God, Christ, and Salvation

Topics in 20th century Christology

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Week 1: Who is Jesus Christ and why don't we stop thinking about him?

At the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, Adolf Harnack gave his famous series of lectures on his understanding of Christianity. He started the first lecture with a quotation from John St. Mill, to the effect that the world needed to be reminded again and again of the fact that the man Socrates had once trodden the earth. True, Harnack continues, but even more important is it to remind the world again and again of the person of Jesus Christ.

Overall, it is remarkable how much the 20th century has followed in his footsteps. While the past century may have brought unprecedented secularisation in various Western countries, while the acceptance of Christianity and its sway over nations and their institutions may have been greatly reduced, there are few indications that the fascination this Palestinian Jew of the 1st century has aroused over the ages has abated or is about to abate. Within Christianity, the awareness of the need to relate all beliefs and all practices directly to Jesus seems, if anything, to grow. At the same time, the impact of the person of Jesus could be observed way beyond the institutional core of Christianity and even beyond the immediate sphere of cultures traditionally permeated by Christianity.

On the other hand, thinking about Christ has not been unaffected by the major upheavals of the 20th century. Christology could scarcely continue purely in its traditional mould, it had to engage the revolutionary developments of the world at large which, as you all know, were political as well as social, scientific as well as economical, cultural as well as religious. Time honoured formulae ceased to mean much to large parts of those who expressed an honest curiosity about the man Jesus and his religious relevance. Attempts at

reformulation and re-appreciation of traditional Christological doctrine, therefore, were ripe; many of those inevitably were short lived, others persevered and became influential in their turn. There were those, of course, who insisted all the more vigorously on the re-affirmation of traditional doctrine, but one should not ignore the fact that the re-affirmation of a traditional formula under substantially changed circumstances can never be a mere repetition, but starts its own process of (frequently unwitting) remoulding.

It is this duality of lasting fascination by the person of Jesus and, at the same time, the need to respond to traditions about him in a new way which makes Christology in the 20th century specifically interesting. Following some of those developments during the course of the 20th century will, then, be the theme of this series of lectures. Today's lecture will be used to offer some theological introduction to this theme.

1. Why Christology?

This series of lectures will deal with important strands of Christological thought or, at least, with thought about the person and the work of Jesus Christ in the 20th century. Yet we cannot understand specific contributions made by theologians and by others to this debate unless we have at least a preliminary idea of what they are talking about, of why they found this person so uniquely fascinating and at the same time, arguably, mysterious. This first lecture will, therefore, be devoted to such a preliminary clarification. The task is to elucidate the basic significance of theological thought about Jesus. What is it people try to understand? Why does the quest for such an understanding, apparently, never end? In other words, what is the question that Christology attempts to answer?

True, it would be a gross oversimplification to limit thought about Jesus in the 20th century to *theological* thought. There have been others, artists, historians, not least believers from different faiths, who have made relevant contributions to this quest. Yet, whatever value all those contributions may have, it seems clear, at the same time, that they elaborate on, respond to, broaden or contradict theological ideas about Jesus. Thus, focussing on

theological notions to begin with is justified and does not foreclose the broadest possible horizon for the further course of our lecture series.

At the same time, sketching the foundations of Christology, as I intend to do in the next half hour, is not the same as recounting the formulae of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. The formula adopted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, rather, is in itself *one* attempt to answer the puzzle posed by Christology to the Church and to Christians. Over the centuries, opinions have varied wildly as to how convincing or how successful this particular answer has been; this again is not my topic today. It is important, however, to see that Chalcedon itself cannot be properly understood without being aware of the question which it tries to address. Chalcedon cannot, and nor can all the earlier and later attempts to untie the Christological knot.

So what is the problem underlying them all? What is the issue they try to address? It has often been observed that Jesus Christ is in a special, possibly unique, way relevant for Christianity. To begin with, I take it that he is to be regarded as the historical founder of that religion. This has occasionally been denied on the grounds that Jesus never intended to found a new religion and that this only gathered momentum after his (unexpected) death and the subsequent break from Judaism. Yet, whatever Jesus' intention was with regard to the foundation of a 'new religion' – a concept he may not have been able to understand, it is clear that Christianity in teaching and practice goes back to his life and to his activity, and in that sense it is proper to see him, much like Moses, about whom we know much less historically, or Muhammad, as the historical founder of a religion, Christianity.

Yet the importance of Jesus for Christianity is not at all adequately described by such an epitaph. The relation of Christians to Jesus has been, from the first beginnings of Christianity, as far as we know them, quite different from the way Jews think of Moses and even from the way Muslims see their Prophet. The reason is that Jesus is central for the Christian concept of salvation. Christianity in many ways may be described as a religion of salvation. While, admittedly, the meaning itself of this concept has been conceived in various ways, it suffers no doubt that the central message of the gospel, we might say indeed the 'gospel', the *euangelion* itself *is* the good news of human salvation

from sin and its consequences, from the wrath of God, from a life of estrangement from God and from themselves, from our subjection to death and finitude. That and how all those ideas go together is in itself a difficult problem, which I cannot address here, but they all express the insight that human nature is in a fallen state, is removed from its proper place and destiny and, therefore, in need of help; and it is precisely this help which is offered to human beings in *the* salvation which Christianity promises.

Central to the Christian religion, then, is the twin concept of sin and salvation, but it is equally unequivocal that there is only one way for humans to receive this divine gift, and that this one way is He who has called himself 'the way, the truth, and the life'. In other words, while the idea of salvation is fundamental for Christianity, it is more specifically salvation through Christ that is promised. The question Christology asks can, therefore, preliminarily be formulated as: 'Who was/is Jesus so he can be our saviour'? We might equally say, remembering the meaning of Jesus' most well known title: 'Who is Jesus so he can be the Christ'? A theological account of Jesus, then, explains nothing if it does not explain how he can be saviour. Or, to put it in technical terminology: Christology and soteriology are but two sides of the same coin.

This has far reaching consequences. It means, once again in a nutshell, that no understanding of Christology is possible without giving proper attention to soteriology; the same is true, of course, the other way around. One will not understand one without understanding the other. One may, of course, pose the question of the inner coherence of a particular Christological doctrine, one may wonder whether this idea or that is in accordance with Scripture or tradition, but all this is not the same as understanding why a particular author, a school of thought, a Church or a particular age opted for one kind of Christology rather than another. In all such cases, as far as I know them, such an understanding will be achieved, rather, by realising that a particular concept of Christology is answering to a specific notion of salvation *through* Jesus which needs as its underpinning an explanation of why Jesus, having been this or that, was actually capable of effecting salvation. This includes, in each single case, the ability to show why some event that happened years ago can have significance for us; why a *person* who has, apparently, lived and died

so many years ago can still be of relevance. Christology, then, must portray Jesus in a way that bridges the temporal (and we might add: geographical, linguistic, cultural) gap separating today's believers from the original salvific event. It must, to use words famously coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, be able to address the question: 'Who is Jesus Christ *for us*?'

Realising this close interplay of the doctrines of Christology and of soteriology reveals, however, at the same time a serious problem. My earlier, slightly impromptu list of things Christians expect salvation from has perhaps at least flagged up the issue of possibly various notions of salvation or, at least, of different *emphases* Christians may place on their respective ideas of salvation. If it is true, then, that the understanding of Christ, the topic of Christology, is intimately connected with the understanding of salvation, considered in soteriology, then such divergence must have repercussions for the former. Or we might say, in keeping with a formulation I used earlier: the question Christology answers shifts if the understanding of salvation is changed. This is not trivial, as it indicates that Christologies may be plural not only in so far as they represent different answers to the same question, but in so far as they attempt to answer what are to some extent different questions.

Be this as it may, the first major thing to note is the utter centrality of Christology within Christian theology. Theology as the elucidation of the Christian faith stands and falls with its ability to give a satisfactory answer to the question of who Jesus, the Christ, is. So what kinds of answer have been given? Let us move on at this point to a brief, systematic overview.

2. Who is Jesus Christ?

The major foundation of any Christological teaching has been, and still is, the Bible, more specifically the NT. It fulfils a dual function as it contains, on the one hand, what I assume for practical purposes here are the oldest (or, in any case, very old) reports about Jesus and his ministry. In this sense, the NT constitutes the fundamental source for any exploration of what Jesus was, said and did during his earthly ministry. Contrary perhaps to appearance, this has not fundamentally been altered by critical scholarship which has merely served to make us aware of how shaky the ground of even this testimony is;

but this could hardly be otherwise given that the events reported and reflected upon were so exceptional or even unique. Who could have been expected to find unambiguous words for their description?

On the other hand, however, the New Testament contains also our most important source for the faith of the earliest Christians. This is implied in much of what it says about Jesus and his ministry; it is more explicitly discussed especially in the gospel of John and in the epistles, of which particularly the Pauline corpus has become foundational for later theological reflection. In this regard it is even more obvious that historical critical research helps, and does not hinder, a proper theological appreciation of the NT. For the faith of the early Christians finds its articulation necessarily in the linguistic and cultural patterns of their time, and it is therefore only through the contextual study of those patterns that this faith becomes intelligible for us.

So who is Jesus Christ according to this witness or, better, to these witnesses? All those who have ever taken even a superficial glance at New Testament testimony about Jesus will realise that it is hopeless to give, in our current situation, even a pretty general account of its ideas about Jesus. Our situation is worse, however, as we cannot be content here with an analysis of the biblical evidence but have to develop this into theological, specifically christological, trajectories. We'll have to be bold, then, and systematize rigidly. In summary, I think we can find three insights in the New Testament which have fuelled Christological debate ever since. They concern in turn his life (a), his death (b), his resurrection (c).

a) From all the evidence there is on both those counts it seems safe to start by saying that Jesus was a human being, a man, a Jew living in Palestine, more specifically in the north, in Galilee. He was not, of course, just any man, all the records we have insist that he was quite special in many ways. And yet, for a start it is crucial to hold on to the insight that the saviour figure the NT portrays is undoubtedly human: born from a woman, as St Paul relates, raised by human parents, growing in size as well as in wisdom. Later on he is depicted as a rabbi, engaged in debates with other scriptural scholars, as a wise teacher, a kind and benevolent man who ultimately meets with an

untimely and cruel death, a fate which he would have sought to avoid yet accepts in his obedience to God.

This Scriptural testimony to Jesus' humanity is so unequivocal that disagreement about this particular feature of Jesus has never been substantial. Later orthodoxy formulated he was 'true man'. At the same time, the theological consequences of this notion are far reaching. For a real human being must have been entirely part of the human world: he would have shared the values of his native culture, he was conditioned, as men are, by birth, upbringing, his historical situation. He was empowered and impeded by his physicality – having a body is, after all, crucial for human beings. I could go on, but you will understand what all this is driving at. Christology can, and is sometimes, formulated in quite an abstract way. What we must not forget is that abstract phrases like 'partaking of human nature' come down to mean precisely the kind of detail I have mentioned.

In spite of all this insistence on Jesus' humanity, however, it is equally clear that the NT points beyond this aspect of Jesus' reality. In the gospels it is relevant that the words Jesus says and the things he does make people ask *who* he is. He must stand in some special relation with God, so much seems clear, and increasingly the insight dominated that this relation must have been of a *kind* different from the inspiration of prophets, of Elijah or even of John the Baptist. It is probably impossible to ascertain with ultimate certainty whether this crucial threshold was passed during Jesus' life time or whether this happened as a consequence of those events which brought his earthly life to a conclusion. Be this as it may, what is more important is that the interpretation of Jesus as Son of God and even as 'God' appeared so evident at one point that it was felt that any account of Jesus' life would be incomplete without it. And it would seem equally uncontroversial that his death and the faith in his resurrection were pivotal in the formation of the earliest Christological views. Let us look at these two aspects in turn.

b) We must not ignore that to contemporaries the crucifixion must have looked as the ultimate failure of Jesus' mission. The NT bears witness to the fact that this was even the perception of his disciples. All the more remarkable is the observation that very soon afterwards we find intensive reflection taking

place about the necessity and the specific relevance of his death on the cross. The fundamental formula seems to be that Jesus died 'for us' which is then subject to various interpretations, which actually continue throughout the history of theology: he died vicariously for us to reconcile us with God; he died as a sacrifice for us to atone the wrath of God; he died to take upon himself the curse of the Law in order to signify the end of this specific form of divine ordination. There is no end of possible interpretations; what they all have in common is that they seem to move the relevance of the person of Jesus from his life towards his death. Yes, he lived, preached and did miracles, but the real purpose would have been his crucifixion; he almost seems to have lived in order that he could die.

What does this focus on Christ's death mean for the understanding of his person? He must have been human, of course; otherwise he could not have died. Yet at the same time it is even more obvious here that he must have been a special, a unique human being. All humans die, many die cruel deaths, some die 'for others', but in no conceivable case could the death of a mere human be credited with such far reaching consequences. The soteriological interpretation applied only allowed for a unique synthesis of divine and human in the person of Jesus.

c) The resurrection, of course, is special in that it is not, unlike life and death of Jesus, a strictly historical event. The former were witnessed by believers and unbelievers alike; they could (in principle) be agreed on the facts, while their interpretation would naturally vary. The resurrection, by contrast, is a reality which has, from the beginning, only been perceived by believers; there is no purely factual level here which we could take for granted and acceptable to anyone.

