffable God and, for that matter, with the corresponding mystery of the human condition. In particular, we should never forget the indirect, analogical, symbolic and mythical character of our biblical, liturgical and theological language about God. As developed in Eastern Christianity, apophatic theology reminds us of the inadequacy of all attempts to approach the divine mystery. Any affirmation about God has to be qualified with a corresponding negation and the recognition that God infinitely surpasses our human categories. The Western tradition of negative theology insists that we can say more what God is not than what God really is. As the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) pointed out, any similarity between the creator and creatures is characterized by an even greater dissimilarity (see *DS* 806). There exists an infinite difference between saying 'God is' and 'creatures are'.

To conclude. Other considerations should and will play their role in constructing a faithful and workable christology. But enough should have been said to show how respect for history, philosophy and language are necessarily involved in any serious christological work.

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