This is actually borne out by even the earliest theological interpretations. In Paul Jesus' resurrection is referred to as the 'first fruits' of those who 'have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15, 20). Christ's resurrection thus is not so much a miraculous event, it is the beginning of a new aeon, a new age of the world which will see the general resurrection of the dead and the revelation of God's full rule over his creation. Resurrection thus, much like life and death of

Jesus, is immediately seen in a soteriological light. Jesus' overcoming of death indicates that in the case of men too death will not retain the upper hand.

At the same time, it is the one aspect of Jesus' history which reveals most strongly his unique relation with God. In Paul we find the idea reflected that Jesus was David's son qua human nature, but declared to be the Son of God through his resurrection (Rom 1, 3f.). The latter event seems like the seal affirming Jesus' divinity. From the witness of Luke it appears that after his death even his disciples could refer to Jesus as a 'prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people (v. 19). It is the resurrection that makes such language eventually inadequate even though it must be noted that the very idea of resurrection implies also Jesus' humanity: God does not die and he who cannot die cannot be resurrected either.

3) Why don't we stop thinking about him?

Why is it helpful and important to realise that Christian thought about Jesus has these three foci? This alerts us to the fact that they, each of them, lead, to some extent, to different conceptions of Christology and, consequently, Christian theology and Christian practice generally. Is Jesus for us primarily the perfect sacrifice who died for our sins and imparts on us righteousness which we could never obtain otherwise? Or is Jesus the source of new, eternal life that has been implanted into human nature due to his overcoming death in the resurrection? Is he the herald of a new age? Or is he the wise teacher and the loving philanthropist whom we are called to emulate to obtain likeness of God in ourselves?

For the longest time, the Church has not considered these possibilities to be alternatives, except in extreme cases, and has instead sought to balance the various accounts of Jesus within a generous and flexible framework. Those who insisted that you couldn't have it both ways were conveniently branded heretics. It was only modernity which insisted on a large scale that theology had to be systematic and that it had to decide which picture of Jesus to adopt. Yet in an ironic twist modernity also produced a multiplication of theological and non-theological pictures of Jesus existing side by side. Thus when, in the

weeks to follow we examine some of those interpretation, we shall inevitably notice how they emphasise one element of this complex picture to the exclusion of others, sometimes with proper justification and often without it; yet the plurality that is driven out of individual conceptions in the interest of systematic coherence is reinstated by the (perhaps complementary?) coexistence of a variety of different approaches each emphasising one of those aspects in the history of Jesus.

One may find comfort in such a thought. At the same time it would appear evident, however, that a full understanding of the person of Jesus Christ would have to do justice to all the strands reported about him in biblical witness. This is perhaps impossible, but certainly one reason why thinking about Jesus has never ended and is unlikely to end as long as people continue to be struck by his unique personality. Understanding him and his history fully in their relation to God and to humanity is a task which is passed on from one generation to the next. In this sense the 20th century represents on chapter of a long tradition, a chapter which follows upon previous ones and will in turn have its sequels.

Week 2: The Search for the historical Jesus. Its justification and its problems

It is part of the customary way of framing and of presenting 20th century theology to say that it started with the crisis of the quest for the historical Jesus. Historically this is undoubtedly true. Yet this statement has its own teleology only for those who are convinced that such a quest is necessarily bound to fail, and furthermore that such failure opens up a new and better perspective on Christology. In other words, while it is clearly the case that theologians (and others) became frustrated at the time with that search and turned away from it, it is something quite different to see this as some kind of proof for the fact that the quest for the historical Jesus was (and is) in principle theologically a blind alley. The mere observation of its recurrence twice in the course of the 20th century ought to warn us against rash generalisations, even though this renewed interest in its turn cannot be, of course, evidence for the justification of this question either.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that we are talking about a development that comprises at least two seemingly separate and distinct perspectives, the historical and the theological. Prima facie the judgment that historically we can/cannot know much about Jesus' life and his teaching seems very different from the problem of whether any such knowledge has or ought to have an impact on our religious and theological understanding of him as saviour. At the same time it would be naïve to pretend they are fully separate. Theology can make use of the historical Jesus only if history provides the data; and the coincidence of historical/exegetical optimism in this regard and theological interest in the historical figure, Jesus, certainly invites the interpretation that theological judgments move not entirely arbitrarily alongside non-theological developments, but rather make the best possible use of them. Yet this is not all. Historical-Jesus research is carried out by scholars, who often or always have their own theological or religious agenda. It is thus not free from some preconceived theological ideas which in their turn may well influence complex and far reaching historical theories which do not, of course, proceed directly from empirical source material. What we have, then, is a complex mix of historical and theological reasoning

which we'll have to try and disentangle in the following. Inevitably, we shall have to focus largely on the theological side; a few side glances on the history of exegesis must suffice alongside the general awareness of how interconnected the two developments probably are.

1. Albert Schweitzer and the Quest of the historical Jesus

The most famous historical document from the early 20th century pertaining to this problem is Albert Schweitzer's book on *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Written in 1906 and translated into English as early as 1910 it bears all the landmarks of a classic. Admirable in the first place for its incredible learning – Schweitzer is, after all, summarising more than 100 years of intensive scholarly argument and debate – the learning displayed nowhere gets in the way of a splendidly lucid presentation which follows a clear-cut idea of what this story is about, what its relevance is and where it is leading to. Not least, Schweitzer's book is written in masterly style, full of memorable metaphors. To give just one example, his discussion of Johannes Weiss' famous book of 1892 is introduced as follows:

> In passing … to Johannes Weiss the reader feels like an explorer who after wary wanderings through billowy seas of reed-grass at length reaches a wooded tract, and instead of swamp feels firm ground beneath his feet, instead of yielding rushes sees around him the steadfast trees.

Schweitzer's book recalls the quest of the historical Jesus as a particular narrative. What is this narrative and what is its significance?

Schweitzer's view is summed up brilliantly in the memorable words from the final chapter of Schweitzer's study:

> The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour. It loosed the bands by which He had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more, and the historical Jesus advancing, as it seemed, to meet it. But He does not stay; He passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let Him go. He returned to His own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position. (p. 399)

The story that is epitomised in these lines contains these essential elements: the quest for the life of the historical Jesus has been fuelled by dissatisfaction with the 'dogmatic' Jesus, in other words by the feeling that the traditional formulae of two natures united in one Person would not satisfy the spiritual and religious expectations of those believing in Jesus at the time. It entertained the hope that historical study would awaken Jesus from his petrified state. This it did indeed. Yet, while breathing new life into the historical figure of Jesus this research proved Janus-headed by removing the man, whom it had thus resuscitated, at the same time to the remoteness of historical and cultural difference. The historical Jesus was, after all, a man from 1st century Galilee, strange-looking, full of opinions and ideas that 19th century Europeans had to find unpalatable. Most important was, from Schweitzer's point of view, the discovery of apocalypticism, the belief in an imminent end of the world so frequent in contemporary Judaism, and its importance for an understanding of Jesus (as Johannes Weiss had shown 15 years earlier). Historical research, then, would eventually reveal Jesus as a failed prophet who had lived and died under the delusory expectation that God was about to end the drama of world history in the near future; it was by benign misinterpretation that he was changed into the Christ, the saviour figure, the ethical and spiritual ideal which humankind was so deeply in need of for its own perfection. Rather than think of the historical Jesus, then, Christians ought to cling to the insights that had been generated in his name and that had taken hold, fortunately, in Western societies.

Schweitzer thus does not actually himself subscribe to the viewpoint of extreme scepticism with regard to the historical Jesus which was, at the same time, put forth by W. Wrede who had (*The Messianic Secret*, 1901; ET: 1971) argued that in Mark the motif of the 'messianic secret' masked the fact that the 'real' life of Jesus had been entirely unmessianic thus positing an outright contradiction between whatever may have been known of his life then and the beliefs of primitive Christianity. Yet Schweitzer is able to write of Wrede's book with much sympathy since he sees himself united with the latter in their opposition to commonly held views about the historical Jesus and his importance for current Christianity:

> The historical Jesus of whom the criticism of the future […] will draw the portrait, can never render modern theology the services which it claimed from its own half-historical, half-modern, Jesus. He will be a Jesus, who was Messiah, and lived as such, either on the ground of a literary fiction of the earliest Evangelist [this was Wrede's view], or on the ground of a purely eschatological Messianic conception [Schweitzer's own view].
>
> In either case, He will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the present can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. Nor will He be a figure which can be made by a popular historical treatment so sympathetic and universally intelligible to the multitude. The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma. (pp. 398-9)

At this point, I make two comments on the historical and exegetical aspect of this problem to move on, then, to the more theological element contained in it.

First, the idea to which Schweitzer and Wrede are responding with such criticism is, in a sense, more than just 'historical Jesus research' in the sense in which it is practised by many even today. They have before them a long list of books purporting to be 'Lives of Jesus'. As such those books cannot do without much historical and, specifically, psychological guesswork. As anyone knows who has read the gospel accounts, one of the features that renders them striking for our own taste is that they are almost entirely devoid of psychology. The very fact that we so strongly expect to find mention of reasons and motivations for particular actions or words in a narrative alerts us to their omission from those stories. This, however, means that they will be substituted arbitrarily (as any Sunday-school version of gospel texts does to this day!). Schweitzer is absolutely right in pointing this out; but at the same time it is misleading to make his comments refer to all and any kinds of historical Jesus research.

The other observation is more general in nature, and already points to the theological problem which we shall address presently. Schweitzer sketches the problem of the historical Jesus in a way which makes it quite similar to historical research in a much broader sense. For it is quite generally a paradox that we study the past with the expectation to discover ourselves in it, but that careful historical study will always reveal at least as much distance and strangeness as it shows similarity and familiarity. This then is not a special

problem of dealing with Jesus, it only becomes a special problem when too much is at stake. The problem, in other words, is not so much what we can or cannot know about Jesus, but the theological and – more generally – the religious expectation that historical study would unearth a Jesus who is both historical and contemporary, both 'original' and 'familiar'. While such desire may be understandable, it cannot really be considered a surprise that it could never be fulfilled.

This latter comment leads on to the theological observation on Schweitzer's conclusions. They are directed, it appears, against a very specific interest in the 'historical Jesus'. This is, to begin with, constructed in opposition to the traditional, dogmatic picture of him. Of this people got tired, and hoped to find a better, a more realistic and, ultimately, a more legitimate picture in the history that was supposed to be contained in, and yielded by, the biblical narratives. This picture, it was then assumed, would provide for a more appropriate underpinning of Christian belief in Jesus. The interesting question here is why? Why would a dynamic, historical idea of Jesus serve Christianity in a way that could not be achieved by more traditional Christologies? The answer can only be: because the function of Christ generally is to impress and inspire believers through his personality. The soteriology underlying the Christological view Schweitzer is aiming at, assumes that the relevance of Christ for the Christians consists of his inspirational personality. And since this personality could be grasped only through historical knowledge, we must employ this to recapture it as best we can, only to discover that what we get in the end is deeply dissatisfying. For no personality can be dissolved from its historical setting.

I note only in passing that, interestingly, this Christology, if we should call it this, corresponds closely to what Schweitzer himself proposes at the end of his famous study – except that he claims that this impression of Jesus is received independently of history:

> Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery. It is the solid foundation of Christianity. (p. 399)

More important, however, is to see that this whole construction is not at all the only, nor indeed the major theological reason to develop an interest in the historical Jesus. If it were, then only a modern and consciously post-traditional understanding of Christ could develop this kind of interest. Yet this is clearly not the case. While not employing the tools of modern historical scholarship Christians, beginning with the gospels, have always wished to ascertain as best they could what the life of Jesus was like. Christological concern has almost always generated interest in the 'historical Jesus'.

Moreover, even allowing for some fairly sweeping generalisations it seems clear that the increasing application of modern historical tools, since the late 18th century, to exegetical research cannot be said to have served in their entirety the narrow theological agenda Schweitzer has in mind. There must then, be something else, something that is, perhaps, more in line with traditional Christological concern fuelling interest in the historical Jesus.

Schweitzer's book has been seen as closing a chapter of theological research. Yet this is true only for his agenda in the narrower sense we have seen it possess: and indeed scholars and theologians have been reluctant ever since to draw on the gospels for a Life of Jesus to re-create his personality for our time (on the less rigid popular market, of course, this is quite different; but this only as an aside). It is unlikely, then, that his arguments have an equally final character for the much wider question of the relevance of the 'historical Jesus' for the Christian faith.

So we ought to move on now to a consideration of that wider question before us.

2. The historical Jesus and the Christ of faith

Assuming we do not in the first place wish to substitute traditional Christology, but reform and reformulate it for out own time, what then is the theological relevance of the historical Jesus for Christian faith in him as the Christ? The broad and general answer to that question must be, of course, that the historicity of Jesus is one, important aspect of his humanity. If it is accepted that he was 'fully man', it must follow that he was part of human history.

Yet this means that all the stubborn problems that are known to have beset traditional Christology will also haunt his relation to history. For, it is clear that, while Jesus must have been 'historical' he cannot have been, as it were, 'merely' historical. His historicity must, as any aspect of his person, mirror his unique status as God-man (to employ traditional terminology). Only if we consented to a radically 'divisive' Christology could this tension be resolved by seeing his humanity as simply being historical and, quite detached from that, his divinity as some additional quality marking him out from other human beings. When one realises, however, that Christology means to think of both, God and man, in the same subject, then this particular quality of Jesus must influence the way he was historical and potentially the way we understand history and historicity generally. In other words: the fact that God became human means, at the same time, that God became historical, and this must have some significance at least for the understanding of the historical Jesus, but probably beyond him.

This is the wider issue which bedevilled much of 19th century theology; it fuelled historical and exegetical research and, at the same time, theological interpretations of its relevance for Christianity and for Christian faith. With only a trifle of exaggeration one may say that history was the medium within which 19th century theology probed and debated the central issues of Christian theology, what it meant for God to become man, and what it means for us that this happened at one point in history, as the biblical phrase has it, *once and for all* (hapax).

This is not a lecture in 19th century Christology, so some very basic outlines must suffice. These, however, are necessary since much of the problem has been bequeathed to the 20th century, and many or most of the theologians who have carried on this debate in the last century have done so by either continuing some thread started in the 19th century or by working against some such thread.

The most influential idea developed in the 19th century for a positive relation between God and history on the basis of the Incarnation makes essentially two interconnected assertions: one is that the Incarnation means, specifically, that God entered the realm of human history thereby transforming it from the chaotic chain of arbitrary and contingent events into an intelligible whole ordained towards a goal. The other idea is essentially soteriological in character (but remember what was said last week about Christology and soteriology being complementary!) asserting that history was also the medium in which salvation was passed on from Jesus to us. It uses history, in other words, to solve this most difficult puzzle of soteriology which has aptly been put into the dichotomy of 'past event and present salvation': how can something that happened long ago be of such fundamentally important relevance for anyone now living. To this the reply would be: it matters now because we are not entirely cut off from the past event, but rather connected to it through a chain of historical developments. The fact that we are Christians now and, as such, affected by salvation is related to the historical reality of Jesus through the historical continuity of Christianity, of the Church. While we don't perceive of this link, it is still there, and it is effective: without this continuity we would not be what we are.

This brings us back to Christology: the wider significance of the Christ event would be that it transformed history by creating something new, something that was about to transform the world in its turn, Christianity. The history of the world – and this is, not least, the history of humankind – thus receives a specific directedness. All history up to Christ would be pointing to him; all history since would be influenced and changed by and through the Incarnation. This, of course, has not been a new concept of the 19th century. The fact that theologians ever since the early Church have developed

theologies of history bears testimony to the attractiveness of historical theories for theological analysis. The novelty, of course, of 19th century theories consisted in their exposure to non-theological notions of history and of historical research. The long chain of historical theologians or theologians of history, from Eusebius of Caesarea to Augustine to Otto of Freising and Joachim of Flora, were never confronted by themselves or by others, with a standard of 'historical research' based on the suspension of value judgments for the time being. This made modern theology of history from the start a dangerous undertaking: one could never know for sure what lurked behind the next corner, and it took, I am not being ironic here, true faith, and reliance on divine providence to embark on so uncertain a journey. And here we may, once again, think of Schweitzer and the untoward conclusions he (and others) drew from historical research in these matters.

The wider theory of the Incarnation's effect on human history, one might say, was less exposed to this kind of criticism partly because it was less specific in its claims. Yet this meant, at the same time, that one might well wonder whether that view, for all its historical overtones, was not in fact disinterested in the historical Jesus. What feature of the historical Jesus would, specifically, compel us to conclude that with him God opened a new page in the book of human history? If there is an answer to that question, this would probably be that it is the resurrection which Paul already saw as the beginning of a new age (aeon). Yet the resurrection is not, really and truly, part of what we call the 'historical Jesus' even though it requires his previous existence. What this boils down to is that the theologian who engages with theology of history may eventually be like the magi of the gospel: he may be searching for signs indicating the wholesome influence of the Incarnation of God among humankind; it is less obvious that he would need, to that effect, knowledge of any particular detail about life or, indeed, the preaching of Jesus.

The problem of Jesus and history, then, is a problem which does not go away with the changing of the tide of New Testament scholarship. It is one fundamental aspect of the central question of the Christian faith: what does it mean for God and man to have come together in the person of Jesus. Interestingly, however, while it clearly has fuelled historical research about

Jesus and his fate, it could also direct attention away from any particular interest in the historical Jesus.

The major protest the 19th century saw against this whole enterprise was articulated by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. It is thus not surprising that early 20th century theologians who wished to steer clear of any mingling of theology and history claimed the support of his ideas about religion, Christianity and the Incarnation and their essentially unhistorical character. This will be the topic of next week's lecture.

Week 3: Dialectical Theology. The de-historicizing of Christology

The Christological relevance of the theological developments that took place in the wake of the Great War is grasped properly only when we realise that it was not merely provoked by some frustration with the contemporary vicissitudes of historical Jesus research. The theological movement which over time became known as 'dialectical theology' reacted much more broadly to 19th century attempts to use history as a major point of reference for the construction of Christology and soteriology. While the war had alerted them, arguably, to the risks and ambiguities of specific amalgamations of Christian mission and Christian hope with secular developments, their theological critique went far beyond any clarification that might have been necessary to rectify some specifically short-sighted liberal or national eschatologies. This it is important to keep in mind both for appreciating the relevance of this movement as a theological movement, *and* for a healthy judgment about their polemical rejection of prior tendencies. For, while the proponents of dialectical theology were quick to point out that, after a major breakdown of civilisation such as World War I, total rejection of the whole liberal enterprise was called for, the actual validity of this argument is, in fact, as limited as it was, not doubt, strategically useful at the time.

1. Soren Kierkegaard

The idea to reject a historical framing of Christology led theologians of that time inevitably back to one of those major figures of the 19th century, who lingered half forgotten for many decades, only to return with full force at the outset of the 20th century, Soren Kierkegaard. He was born in the same year as Karl Marx, 1813, but since he died in 1855 and produced all his major works within only a few years in the 1840s we think of him very much of belonging to the former half of the 19th century – unlike Marx, e.g., whose fame rests largely on writings he produced in the 1860s and 70s.

Kierkegaard wholeheartedly opposed the Hegelian system with its attempt to identify mind and reality. What for Hegel's admirers meant making the world intelligible meant for Kierkegaard imprisoning it, subjecting it to the feeble thoughts of presumptuous philosophers; and he used all the polemical venom

that he possessed, and this was no small amount, to write against this kind of philosophy. This included its attempt to embrace history in the overall sweep of philosophical reflection and, specifically, the way this was then related to, and in fact equated with, the Christian concept of salvation history.

Kierkegaard starts from the assumption that, contrariwise, faith and knowledge are opposed to each other, and that religious truth cannot be found through the channels of historical knowledge. We have to consider here the argument he develops in his *Philosophical Fragments*. There, Kierkegaard starts from the problem of the human acquisition of knowledge. How is this possible? Plato had already discussed what seemed like a real dilemma: either we know what we aim to learn, but then we do not have to learn any longer; or we do not know, but then we have no chance of learning either, because we could not identify what we desire to know. Indeed, if truth would chance on us we would not be able to recognise it. Plato's own solution is his famous theory of anamnesis: learning is being reminded of something we have known before (e.g. in a previous life). This answer to Kierkegaard seems emblematic of a conception that is wholly unsuited, at least, to religious truth. It stands for the assumption, explicit or implicit, that in and through religion we only find out what, somehow, we had know a long time anyway. Yet this is dubious, to say the least, when God is concerned since God is the Unknown, he is completely unlike man. To understand this alienation fully, he further argues, we must take into account that man willingly turns away from God; only sin explains the total estrangement between God and man.

In this situation, the only way for human beings to learn about God is by being not only instructed, but actually changed. He must first become such a one as would accept the truth about God. For this reason the only way for human beings to find out about God was to be taught by God himself. God must be the teacher, in a sense quite different from the Socratic model that had been advocated by Plato. In order to be such a teacher, however, God must approach humans not through any means of overpowering for in that situation they would not consent because they had actually understood or, rather, believed, but because of fear. So God became man to communicate to man the true nature of God and the secret of his own being.

This coming together of God and man, however, according to Kierkegaard cannot be grasped except by saying it is a paradox – which of course is the same as saying that we cannot understand it. It is, more specifically, the Absolute Paradox; to assume that time and eternity come together is not only impossible to understand, it upsets and becomes a scandal. Yet this is, precisely, what religion truly is: a scandal to those trying to understand it rationally. This then leads to a crisis which either ends with a 'leap' into faith or in continuing unbelief. We are reminded, of course, of St Paul: 'The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' (1 Cor 1 : 18)

This insight into the person and the workings of Christ leads Kierkegaard directly to the problems of faith and history. It had been a celebrated claim, made first by Lessing, that there is a fundamental difference between the 'first' and the 'second' disciple. The first believes because he has actually seen the things that have happened; the latter must rely wholly on the account of the former; and, as Lessing observed, there is a huge difference between these two experiences. Kierkegaard flatly denies this claim, and it is easy to see why. Facing Christ, human beings face the impossible possibility, they face the Absolute Paradox. This problem is precisely the same for the contemporary of Jesus as for us. To accept the reality of this coming together of God and man is as difficult and unlikely now as it was then; faith as much a miracle then as it is now. History, then, is irrelevant for the understanding of Christ and his salvific effects on us. To say the opposite is merely yet another attempt of the sinful human being to avoid the paradox by making God and his Incarnation ultimately part of his own, human world.

One must admit that it is somewhat artificial to look at Kierkegaard's argument from the point of view of a 'Christology' as he nowhere claims that this is what he aspired to. Yet given that his views were to become so influential among theologians, it is perhaps justified to point out that his account places its entire emphasis on the utter strangeness and mystery of the mere idea of human and divine coming together. It is not difficult to see why his view would inspire and fascinate many – not least through the interesting spotlight he throws on the relation between Christology and soteriology,

implying that there could never be an 'impartial' Christology that understanding the unity of God and man was tantamount to 'believing' or, more precisely, with being touched by divine grace or, in the language of the reformers, being justified. For, one must not misconstrue Kierkegaard as being fideist in a narrow sense of *credo quia absurdum*; the point is not to accept something as true even though it appears to be impossible, but that meaning occurs on the basis of a personality change which is itself not in the power of the human subject.

Yet at the same time it is also clear what this theory fails to explain or, perhaps better, what it does not intend to explain, and this is the Incarnation itself as a historical event. In Kierkegaard's account there is no way of conceptualising the actual union of God and man in Jesus; this, precisely, is the paradox, and thus far this is all there is to be said about it. God touches the human world only in individual flashes, as it were, then in the Incarnation, every now and then in human conversions; Kierkegaard offers no argument to sustain the notion that he entered in communion with humanity, including our spatial and historical constitution. This should prove the Achilles heel of all theological attempts to appropriate Kierkegaard to which we now move.

2. The early Karl Barth

It is inevitable to deal with Barth twice in the course of these lectures. While the exact nature of his theological development has been the subject of much debate, there is no doubt that specifically the ideas about Jesus Christ underlying his early, 'dialectical' work are substantially reworked and corrected in his later *opus magnum*, the *Church Dogmatics*. This will be the subject of a later lecture. Today Barth is of interest as the major figure in the post-war movement called dialectical theology. It would be too easy to see in him only a student of Kierkegaard; he was earlier under the influence of academic theology in the tradition of Kant and Schleiermacher which, however much he disowned it later on, left indelible traces in his own approach to theological work; equally, the political influence of socialist thought and – correspondingly – the theological influence of religious

socialism must not be underestimated. Barth was a highly politicised person throughout his life, indeed one may not go wrong in seeing his political instincts behind the exceptionally successful and durable clichés he was able to label on his adversaries.

From 1911 Barth had worked as local pastor in Safenwil in his native Switzerland. During the ensuing years he became increasingly convinced that theology needed a radical overhaul. This would essentially consist in a departure from a theology that had put humanity at its centre and relegated God, at best, to the periphery. This, in Barth's view had been the one unifying aspect of all theologies (or almost all theologies) since the 18th century. The alternative would be, of course, to put God back at the centre of theological thought. What exactly that meant and how it could be achieved, this is the fundamental issue with which Barth wrestled throughout the remainder of his life, which caused him to take on first the theological establishment of his time and later countless others, often former friends; it made him constantly rework his own thoughts and ideas also.

The major document of Barth's theological breakthrough after the Great War is his *Epistle to the Romans*, a commentary on Paul's most theological letter. Barth famously and controversially all but ignores historical-critical scholarship of his time and, instead, tries to take the text seriously as a theological document, an attempt to express something that defies saying – then and now. Barth published this book originally in 1919; it became a huge success in spite of much criticism that was levelled against it from the very outset. In subsequent years he nevertheless reworked the commentary thoroughly, and it is this second version, published in 1921 which has stood the text of time and become a theological classic.

Barth's central idea is identical with Kierkegaard's – that there is an 'infinite difference' between God and man, and any attempt to think or speak (or write) about God must start from the ensuing utter impossibility of any such undertaking. What does this mean for Jesus Christ, then? Right at the beginning of his commentary, Barth approaches this problem head on. To speak of Jesus Christ, he says, is to speak of the intersection of two planes. One we know, the other is utterly unknown to us. And it remains unknown

except for the fact that it has actually touched our own world. For Barth insists quite strongly on this meeting in one point; over and over he emphasises in a cascade of metaphors the fleeting nature of this encounter:

> The point on the line of intersection is no more extended onto the known plane than is the unknown plane of which it proclaims the existence. The effulgence, or, rather, the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell, the void by which the point on the line of intersection makes itself known in the concrete world of history, is not – even though it be named the life of Jesus – that other world which touches our world in Him. (29)

We can see that, within the train of thought we observed earlier in Kierkegaard, it is in particular the combination of two ideas that Barth finds fascinating and incorporates into his own theology: one is the radical otherness of God; the other is, consequently, the idea of the Incarnation as the merely paradoxical unity of what is totally unlike each other. In a famous phrase, Jesus intersects our own plane 'vertically, from above'. He touches it, to cite another equally famous phrase, 'as the tangent touches a circle, that is without touching it.' (both p. 30)

Barth has less use of Kierkegaard's quasi-existentialist account of the generation of faith through an encounter with this paradox. He is interested in a way of thinking about God while at the same time acknowledging his complete difference from everything we can know, experience or express. It is, in a sense, an extreme version of negative theology except that Barth would see this tradition as not going far enough in this direction.

It is not surprising, then, that Barth's Christology in *Romans* is almost entirely focussed on the resurrection:

> The Resurrection is the revelation: the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus. The Resurrection is the emergence of the necessity of giving glory to God: the reckoning with what is unknown and unobservable in Jesus, the recognition of him as Paradox … In the resurrection the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world … (30)

And it is this particular act, this point of contact between the two worlds that is all decisive. Through this act Jesus is declared Son of God, as Barth formulates in the words of St Paul, and he adds in his own words – and even he himself would perhaps not have fully and entirely believed that Paul would have followed him there:

> [This] is the significance of Jesus, and, apart from this, Jesus has no more significance or insignificance than may be attached to any man or thing or period of history in itself. (30)

Surely, what he means is that Jesus' colour of hair or favourite dish, his personal accent or his choice of clothing matter not for the Christian faith; like Kierkegaard, he wants to emphasise the importance of the mere fact of the coming together of God and man, but in a way he goes further than the Danish philosopher. By making the resurrection the one point of contact between our world and the Kingdom of God an Incarnation is virtually ruled out. Christ is important insofar as he gave the occasion for this event to happen, but when it actually happened, his life had been over anyway. What matters is not the 'merging or fusion of God and man', what matters is the revelation of the Kingdom of God which is briefly but decisively unveiled in the moment of the resurrection: 'The Kingdom of God has become actual and is "nigh at hand."'

At this point we are reminded that the discovery of eschatology, which had played such a fundamental role for Schweitzer, is pivotal for dialectical theology also. The difference is that, while Schweitzer thought that eschatology could only mean eschatology, that is the expectation of an imminent end of the world, Barth and his friends had a clever variation on this theme to offer. They argued that the Kingdom that Jesus preached and that Primitive Christianity was so concerned about was no new act of history consequent upon the downfall of the current order, but that it was the beginning of something altogether new and different. Therefore, what Schweitzer had seen as the ultimate doom of Christianity, the insight that the hope of the early Christians had been entirely disappointed by the non-occurrence of the Parousia, is vehemently contradicted by Barth:

> But that day and that hour no man knoweth – *not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father* (Mk 13, 32). Do not our ears burn when we hear this? Will there never be an end of all our ceaseless talk about the *delay* of the Parousia? … The end of which the New Testament speaks is no temporal event, no legendary 'destruction' of the world; it has nothing to do with any historical, or 'telluric' or cosmic catastrophe. The end of which the New Testament speaks is really the End; so utterly the End, that in the measuring of nearness or distance our nineteen hundred years are not merely of little, but of no importance. (500)

This is because the end is here understood as relating to the difference between time and eternity, man and God. This is the difference which has at once been revealed and bridged in the revelation through Christ, more specifically, in his resurrection.

Barth then clearly manages to break away from the major strands in Christology that had dominated theology for more than one hundred years. He presents a picture in which the major disturbances that had bedevilled Schweitzer and others, the crisis of the Lives of Jesus and the discovery of eschatology, are not only neutralised in their consequences, but are actually pressed in the service of a specific theological conception; they are transformed from liabilities into assets, we might say. Yet this theology is so far theocentric, emphasising the strangeness and the otherness of God. Focussing specifically on Christology we can see that Barth is actually paying a hefty price: much more distinctly than in Kierkegaard the very notion of the Incarnation practically vanishes. Jesus is reduced to little more than an occasion for the resurrection to occur, which is the one revelation which sheds new light on everything, including, but not limited to, the life of the 'historical Jesus'. It is not surprising then that Barth himself felt the need to rework this theology, and that he came up eventually with a version which was quite different from his first attempt – especially so in its Christology.

For today, however, it may be worthwhile to dwell on one more dialectical theologian who had, even in that early time, quite a distinct voice and would become, later on, Barth's major theological rival, Rudolf Bultmann.

Week 4: Jesus Christ and human existence

In many ways this week's topic continues last week's lecture. The two theologians I shall be dealing with mainly may be said to have belonged, at least initially, to the same group of 'dialectical theologians' in the 1920s. They too take their starting point from the scholarly and cultural crisis of the First World War. Finally, they much like the early Barth are deeply influenced by the failure of historical Jesus research and by Kierkegaard's 'anti-historicist' argument. Yet they develop Kierkegaard in a different direction and, finally, admit other influences besides him as well. Whereas for Barth the major stimulus received from the work of the Danish philosopher was, as you have heard, the need to draw a radical distinction between God and world, others took seriously his insistence that the cognitive insight gained by theological and especially Christological study could not be separated from a personal encounter with Christ. This 'existential' aspect informs both historical study of the New Testament and systematic reflection on religion today. For the former aspect we shall look especially at the work of Rudolf Bultmann, for the latter at the contribution made by Paul Tillich.

3. Rudolf Bultmann

Bultmann's take on Christology is crucially influenced by the fact that he was, throughout his academic career, in the first place a New Testament scholar. As such he is much more indebted and under the influence of those developments that we witnessed in the work of Albert Schweitzer, more specifically the 'radical criticism' of Wrede. Bultmann was deeply convinced that historical study in the New Testament would destroy any confidence in obtaining any idea of Jesus' personality or the details of his biography. He did not doubt, to be sure, that Jesus existed (in fact he thought that no serious-minded person would entertain this kind of doubt). Nor was he sceptical with regard to the teaching of Jesus; he held that solid critical work would provide us with a clear picture of what Jesus' main ideas and the content of his preaching was.

And this was all that mattered. He could say:

> 'I never felt uncomfortable in my critical radicalism, indeed I have been quite comfortable with it. … I let it burn, for I see that what is burning are all the fanciful notions of the Life-of-Jesus theology, and that it is the *Christos kata sarka* himself.' (GuV I, 101)

The allusion of course is to the conventional dichotomy 'according to the flesh' – 'according to the spirit' which in Paul is tantamount to 'being under the law' – 'being under grace', 'being part of the old world' – 'being part of the new world', etc. This is quite telling. For Bultmann, any interest in the historical Jesus, insofar as it is theological interest is misguided because it practically seeks to draw our attention away from what really matters. It is human interest in another human being, which is natural and not in itself bad; yet it is no more justified in the case of Jesus than it is in the case of Napoleon or Leonardo da Vinci or Albert Einstein. What makes Jesus special is something different.

What is this? Bultmann thinks, characteristically, that it is to be found in his preaching (which incidentally we know). It is there that we encounter the Word of God. How do we know it is the Word of God? Why is it special? To this Bultmann answers that it exposes the wrongness of our entire existence; it confronts us with the insight that we are sinners and that God offers us forgiveness of sins. This, of course, does not happen automatically or naturally, but only through faith. Faith, then, is – much as it was with Kierkegaard, a total change of our personality and, as such, a miracle. In a way it is the one miracle that actually confirms the Sonship of Jesus. The testimony of the New Testament is so valuable, Bultmann believes, because it testifies precisely to this miracle, it witnesses the faith of the early Christians, and – if it is accepted that the generation of faith is not a natural act – this is as much of a miracle as you could ask for (and, therefore, and only therefore Bultmann was quite happy to discard all the so-called miracles as attempts to express this one true miracle within the language and the thought world of antiquity).

This coming-into-existence of faith does not, of course, happen in a vacuum, it is something that human beings experience, and therefore it can be the subject of academic theological study – unlike the nature of God. For Bultmann, while sharing Barth's ideas about the utter distance between God and world, draws a

different conclusion from this insight which should over time make him and Barth almost paradigmatic opponents. While Barth thinks that theology must move from the recognition of this distance to the paradoxical insight that it must think about God though it cannot think about God – and try to make sense of it, Bultmann argues that theology must therefore study what it can study, and this is the human being in his response to the Word of God. Theology, then, is trying to analyse human disbelief and human faith, the human condition apart from his relation to God and the possibility of his being transformed by the encounter with the Word of God in the preached *kerygma*. This brings him, in the eyes of Barth, full circle back to the position of Schleiermacher and 'liberal theology' which, from Barth's perspective, had committed the fatal mistake of confounding theology with anthropology by refusing to think about God. Bultmann himself undoubtedly perceived this relationship and would not deny it, but for him the crucial mistake of those theologians had been a different one anyway, viz. the neglect of God's transcendence and thus the collapse of the Word of God with some kind of insight human beings had on their own and quite independently of their encounter with that Word.

Characteristically, Bultmann's Christology is nowhere more clearly developed than in his landmark commentary on the gospel of John. It has rightly been observed that Bultmann sees the essential message of that gospel specifically in the first half of the famous 14th verse of the 1st chapter: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us full of grace and truth.' The gospel thus witnesses this paradoxical unity of God and man and the task faced by those meeting Jesus to respond to that challenge. Bultmann is using all his critical acumen to prove that everything else in the gospel, notably the many seemingly 'ontological' dualisms of light and darkness and the like were later additions, influenced, as he assumed, by the encounter of Christianity and Gnosticism and the ensuing misinterpretation of the gospel. While few would now share the many historical and philological assumptions Bultmann makes in that commentary, he himself indicates what he finds truly important by relegating most of that discussion to his extensive notes while confining himself in the main text to argue his theological, Christological point: that the union of God and man is something that is essentially invisible and therefore

must be grasped by faith. The words spoken by the resurrected Jesus to Thomas, the doubter, at the very end of the gospel: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,' thus are not only spoken to those who come later and have to make a virtue out of necessity, but refer to the entire story that is related in the preceding text.

The problem in the end is, then, much the same as in Kierkegaard and the early Barth: while the distinction of God and human nature is maintained and actually emphasised in Christology, the very act of their coming together and thus the very idea of Incarnation is not conceptualised. In Bultmann one could almost speak, in analogy to negative theology, of a negative Christology because the divine element is maintained almost as a vacuum, a space left empty due to our inability to think or speak about it.

4. Paul Tillich

The third representative of this Kierkegaardian response to the failure of the quest of the historical Jesus to whom we have to turn briefly here is Paul Tillich. Tillich is, like Barth and unlike Bultmann, a person who has worked and reworked his theology throughout his life. During the 20s he was strongly under the influence of Marxism and became perhaps the major theological representative of religious socialism. This made him a prime target of the National Socialist rulers, and Tillich went into American exile. It was in the US where he truly came to fame, and a certain irony lies in the fact that in the 50s and 60s his theology was accepted by an American mainstream which, during those years, quite generally was not specifically prone to Marxism or socialism. The reason for this is partly that Tillich's theology was by then couched in the terminology of existentialism though, as we shall see, while he much more than the early Barth or Bultmann acknowledged this kind of philosophy as a formative element within his theology, he also gave it a very particular twist.

The reason why Tillich is much less coy in the use of terms like existentialism in his theology is his specific understanding of what theology is. He thinks that theology is by necessity closely related to all the other, non-theological aspects

of human culture and their analysis, in other words to art and literature, but also to psychology and film study (which though did not exist as an academic discipline in those days), to literary criticism and not least philosophy. This close relation exists because theology uses a method which he calls the method of correlation. This method assumes that the whole of human culture represents ultimately a set of unanswered questions about what human beings are, where they come from, what their purpose and their destiny is. These questions theology must take seriously because the Christian message is to be understood as an answer to those questions. In order to answer them, however, theology has to know them, and it certainly marks a strong and creative aspect of Tillich's work that he realises and emphasises that this 'knowing' must be concrete and encompassing which, currently, theology can only obtain by learning from those around them. While this openness towards culture, as Tillich was aware, makes him stand out from dialectical theologians like Barth, he is at one with the other dialectical theologians in rejecting the kind of synthesis between Christianity and culture that was advocated by some liberal theologians of the previous generation. For Tillich restricts the relevance of culture in theology to the formulation of existential questions; it is, on the other hand, the task of theology to formulate answers to them. And these answers are real answers; they are not yet contained in the questions.

Tillich's major work is his *Systematic Theology* which appeared from 1950 in four parts (in three volumes). It is held together by the attempt to construct the entirety of the traditional contents of Christian doctrine within this framework of Tillich's own method.

The 2nd volume contains the third part of that system which deals with Christology. It is aptly titled *Existence and the Christ*. This title indicates what Tillich has to say on the subject. Christ must be understood as the answer to the puzzle of existence. Now existence is for Tillich by definition *finite* existence and as such distinct from infinite essence, God. Existence is thus characterised by the difference of actual and potential, of what it is and what it might have been, of existence and essence. It is thus inherently problematic, characterised by 'estrangement' from its origin in infinite being, which is, for

Tillich, symbolised by the theological term 'sin'. This inevitable estrangement finds its expression in all the more specific forms which the Christian tradition has associated with sin: unbelief, hubris, concupiscence as well as the existence of evil. Existentialism in philosophy and the arts brings out this human condition and thus is, Tillich thinks, a natural ally of Christianity (vol. 2, 27). Tillich in a sense brushes away the possibility of atheistic existentialism as the whole point of existentialism is to point to a problem to which there is, within human experience, no solution. One might almost say that the bleaker the perspective of the existentialist, the better for the theologian: at the height of unbelief and despair the need for the saviour is most keenly felt. Much more dangerous, on the other hand, is what Tillich calls the 'essentialist' tradition which is that philosophy (and its cultural counterparts) claiming to conceptualise reconciliation, i.e. the overcoming of estrangement, and the healing of the existential rift. For this kind of thinking pretends to be able to do something humans cannot do on their own; on a more malicious note one might say that they dare rob the theologian of his role and make him thus redundant, though in all fairness the point for Tillich is not that of individual competence as theologian or philosopher, but of the separation of roles. That Hegel's philosophy is half theology would, as such, not matter were it not for the fact that it is presented as merely philosophy.

The answer the theologian formulates to the existential dilemma is – once again we encounter Kierkegaardian terminology – the paradox of Jesus as the Christ. 'Paradox' for Tillich means specifically that it 'contradicts the *doxa*, the opinion which is based on the whole of ordinary human experience, including the empirical and the rational. The Christian paradox contradicts the opinion derived from man's existential predicament and all expectations imaginable on the basis of this predicament.' (vol. 2, 92)

It is paradoxical precisely because it means that the infinite enters the finite, thus conquering and judging it. Christ provides the answer to existential estrangement because he represents the infinite in a personal life, under the conditions of finitude. He thus opens up a new chapter in the history of humankind, is the beginning of a new aeon (Tillich – again like Barth and

Bultmann is under the influence of the 'eschatological turn' of theology), and the believer is therefore aptly called a 'new creation'.

Tillich's own preferred term for what Christ means – in one with his terminology of essence and existence – is New Being. He maintains that the expectation of such a New Being is a necessary consequence of the existential predicament of human beings, and it is for this reason that the world of religions knows of this expectation in endless varieties which fall largely into two types: historical and trans-historical. Christianity, Tillich argues, can claim to offer a universally valid answer to these expectations because its belief in Jesus, the Christ, embraces both those types:

> The universal quest for the New Being is a consequence of universal revelation. If it claims universality, Christianity implicitly maintains that the different forms in which the quest for the New Being have been made are fulfilled in Jesus as the Christ. […] Christianity, to be universally valid, must unite the horizontal direction of the expectation of the New Being with the vertical one. (vol. 2, 89)

The horizontal then is signified by the historical existence of Jesus, by the assumption that the infinite actually entered the finite world, the vertical, by belief in his pre-existence, by his identification with the divine *logos*. For Christianity, both is equally essential: the Jesus-side and the Christ-side of the event. It constitutes the legitimacy of the quest of the historical Jesus that it emphasised the former; yet it failed. Tillich spills some ink on an attempt to come to terms with this problem, but it is not quite clear that he has one clear position. On the one hand, he takes a radically de-historicizing perspective and criticises even Bultmann for his lingering interest in the historical message, the *kerygma*. This is because, according to Tillich, the fundamentally theological reason for the failure of the quest of the historical Jesus is its refusal to acknowledge that it the New Being or the Christ of faith (the latter expression Tillich does not use here) could never be discovered by historical research. In this sense he comments on Bultmann's theology of *kerygma*: '… it is impossible to retreat from the being of the Christ to his words. The last avenue of the search for the historical Jesus has been barred, and the failure of the attempt to give a foundation to the Christian faith through historical research becomes obvious.' (2, 106)

And yet, Tillich subsequently comes back to the problem of historical research and theology. He realises that historical existence is fundamental if the gospel of Jesus, the Christ, is not pure mythology, and also that mere existence (Bultmann's famous 'that') is not sufficient:

> Kierkegaard exaggerates when he says that it is sufficient for the Christian faith nakedly to assert that in the years 1-30 God sent his son. Without the concreteness of the New Being, its newness would be empty. (2, 114)

Tillich's solution to this problem, however, is not so different, ultimately, from that of Bultmann and, once more, betrays the legacy of 19th century theology. The traces we look for of the New Being, Tillich argues, are preserved as in an image in those who have been in contact with him. And there is, as it were, an *analogia imaginis*, an analogy of image which allows us to gather some insight into the mystery of what the New Being was like – just like the analogy of being allow us limited insight into the being of God. The only way then to speak about the reality of the New Being is indirect, through the reality of faith generated in those who encountered him.

What exactly does Tillich mean by his term of New Being, and what is the relevance of this way of framing Christology? The New Being is the actuality, the reality of human life in finitude but without the ambiguities of existence. It is the reality of finite life without estrangement from its source and origin in infinite being. It is the concrete example of being reconciled. It is *New* Being because Tillich does not accept the literal reading of the Fall story. The true being of humanity is something that is yet to come and has therefore been revealed in Jesus as the beginning of a new age. This does not mean, of course, that it is something entirely new. As far as God is concerned it is, rather, the eternal being of humanity, but historically it is not something that has existed at some time, but new reality.

Christ, consequently, exemplifies this eternal, but so far not historical, relation between God and humanity. This brings him into conflict with the Christological formula of Chalcedon and the terminology of two natures generally. While he accepts that this represents an attempt to conceptualise the true character of the Christ-event, this conceptualisation itself is open to serious misunderstanding, now more than ever:

> The assertion that Jesus as the Christ is the personal unity of a divine and a human nature must be replaced by the assertion that in Jesus as the Christ the eternal unity of God and man became historical reality. In his being, the New Being is real, and the New Being is the re-established unity between God and man. We replace the inadequate concept 'divine nature' by the concepts 'eternal God-man-unity' or 'Eternal God-Manhood'. Such concepts replace a static essence by a dynamic relation.' (2, 148)

It is quite interesting to observe here how Tillich, in spite of his existentialist rhetoric, practically moves towards an idealistic framework where Jesus Christ in the end symbolises an eternal truth about humanity, its unity with the divine. While he would vehemently protest against such an interpretation, it appears that his willingness to couch Christian theology in the terminology of essence, existence, estrangement and New Being makes it quite easy to argue that this is a universal insight which finds merely its specific confirmation in the particular narrative of Christianity. This, of course, need not be wholly bad, but it is clearly not what Tillich wants and pretends to do. He is caught, it seems, in the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between theology and philosophy on a purely formal level. Assigning to philosophy merely the task of raising the existential question is a limitation not every philosopher will be happy to accept, and such a critic could easily argue that much of Tillich's 'theological' answer is itself philosophical. While it is true that the historical existence of Jesus is something that no philosophical system could deduce, the same is not necessarily true of the universal truth thus expressed. Tillich can only maintain the purely theological character of his 'answers' by confining philosophy to agnostic existentialism yet this in itself is not least a philosophical decision.

In passing at this point to the mature Barth, it may be worthy of attention that this, specifically, is one problem Barth continually wishes to steer clear of. His idiosyncratic version of Christocentric theology is not least designed to secure a more stable dissociation of theology and philosophy.

Week 5: Christocentric Theology: Barth's *Church Dogmatics*

The picture we have gained in these lectures so far seems about to be this. The 20th century started from doubts about a particular amalgamation of Christology and historical thinking. There was the crisis (heralded mainly by Schweitzer's book) of historical Jesus research, but there was also a more generally felt uneasiness about too close a union between theology and the interpretation of historical developments, and it was the latter that made the religious thought of Kierkegaard attractive. Kierkegaard's ideas about Christology are driven by the insight that the encounter with Jesus that is at the heart of Christianity cannot be mediated by historical processes, but must be explained as bridging the historical gap. It thus emphasises the transhistorical nature of the Christ event at the expense of its historical aspect.

All the major figures we have looked at over the last few weeks have, in various ways, taken this Kierkegaardian insight as their starting point: the early Barth emphasises the absolute duality of divine and human; Bultmann the transcendence of the Word of God coming to us in the *kerygma* of the New Testament; Tillich with his more existentialist interpretation of the Incarnation.

Eventually, they have all encountered similar problems. While they (arguably) avoided the major problems of 19th century theological liberalism and steered clear of an identification of Jesus with their own social or political ideals, they found it difficult or impossible to conceptualise the Incarnation as an event. The Incarnation as an event can only be, however, a *historical* event. Ultimately, while there was much concern, during the former half of the 20th century about the need to maintain the singularity, the paradoxical nature of the Christ event, one may well argue that all these theologians once again failed to arrive at a satisfactory explanation or, in fact, at any explanation of the Incarnation. They all were, in one sense, tending towards docetism if by that we mean a Christology which, in principle if by intention, works without the core idea that in Jesus Christ God became human. This is different from the postulation of an 'Incarnation principle', the *idea* of divine-human unity. Incarnation must be a historical event and thus our own historical existence must be involved in its appreciation.

One of the reasons why Karl Barth must come up in these lectures a second time is because he was one of the first to recognise this problem. He reflected towards the end of his life that at some point during the late 1920s he realised that his initial, 'dialectical' theology, while striving to bring Christ back into the centre of theology, had actually (and ironically) failed to do so. His *Church Dogmatics* therefore represents, in one sense, a major attempt to correct and rewrite his earlier theology while holding fast to its fundamental tenets – the need to emphasise the true divinity of God.

This great work then represents something like a turning point in 20th century thought about Jesus Christ. It does also, however, merit consideration here because it is, really, Christocentric theology. In fact, this very fact makes it essentially impossible to give an account of Barth's mature Christology in the course of this lecture, more than the sheer bulk of his writing on the subject, though this is not inconsiderable. The doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ is the centre and the organising principle of the 13-volume *Church Dogmatics*. Inclusion of material, the evaluation of theological tradition and contemporary thought and, most stunningly, the exposition and the discussion of all doctrinal topics throughout this work are guided almost entirely by reference to this particular doctrine. While it is, obviously, not practicable to lay out the *CD* in full here, it would, for this reason, be quite misguiding to relate a particular part or aspect as Barth's Christology. Instead I shall sketch the overall outlines of this great work and try to make it clear how far they are actually determined by a Christological focus.

Barth's decision to make belief in Jesus Christ, more specifically in the Incarnation, the centre-stone of his work has led him to a number of crucial negative as well as positive assertions. Interestingly, the negative ones are better known; it is they that have earned him the doubtful honour of the epitaph 'neo-orthodox', and in most Barthians they do actually dominate. The major contention to be mentioned here is Barth's rejection of what he calls 'natural theology'. This includes, but is not limited to the kind of theological enterprise which William Paley famously practiced, viz. the study of God in the context of nature. For Barth, rather, natural theology means any admission within theology that there is or could be another epistemic

principle apart from Jesus Christ. At the outset of the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* he makes it clear that he has mainly two such practices in mind, one being liberal Protestantism's reconfiguration of theology as anthropology, the other, the Thomistic analogy of being. Both, Barth argues, go astray insofar as they presuppose some innate knowledge of God as the first basis of theology rather than relying entirely on God's own revelation in Christ.

Why was Barth so insistent there? The answer I think is that he felt that any such attempt would ultimately give priority to universal categories (of 'religion' or 'God' or 'salvation') and reduce the Christian understanding of these same categories to specific instances of this universal category. Christianity would be *a* religion, the Christian God would be *a* God, Christ would be *a* saviour figure etc. Yet this would take away from the Christian faith what it actually holds. It would also, incidentally, take away from theology what makes it unique. In such a scheme, the discipline dealing with the more universal categories would necessarily be the more comprehensive one and would prescribe the framework within which theology can then talk about its own, more specific insights. Yet this is contrary to the task of theology which is to articulate something that claims to burst all the categories of human experience. He therefore urges to ignore all those frames and start, instead, from the one insight which all theology must accept as its starting point, viz. that god intended to make himself known through his Word.

It is essential to note that Barth's reason for choosing this approach is his intention to express the concreteness of Christian beliefs: Jesus is not one instance of a saviour figure, but essentially himself; God is the God who made himself known through Jesus Christ; even what humanity is, Barth claims, theology knows not primarily from anthropology or the life sciences, but from its focus on the God-man, and it is precisely this focus which enables theology to obtain a concrete truth about the human being which is so easily lost in scientific approaches. In a way we may say that Barth's celebrated or, to others, notorious insistence on revelation really means the revelation of concrete truth. For revelation, in Barth, does not mean a set of propositions which human beings know only because some authority has revealed them, but a new way of cognition; our eyes are opened to a reality which we would

not otherwise have perceived. It is like walking through a picture gallery accompanied by an art expert whose account makes us see the paintings in an entirely new way. Just in this sense Jesus Christ is the one revelation of God: he makes us perceive God and humanity in a way we could not otherwise have perceived them.

This rejection of universal categories in the service of a perception of particular and concrete reality is not at all orthodox; rather, it has made Barth unwittingly a forerunner of some of the more celebrated theorists of postmodernism, such as Jacques Derrida, who have marked out the universalist character of human thought and language as the major source of a systemic blindness for concrete reality. Not surprisingly, therefore, Barth has more recently enjoyed some reputation amongst those who feel that this challenge to traditional Western thought has some legitimacy.

Barth's focus on God's revelation in Christ thus leads to the rejection of many insights and many methods that have been accepted by orthodox and liberal theologies alike, and, as I said earlier, this negative aspect of his theology has been the focus of much attention amongst his followers as well as his critics. Yet it is crucial to see what Barth goes on to make of theology once he has identified God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the one proper topic of it. In a nutshell, his theology works from the reality of reconciliation. In Jesus Christ God has reconciled the world to himself; he has revealed himself in the form of the servant thus emphasising his 'humanity'. And he has revealed the human being in its likeness to himself; thus the Incarnation signifies God's turning to humanity, and humanity's being exalted to divine likeness. Now this of course is orthodox doctrine, nothing other than what used to be called the revelation of divine love and grace, and the restoration of the *imago dei*. Yet it is crucial to realise that in traditional theology this was set against all sorts of other insights which could be had independently of the Christ-event, such as the existence of God as eternal, immutable etc; his relation to the world as creator; the original image relation of human beings and its subsequent loss through the Fall and the ensuing drama of salvation history. For Barth, all those insights would only be recovered in the light of God's revelation in Christ, but this means that they are logically posterior to this

revelation. This has far reaching consequences. The separation from God of humanity in sin, for example, is only seen from the point of view of its having been overcome in Jesus Christ. It is perceived, then, from the outset as something that, strictly speaking, no longer stands. Barth's theology, in other words, is driven by the conviction that God and the world are actually reconciled, and signs to the contrary are to be interpreted in light of this revelation. Yet this gives his theology a dynamic which eventually all but reverses his original negations. Can theology know God from an analogy of being? Barth answers with a resounding no. Yet given that Christ has reconciled God with the world on a universal scale, will not – in light of this fact – signs of this state be visible and perceivable for him who has eyes to see them? Put thus, the question must be answered in the affirmative, and Barth reintroduces analogy of being through the back door as 'analogy of faith'. Or again: does religion as a human exercise in beliefs and rituals lead us to God? Barth's answer famously is no. Yet given that the world is in a state of reconciliation with God due to Christ, will not the religions as such appear as indicators of this reality? Once again Barth admits that yes. Perhaps only the fact that at some point while still continuing to spin the yarn of *Church Dogmatics* Barth grew old and died prevented him from rescinding, word after word, everything negative he had said in the opening volume in order that God could be all in all.

At this point, it is necessary to insert a qualification. Looked at up to this point, it would appear that in a way Barth has returned in his mature theology full circle to his theological roots in 19th century liberalism and idealism. Has he entirely forsaken the critique of his dialectical phase? There has been a long debate about the relation of continuity and discontinuity in Barth's theology, and this is perhaps inevitable. The account given here has emphasised discontinuity more than continuity, but this is partly because the one area we are interested in specifically, Christology, has been the centre of Barth's theological development away from his early, dialectical phase. Yet even in this particular perspective it is important to note an element of continuity, an insight that has been preserved from his *Romans*. As you will recall, revelation there meant the unveiling of a God who is utterly strange and unknown, and the point of revelation is precisely that he is revealed as such. In

ChurchDogmatics God is revealed as the one who has taken human form in Jesus. From this insight, Barth's liberal teachers had concluded that talk of God's transcendence had no longer theological justification. The mature Barth, however, begs to differ, and this marks his theological continuity. Revelation does not mean that in Christ God becomes wholly and entirely known to us. His revelation is at the same time his concealment, and thus the response to his revelation is rightly called faith, not knowledge. This is because the Incarnation does not reveal something about the nature of God as it had done in Hegel where God needed to become human to be fully God, but about God's salvific will. This is something to rely on, but clearly different from the consciousness of having known and understood God in his eternal being. God has decided to align himself with the fate of the human race, and this decision is final and irrevocable, but it is nevertheless his free decision. Ultimately it is for this reason that Barth's theology could never lead to a metaphysics of a loving God which would be true apart from the contingent event of the life of Jesus. Rather, in accordance with John 14 : 6, Jesus remains the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father than by him.

Week 6: From the 'Religion of the Incarnation' to the 'Myth of God Incarnate'

In 1977 a group of English theologians published a book which at once became, if nothing else, a huge commercial success. *The Myth of God Incarnate* sold out on the day of its publication; during the next eight months some 30,000 copies of the volumes were sold. The several authors who contributed to the book, amongst them John Hick, who edited it, Oxford's Maurice Wiles, Don Cupitt and Frances Young, argue for what is essentially a simply thesis. Belief in the 'Incarnation', according to this argument, would not be after all the central tenet of the Christian faith, but rather *one* particular way of articulating it, a way, moreover, which has various problems and should therefore, be reduced to the more foundational idea which it was originally meant to support: that Jesus is something *for us*, viz. the perfect example for a life lived in accordance with the loving will of God.

These ideas proved extremely controversial. Only a few weeks after the original publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate* opponents managed to put together a critical volume on *The Truth of God Incarnate* which was only one in a huge number of publications following in the wake of Hick's provocative title. From the debate it appears that what enraged many was the mere idea that theologians could question the idea of Incarnation as the central topic of Christian theology. Yet this, in many ways, was not a terribly revolutionary thing; we merely have to remember in this place Paul Tillich, about whom we heard two weeks ago. While it would be grossly misleading, of course, to call him a Hick *avant la lettre*, Tillich finds it quite natural to cite Incarnation together with other Christological models as *symbols* for the New Being. As a matter of fact, he cautions against the use of this particular symbol with arguments that are not so different than those used by some authors in MGI. Or again, very similar arguments are to be found in Wolfhart Pannenberg's overall fairly Orthodox Christology *Jesus – God and Man* which was published many years before MGI.

It is generally agreed, therefore, that the particular vehemence of the reaction against MGI is essentially due to a particularly Anglican theological tradition which we have to consider briefly here. This tradition starts essentially with

the publication, in 1889, of a collection of essays under the title *Lux Mundi*. Its editor was Charles Gore, then fellow of Trinity College, a staunch Anglo-Catholic and later Bishop at Worcester and Oxford. The collection is subtitled *The Religion of the Incarnation* thus indicating its programmatic interest:

> Christianity is a religion of a Person. It propounds for our acceptance Jesus Christ as the revealer of the Father. The test question of the Church to its catechumens has never been: 'Dost thou believe the Bible?' but 'Dost thou believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?'

This therefore is the crucial test Christianity must pass:

> If Christ be God, the Son of God, incarnate, as the Creeds assert, then Christianity is true.

Lux mundi gains its theological significance as well as its coherence from a systematic development of this particular theme. It seeks to show, by covering a wide range of doctrinal and ethical topics, how everything depends on a proper understanding of the notion that in Jesus God himself became incarnate.

The leading philosophical idea in this attempt was that a theology of the Incarnation would lead to a strong notion of divine immanence in the world. God had, after all, become human and that was to say, he had come into the world. He could not, therefore, be seen as primarily or essentially detached from it. Christianity as the religion of the Incarnation would emphasise God's indwelling the in the kosmos, not his transcendence.

For the authors of *Lux Mundi*, who as I said are Anglo-Catholics, this meant an affirmation of the sacramental presence of God. Yet it meant also, and this is how these authors squared their conservative theological outlook with an openness to modern developments, that evolutionary and historical categories did not have to stand in opposition to the Christian faith. On the contrary, looking at the world from an incarnational perspective made an evolutionary understanding of it most attractive, as the Incarnation became, as it were, a symbol of the gradual development of the world towards its full union with the divine. One may doubt that this 'evolutionary' interpretation of world history could really be able to address the fundamental challenge of Darwin's theory, which after all was not so much a theory of evolution as a theory of natural

selection, but whatever the argumentative value of its claims, it was crucial that readers could find in the pages of this book a confident endorsement of Christian existence in the modern scientific world, and this endorsement was given by theologians, by faithful members of the clergy who could not successfully be challenged on account of their orthodoxy or their allegiance to the teachings of the Church. *Lux Mundi* did more than any other publication in the 19th century to introduce into Anglican theology and into the Church of England beyond small liberal circles debates about science and religion and about historical biblical scholarship.

In its more specific interpretation of the Incarnation *Lux Mundi* advanced a strongly *kenotic* viewpoint, in line with its immanentist approach. In other words, it was assumed that Christ, in his Incarnation, had emptied himself of divine attributes. They were hidden so as not to endanger the true humanity of his incarnate reality. In fact, the authors of *Lux Mundi* were not afraid even of the consequence to ascribe suffering to the divinity long before this idea became popular in post WWII theology. The theological force of their argument consisted precisely in their willingness to accept whatever theological insight that seemed to follow from their basic tenet of the Incarnation.

This leads to a very systematic form of theology, but at the same time permits much more than that. *Lux Mundi* was to become so influential and deeply entrenched in English theology for nearly 100 years because it opened up an extremely fruitful combination of a largely traditional or, at least, Catholic interpretation of Christianity (emphasising Christology and sacramentality) with the promise of a modern Church capable of defending its place in a secular world by engaging constructively the two major intellectual threats posed by science and by historicism.

It is against this veritable tradition, which had all but identified Christianity and the notion of Incarnation, that MGI appears to be directed. Against this particular contention it is held that Christianity does not stand and fall with belief in the Incarnation. Rather, it is argued, Incarnation is one of various forms of speaking about Jesus; it is only in the course of doctrinal history that

it assumed such a privileged position, and this development was caused by reasons that were not entirely theological in nature. Hick writes, 'the Nicene definition of God-the-Son-incarnate is only one way of conceptualizing the Lordship of Jesus, the way of the Graeco-Roman world of which we are the heirs, and [...] in the new age of world ecumenism which we are entering it is proper for Christians to become conscious of both the optional and the mythological character of this traditional language'. (168)

In particular, this development altered decisively the meaning of Incarnation. Whereas initially this was, as many other categories and predicates, an expression of the special significance of the human being Jesus of Nazareth (who was said to be, amongst other things, Son of God or even 'God'), the evolving Incarnational Christology meant that the subject of predication was effectively changed to the divine Logos who was now said to have become human. Rather than a statement about Jesus and his importance for the believer, the final doctrine of the Incarnation would make a statement about the divine Logos who descended from his eternal abode to take on flesh etc. Yet this inevitably meant that attention was taken away from the human reality of Jesus, and while Hick and his colleagues are aware that the full humanity is, in principle, maintained in orthodox doctrine, they claim that it is, in practice, always in danger of being stifled within this particular framework. At the same time, the final orthodox account of Incarnational Christology cannot be coherently expressed. This, Hick argues, is borne out by the fact that during the centuries one attempt after another was made at achieving this, while all of them either did not account fully for Jesus' divinity or for his humanity or for the union of the two.

Wiles, in his opening comments, expresses his doubts by responding to a recent orthodox Christology whose author had formulated this rhetorical question:

> Is it […] unreasonable to suppose that the contents of Christ's human mind will include not only that experimental knowledge which is acquired by him in the course of his development from infancy to manhood in a way substantially the same as, though immeasurably more consistent and unimpeded than, the way in which we acquire ours, but also an infused knowledge which is directly communicated to his human nature from the divine Person who is its subject, and which is a participation in the divine omniscience and is limited only by the receptive capacity of human nature as such? (from E.L. Mascall, *Christ, the*

Christian and the Church, 1946, 56-7)

This is Wiles rebuttal:

> That quotation ends with a rhetorical question expecting the answer 'No, it is not unreasonable'. But the only answer that I can give is 'Yes, it is unreasonable'. The argument seems to me to have reached a conclusion far beyond anything that the evidence could conceivably justify. (5)

Orthodox incarnational Christology, then, fails both as a theory and as a legitimate explication of what faith in Jesus is about. Christological statements, namely, are metaphorical attempts to express the significance of what Jesus means to the believer. They are thus firmly anchored in the reality of the historical Jesus merely adding something to his description in narrative and through his sayings. This something is his unique relationship with God which is shown in his practice of divine love. The use of Christological formulae would thus primarily express this insight alongside the obligation felt by the believer to model his own life according to this pattern.

Such metaphorical use of Christological titles, then, had a clearly practical purpose; it would emphasise the inherent link between the believer's awareness of Christ's reflection of divine love and his own calling to imitate this perfection in his own life. This was then misconstrued into a myth (consider the title!) which seemingly offered a metaphysical underpinning of the particular bond that was seen between Jesus and God, and which worked specifically on the backdrop of a world in which the myth of divine incarnation would still resonate with many. Incarnational Christology, then, is in an almost Wittgensteinian sense a category mistake based on a misapprehension of the use of language (cf. Wittgenstein's example of 'it rains' – 'who rains'?)

We can see at this point how Hick et al. formulate very nearly the precise opposite of the tradition flowing from the *Lux Mundi*: far from being at the centre of Christianity, Incarnation is one way of expressing the much deeper truth that Jesus is our model for imitating divine love which ran out of control by being turned into a myth which practically perverts the foundations of Christianity by drawing attention away from Jesus rather than to him.

In Hick's own words:

> The real point and value of the incarnational doctrine is not indicative but

> expressive, not to assert a metaphysical fact but to express a valuation and evoke an attitude. The doctrine of the incarnation is not a theory which ought to be able to be spelled out but – in a term widely used throughout Christian history – a mystery. I suggest that its character is best expressed by saying that the idea of divine incarnation is a mythological idea. […] The truth of a myth is a kind of practical truth consisting in the appropriateness of the attitude to its object. That Jesus was God the Son incarnate […] gives expression tp his efficacy as saviour from sin and ignorance and as a giver of new life; it offers a way of declaring his significance to the world; and it expresses a disciple's commitment to Jesus as his personal Lord (178).

Looking at this argument in its internal coherence brings out quite naturally its justification and its failure. The MGI people are right, clearly, to argue that the person of Christ cannot be understood without placing it in relation to the believer. This is what we have called, throughout this series of lectures, the immediate connection between Christology and Soteriology. It certainly is a problem of the *Lux Mundi* approach that Incarnation is treated almost as a metaphysical truth exemplified in the doctrines of Christianity. Against such a position it is quite appropriate to point out that the question of the being of Jesus has never been and must not be articulated without recognising the specific importance Jesus has for the believer – or else the account will not be theological.

Yet while the MGI is right to insist on such a soteriological reconstruction of Christology, and while its authors are also right to point out that faith will necessarily result in practice, it is surprising – to put it mildly – that it is supposed without much ado that this relationship between Christ and the believer could or should be reduced to that between an example and its imitator. Of course, if it were true that Jesus' significance for the Christian would consist in nothing except such a paradigmatic role, a pattern to be emulated, a model to be copied, *then* Christology could not be more than a metaphorical way of saying that Jesus is the kind of person who ought to be followed in this particular way. Yet it is by no means clear that the condition formulated in this if-clause is at all appropriate. The experience underlying the Christian faith has been, rather, that encountering Jesus had a deeply transforming effect on human beings, which is, in the NT, expressed in various ways: their sins are forgiven, they are new creatures, they are under grace, not law; consider also the many stories told to that effect in the gospels. The practical aspect of being Christian is throughout the NT seen as resulting

from that change of personality, as is expressed classically in Gal. 5 : 25: 'If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.' Or, to use the later theological formula: Christ is sacrament and example for the believer, but first sacrament, then example.

It is this particular experience which calls forth faith and, at the same time, the need to reflect on the question of who this Jesus is. This, of course, does not in itself justify the high Christology of Chalcedon – and once again MGI are right to emphasise the distinction between the Christ event and any attempt to interpret it – but it sets the scene for such a discussion in a decidedly different way.

The MGI group, specifically Hick, see the theoretical problem involved emerging from the recognition of a human person, Jesus of Nazareth, who is then said to be God. It is not difficult, from this basis, to show that any framing of such an argument is fraught with difficulties as it will inevitably lead to the conceptual destruction of the original subject, Jesus. It is partly for this reason that they suggest the alternative of seeing the predication of his divinity as metaphorical and not a statement about Jesus' identity. In this whole argument they overlook that Christology has never, not even in its earliest forms, started from the assumption that Jesus is merely a historical human being, but that his death and resurrection make him a special one. In other words, while it is arguably a good idea to start a Christology from the human reality of Jesus, such an approach 'from below' must not, as Pannenberg says, neglect the fact the even in the historical Jesus God comes into play. If this is ignored then a Christology 'from below' will never be able to bridge the chasm between this human identity and any claim to divinity of his behalf. Yet the beginnings of Christology start from the assumption that a human individual of the past is present with them in a unique way and is, for this reason, not merely human.

The MGI use, though in an oblique way, two other arguments. They say or imply that whatever power a Christology of the Incarnation did have in the past, it has lost this in our present world. Quite clearly, their argument is partly driven by a logic of secularisation implying that if the truths of

Christianity are to persevere they must be subject to radical reassessment and where necessary radical reinterpretation.

The other argument, again specifically a concern of Hick's, is that such a reduced Christology would enhance the dialogue with other religions; the similarity between Christ and other saviour figures would become more apparent, and thus mutual understanding would increase.

This is not the place to engage properly with either of those concerns. It is beyond any doubt that they are both to be taken extremely seriously. And yet, to begin with the latter, it is not at all evident that the way towards inter-religious dialogue and peaceful coexistence is facilitated by diluting the specificity of individual faiths. One may doubt that any Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist will trust too much a Christian's willingness to accept the idiosyncrasies of their respective religions if he is willing to tamper with the particularities of his own religion. And in the case of Hick they would surely be right to be suspicious since he does of course intend to subject the other religions to the same reductionist treatment which in the end leaves the philosopher of religion the only one in possession of the full truth about God.

As for the former concern, this is entirely justified and does legitimise the question of what is essential and what historical about Christianity. Yet success or failure of such a programme of modernisation crucially depends on its ability plausibly to make this distinction which, arguably, has not been achieved by MGI.

We are thus left with a somewhat unsatisfactory result. While MGI has rightly pointed out serious problems with the 'religion of the Incarnation' concept, while it has rightly emphasised the need to go back to the fundamental theme of Christology in order to reformulate it in light of today's challenges, these authors have fallen short of a productive answer because they failed to see that the relation between Christ and his believers cannot be reduced to that of an example and his imitators. It will be most interesting, then, to move on to Christologies which take this very same notion seriously while being aware that the relation between Christ and his disciples must fundamentally be something else. This will be the topic of next week's lecture.

Week 7: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

1. Christology and Ethics

One might perhaps characterise the approach of MGI by saying that they considered the theoretical framework of Christology a problem, the practical question of what Jesus would ideally mean for us, however, not. While they were right to emphasise the 'practical' aspect of any Christology, one might reasonably question their implicit assumption that this was somehow obvious. Do we really know what it means for our lives, what it means today to believe in Jesus Christ? It is probably no coincidence that the latter impresses itself as a question of the utmost urgency on those who are exposed to more extreme situations of economic or political oppression, situations in which the alternative between one course of action and another often amounts to a matter of life and death. Yet, the problem is not, of course, limited to those extreme situations; rather, they merely bring out something, which, in principle, applies to all believers at all times.

In a sense, then, we might term what we are looking at today the 'ethical' aspect of Christology. Within theology everything is interconnected, and clearly Christian doctrine and Christian practice are intimately linked. From NT times onward it has always been accepted that the test of the Christian faith is the Christian life, that without works, as the Epistle of James famously put it, faith is dead. At the same time, however, speaking of an 'ethical aspect of Christology' is dangerous, for it might just suggest that the significance of Christ is reduced to that of an example of moral perfection, that Christology is *merely* ethics. This, of course, would be deeply problematic and certainly not in keeping with tradition. What is meant, rather, is that Christology, as any part of Christian theology, will have an impact on Christian life, not that it will be *just* ethics, but that it cannot exist without containing and, perhaps, culminating in ethics.

Why then is it inappropriate to conceive of this relation as being merely that of a paradigm and an imitator? And, equally important, is there a way this relation can be thought of in a different way? It is important to address these questions at this stage; they concern fundamentally the relation between

religion and ethics, between Christian faith and Christian practice. Ethics, broadly, is the theory of the good life. It encompasses all human understanding of what it means to live as we ought to live for the benefit of ourselves and of others. Yet, simply put, there is a rather major difference between knowing what is right and actually doing it. One may have studied an ethics paper and scored a high mark on it and yet not be a particularly good human being. To say this, to us, seems almost trivial. Yet it is anything but. Ethical knowledge is not knowledge of facts, but knowledge of what *ought to be* the case. And in a sense such knowledge should translate directly into practice. This apparently was the view of Socrates who famously said that people acted wrongly only out of ignorance. We tend to find such a view implausible, almost difficult to understand. This means, however, that we need a further element in our theory of the good life, namely an explanation of why people not only know what is right and what they ought to do, but also make an effort to act accordingly. Often, this is the point where ethics is accepted to have a religious dimension. Religion, in other words, is allowed in to explain the transmission from insight to action. Yet how would religion achieve this? An intuitive answer might be: by offering reward and punishment respectively. In other words, by stipulating that a particular course of action will be sanctioned or censured by God in the afterlife, religion offers a strong incentive, a source of motivation for putting ethical insight into practice. The problem with this answer is twofold. From the point of view of ethics it invalidates the insight. The motivation ultimately is not to do what we know is right, but to do what promises a reward. From the point of view of theology, one may question whether the relation between God and human beings is aptly conceptualised as such an interplay of rewards and penalties, in an almost economical way.

It is at this point, then, that we come back to our initial question about Jesus as an example or a paradigm. Clearly, the idea that the Son of God became human so that we have a vivid idea of what we ought to be like is a more satisfactory explanation of the motivational force of religion. Christians would wish to put ethical insights into practice because of the inspiring force of Christ's perfection which they aspire to emulate. Yet it is not necessarily clear that an example of perfection calls forth this kind of attitude. Will an excellent

pupil in a class become a role model for all the other children? Chances are that this will work for those who see a chance of actually becoming like him. Those, however, who realise that however much they try they will never ever even come close to being a model pupil, may react differently. They may tell themselves and others that they have no interest whatsoever in emulating this kind of person who, after all, is merely a 'swot'. They respond, as Nietzsche might have called it, with a transvaluation of values.

In other words, in order for an example to call forth imitation, there must be the expectation that this will actually produce the desired results. If you are already a good pianist, hearing Glenn Gould may inspire you to work even harder. If you are not, you may thoroughly admire his art, but you will not feel it is up to you to become like him. Or it may, but then this might not be a good thing: you will waste your time trying to become something you never can be. If we take these observations as our basis, we might say that Christ can only inspire imitation successfully where some kind of similarity is already there. Where this is not the case, his perfection is either negated (which, we might say, led to the death of Jesus), or it is acknowledged but ignored as an example, or again it may be emulated in a doomed effort to achieve salvation through one's own merits.

Christianity cannot, of course, do without the idea that Christ functions as the paradigm for the Christian life, but this relation can only be established *after* humans have been made like him. In other words, the example – imitator relation can only work on the foundation of another relation which enables the believer to follow that route successfully. This other relation is the relation of faith, faith meaning to have trust or confidence. Christians have confidence that encountering Jesus will transform them in a way that then enables them to follow his example.

If religion, then, is supposed to explain the transition from ethical insight to actual practice, the answer of Christian theology is twofold. Encountering Christ, Christians experience that they are transformed and liberated. This experience enables them to follow the paradigm of Christ as that of a perfect example. This then also explains what it means to speak of an ethical side of Christology. This is first and fundamentally about the inner transformation

brought about by the encounter with Christ; yet this transformation has immediate consequences for the whole life of the individual, including their moral practice. It then means living a life according to the example given by Jesus.

I said initially that questions of this kind were asked with specific urgency by theologians in difficult and problematic situations. And we can now see why. They were (and are), on the one hand, particularly alerted to the necessity of doing something: to help the poor, or to stem oppression, or to protest against injustice. They were also, however, specifically aware of the fact that doing the right thing required more than just wisdom and resolve, it needed faith and it needed grace.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

The one theologian who has brought the question 'who is Jesus Christ for us today' to the centre of theological debate in the 20th century, has been Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's life can be understood as being essentially driven by a particular awareness of the practical side of theology, the interconnection of theological knowledge and Christian practice. For, we should not ignore that theology has a problem quite similar to that mentioned earlier with regard to ethics. It appears that one can know much of it without this having any practical consequences. Yet, what does this tell us about such knowledge? For Bonhoeffer, theology would only be theology if it was more than abstract, academic knowledge, it had to prove its salt by translating its ideas into real life. It is perhaps for that reason that he cast aside what doubtlessly would have been a brilliant academic career to work for the Church and, later on, found his way even into political resistance against Germany's nazi rulers. He was eventually found out and executed on 9 April 1945 a mere month before the end of the war.

When Bonhoeffer asks who Jesus Christ is, it always means this. Who is he for us today? In other words, the Christological question is tantamount to the ethical question in the sense in which I discussed this earlier. Why is this so? One aspect surely is that Bonhoeffer's thought is influenced by the experience

(and the concept) of secularisation. In other words, he observes a world which in its entirety is no longer governed by religious insights. People, even those who are church members, make the majority of their decisions based on considerations that have nothing to do with religion. What is the consequence of this for Christianity? Bonhoeffer thought he could make out two major strategies; and he found both worrying. One was the strategy of liberalism which would say that, as long as people lived their secular lives roughly in accordance with Christian principles, interpreted widely, the whole development posed no problem whatsoever. People had, in other words, internalised their Christendom so much that they followed its major ideas guided by secular agents. Bonhoeffer's experience in Nazi Germany naturally made him sceptical about such an assumption. He was convinced that the 20th century proved more than anything else the lasting subjection of human beings to temptation, to thoughts and deeds which were in the deepest sense inhuman.

The alternative response of Christianity to the modern world would have been a retreat to the Christian ghetto. While the world at large would turn from Christianity, theology would decide to let the world run its course and merely reaffirm the traditional foundations of the religion. This was what Bonhoeffer suspected about Karl Barth from whom, at the same time, he had learned much.

In effect, both these attitudes would make it precisely impossible to articulate what Jesus Christ meant for the world of today. The first because it fails to articulate him in the first place, but the latter also because it articulates him in a seemingly timeless fashion which practically prevents his being understood by a modern world.

Both strategies thus fail, and they fail spectacularly, Bonhoeffer thinks, given the Christological basis of Christianity. For, if Christianity is essentially the gospel of God's coming to the world of humankind, then this must have a direct effect on Christian belief and practice in their attitude to the world. Following Jesus must then mean to care for and to act for the world however far this world is removed or has removed itself from God. If Jesus carried out his mission in a world so hostile to him that it ultimately murdered him, then

what excuse could the Church have not to engage a world which had ceased to be automatically religious? If Jesus had given his life *for* such a world because of God's love for the world, what did this mean for the Church's attitude to the 'secular' world of modernity? Did it not make this a particular task for Christians to find out rather than turn away from it?

Yet Bonhoeffer's concern about the meaning of Jesus Christ for us was not only driven by his thoughts about secularisation. He was also concerned in a more general sense about the relation between belief and practice, between doctrine and ethics in Christianity. He accepted the Pauline teaching, as affirmed emphatically by the reformation, that grace, not works bring justification before God. Yet this brings about the problem which he famously termed 'cheap grace'. One may tend to think of grace and forgiveness as of something that is already factored into our lives with the consequence that what we do and how we act does seem not to matter at all. Yet this is a misunderstanding. Real grace is 'costly' grace, paid for by the suffering and the death of Jesus. Thinking that what we do doesn't matter merely reveals that this significance of grace has not been grasped properly. While Bonhoeffer thus did not wish to revise the reformation teaching about the prevalence of faith over against works, he insisted that faith and works cannot be separated.

His special account of what this means is contained in his *Cost of Discipleship*. It is crucial, he argues, that following Jesus is, first of all, answering a call of authority. When Jesus says to Jewish fishermen, 'Follow after me', he is not telling them why this would be a good idea, nor are they asking him why they ought to do this? Rather, the NT simply records that they are told to follow, and then they do this. This, Bonhoeffer thinks, is because following Jesus is something that goes, in principle, against the nature and the inclinations of sinful humanity. Appealing to anything human beings value would not, therefore, have worked. The will and the desire of humanity pointing away from God, these first have to be redirected before anything useful can result. This, then, is Bonhoeffer's view of the primacy of faith. It consists in the acceptance that a call must be answered as a first step towards a new self. This first step involves the giving up of pride and the submission under the

authority of someone else who is, of course, not anybody. Thus, this is quite different from an ethics of imitating Christ. For Bonhoeffer, imitating Christ is a promise, a hope along the way of discipleship. Becoming like him is something Christians can expect to obtain at some point, but it cannot be the motivation of their first step. This is because the first step must be conceptualised as a transformation of human willing which can only be accounted for by means of an external overpowering, not as some internal decision.

Who, then, is Jesus Christ for us today? He represents the call to discipleship into a world that must be the object of Christian love and of Christian commitment however much it sees itself as secular. Christ is the object of Christian faith, a faith that enables a transformation of the self which consequently allows our imitation of him as example. Following Christ implies accepting his cross, in other words his unconditional love of a world which did not accept him. The Christian hope of resurrection and eternal life is only realised in this way.

3. Jesus Christ Liberator

The direction of thought we find in Bonhoeffer is encountered again, though with characteristic modifications in the more recent theological movement known frequently as liberation theology. Christological contributions within that movement have come, not least, from Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino. Liberation theology in general starts from a strong awareness of context. In the situation of Latin America with its extreme poverty and social injustice, any theological reflection simply must *start from* the premise that following Jesus means solidarity with the poor. This recognition, it is argued, carries theological weight: it is orthopraxis, and as such as important or more important than orthodoxy. Right action, in other words, is more crucial (at least in some situations) than right opinion. We see that liberation theology leads us, once again, directly into the fundamental notions of the theory-practice relation in Christian theology. Liberation theologians are unequivocal in their demand that Christianity is (primarily) a life, not a theory.

Once again like Bonhoeffer, the liberation theologians equate this notion of Christian practice with discipleship. Jon Sobrino writes that 'Christian life as a whole can be described as the following of Jesus. That is the most original and all-embracing reality, far more so than cultic worship and orthodoxy.' Their further development of this idea, however, differs quite remarkably from that found in Bonhoeffer. For Boff and Sobrino now bring in the notion of the Kingdom of God as the central theme of Jesus' preaching, and they interpret this category as liberating practice. Following Jesus then is more specifically becoming part of the liberating practice inaugurated by Jesus himself. This is quite different from the picture Bonhoeffer had presented where the call into discipleship is, in the first place, a call into obedience. While Bonhoeffer is quite willing to emphasise notions of authority in his reconstruction of Christian practice, the liberation theologians in a way draw much more on 19th century liberalism in their emphasis on freedom as the one distinctive mark of the new life promised and started by Jesus Christ himself. This freedom, of course, is seen emphatically as including notions of political and social justice, rather than being limited to individual independence from authority. It is for this reason that they are willing to include in their theological argument analytical tools, such as Marxist philosophy, in the hope that they would help understand the conditions under which such deliverance can only be turned into reality.

However, it would be one-sided to see liberation Christologies as mere political readings of the life and actions of Jesus encouraging Christians to follow in his footsteps. Boff certainly develops from there a full Incarnational Christology with ideas reminiscent of Gore's theories in *Lux Mundi*. He accepts that the Incarnation means that God himself becomes immanent in the world, and that this is ultimately the driving factor of the world's spiritual improvement. In this process, people move closer to God; they become transformed and 'divinised'. And, once again not dissimilar to the 19th century Anglo-Catholics, he connects this developmental interpretation of the Incarnation with the growth of the Church and a sacramental understanding of reality overall: 'Religious experience makes everything sacramental, because it is penetrated by and suffused with the presence of the divine.'

Yet once again it is important to note two things: first, this process is a practical process and therefore requires the active participation of the Christian. Secondly, the transformation envisaged here includes as a principal element the economic and social transformations that only allow for a humanised existence.

It is then clearly wrong if liberation theology is sometimes reduced to the caricature of a revolutionary reading of Jesus sexed up with elements of Marxist theory to substitute for the missing programme of a social revolution in the gospel. What we find in an author like Leonardo Boff is much more than that; it is a reflection on the person of Jesus Christ following the leading question of what he is for us today. It is assumed that the preaching of the Kingdom institutes a social practice, and that only by joining this community in its actions we can ever hope to understand the truth about the unique personality of Jesus Christ himself. Once we have made this step, however, a full new reality opens up to us, and it is in his interpretation of this new reality that Boff is able to include elements of traditional Incarnational theology: it shows the interweaving of divine and human in a process that has its beginning and its principle in the historical Incarnation.

The major problem with this account is whether it is sufficiently guarded against a reality that all too often does not correspond with this narrative of social progress. Can it not lead to frustration when it is recognised that humanity is not nearly so near divinisation as one would expect 2000 years after the Incarnation? Traditional Christianity has always emphasised the transcendent nature of eschatological promises. Arguably, both liberal and liberation theologians are right to charge that this has often been tantamount to complicity with oppressive structures which would de facto be justified with the argument that deliverance was promised for a later life. Yet while this protest is important, there is the corresponding danger that salvation becomes mainly a human project where the eschatological dimension of the history of salvation is excluded from consideration. It is significant that the life of the historical Jesus ended with his death on the cross: a theological understanding of his person that does not reflect on the tension between historical, empirical frustration and corresponding hope for divine deliverance

transcending these conditions will inevitably fall short of the religious reality Jesus Christ can and should have for the believer today.

Week 8: Jesus as Sacrifice or Scapegoat?

It has been accepted throughout this series of lectures that Christology and soteriology are closely related. And yet, specifically soteriological questions have not so far been dealt with. In this regard this last lecture will be exceptional, even though it is at the same time in many ways in keeping with trends and tendencies, with questions and answers that have been developed in previous weeks. It brings up briefly the much debated and dangerously vague concept of postmodernity and its influence in theological, specifically Christological discussion.

One of the reasons why postmodernism has had such a strong impact on theology is that many of its proponents contributed to theological and religious questions without necessarily being 'theologians' in the technical, i.e. vocational sense of the word. In other words, it has not been so much the case that theologians themselves were overly keen to jump on the bandwagon of postmodernity, but within postmodern debates the topic of religion, of Christianity and thus inevitably theological problems came to the fore, and theologians in a sense noticed to their own surprise how much was going on there without their genuine contribution.

I do not think it is altogether easy to say why this happened. I think one of the reasons certainly was the very ambiguous relation that postmodernism – as its name betrays – has with modernity. One cannot really be 'post'-modern without reflecting about modernity. And one of the defining characteristics of modernity had been, after all, its particular attitude to traditional religion. Thus, the post-modern *relecture* of modernity involved almost inevitably a reassessment of modernity's critique or at least restatement of religion. This is not to say that postmodernity involves a return to a pre-modern view of religion. As I said, the relation of post-modernity to modernity is ambiguous, and in some respects unclear, but so much is obvious that post-modern cannot be the same as pre-modern, but that the self-definition as post-modern, rather, assumes the passage through modernity.

Be this as it may, a distinct voice within this broad and polyphonic chorus of postmodern voices has over the past decades been that of René Girard. He

clearly is a chief example of a theological interest that comes from a distinctly non-theological background. Girard has originally been a scholar of French literature who then moved on to work on literature more generally (one of his earliest works is on Shakespeare) and increasingly about culture in a very broad sense of that word. He has also emerged, to some perhaps surprisingly, as a major apologist of Christianity even though his account of Christianity is by no means orthodox and not lacking in criticism of traditional Church doctrine. Since one of his central concerns is with the understanding of Jesus Christ, and particularly his death, this is chiefly why he is a fitting topic for this lecture. Yet to understand Girard's views about this particular topic we have to set them against his more general views which inevitably go beyond theology proper.

The fundamental insight of Girard's entire work is the role played by mimesis for human desire. To the question, central to any theory of human agency, from where the goals of human desire come, he answers that desire as such is mimetic. We know what we want because we see that someone else wants (or has) the same. Examples are multiple.

Now this mimetic structure of our desires is deeply problematic because it brings us into a precarious relation with our neighbour who, as Girard says, 'mediates' our desire. On the one hand we admire this 'mediator', he is our role model, our example, our pattern and our idol, on the other hand, we also envy him: he is our rival because we covet the possession of a good which he covets as well, or worse: which he possesses. This makes mimetic desire a constant source of rivalry, envy, ultimately of violence which may well end deadly as it is only through killing that we get our rival finally out of our way.

This violence, which erupts within all societies at all times, threatens peace, life and, ultimately, the very existence of this society. Girard therefore postulates that in situations of crisis, which is a general feeling of uneasiness due to a high level of unspecific mimetic violence, aggression tends to be focussed on one particular object, a person who in a sense is randomly chosen though one could often see why he would be the 'type' (an outsider, someone with a physical defect, etc.). More and more people become convinced that

their general feeling of uneasiness is caused by this person. Finally they turn against him, physically, and together they kill him.

This brings about a surprising result, namely a cessation of violence and the general tension created by mimetic rivalry for the time being. From the point of view of the community this is because the culprit has been removed; in reality it is because in this communal act of murder a community has been born, because this act has revealed something like a unity of will and purpose amongst them all. One can see here the echo of both Rousseau (volonté générale) and Durkheim (effervescence of communal experience). In any case, Girard goes on to argue that due to this particular experience this moment remains enshrined in the memory of the community. Yet, of course, they do not want to remember the moment as it actually occurred, neither those who were participants nor their descendants want to this of this special moment as a simple crime, and so they make up a story which explains that the victim had to die in order to bring peace and unity to his people. He sacrificed himself voluntarily so his people could live. In this way, myths come into being, and Girard would summarise this by saying that culture generally is based on myth. Myth then is a story, which turns a victim into a sacred being and a murder into a sacrificial killing. Myth thus for Girard is a thoroughly negative term; it is a story that covers up the outbreak of mimetic violence in order to turn a nasty event into a memorable and heroic piece of collective memory. Myth is untruth, and the fact that it is a public lie on which the wellbeing of society depends does not make it any better.

The effect felt after the original act of mimetic violence means that people look back to it whenever the level of mimetic violence rises to dangerous levels again. In such situations they will remember the original event, and re-enact it as a ritual sacrifice in the hope to reproduce the original result of felt commonality. Thus, sacrifice and myth are the pillars of religion, and religion as based on these two pillars is essentially meant to contain mimetic violence. Yet, this is achieved only by a cover-up: sacrifice can only reproduce the original effect of the killing of the scapegoat if participants are in ignorance about the actual mechanisms operative in their actions then and now.

This, Girard argues, is dangerous because it means that mimetic violence continues all the time. Scapegoats will be found and killed, and humanity is essentially unable to put an end to this while the myth-making mechanism prevents them from ever seeing through this dangerous play.

We thus get a fairly bleak picture of human culture as such. And we really must appreciate, following Girard, that there is *prima facie*, no way out of this predicament. Only by following him to this point namely, can we appreciate what, in his view, the specific and actually unique role of the biblical books is. For they contain a truth which was 'hidden from the foundation of the world', they reveal the truth about the sacrificial mechanism. This is because they call the victim innocent. They describe suffering as something that should not be, as something that requires our compassion and, perhaps, our action but is not couched into the logic of posthumous religious or mythical justification. The Bible thus contains, theologically speaking, a critique of religion, and its revelation is precisely such a critique of religion, it unmasks the very foundations on which religion has traditionally rested.

This is true for many parts of the OT (think of Joseph, e.g., and most importantly the 'suffering servant' of 2nd Isaiah!), but it is particularly true of the NT with its central focus on the passion narrative. This narrative flies in the face of the sacrificial logic as Jesus refuses to accept the necessity of his death (the recognition of one's guilt or, as we would put it, one's responsibility, is, of course, a central aspect of the logic of sacrifice). The gospels then offer something like a counter-narrative which tells, against all the sacrificial narratives, the story of innocent suffering, according to the motto, ascribed in the gospel to Caiphas: 'it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish' (John 11 : 50).

This 'revelation' then is contained in the Bible. What does it change in human culture? In a way, one might argue, it means very little. The sacrificial mechanism did not stop to function; scapegoating continues very much in our own time, and we can still see examples of that wherever we look. And yet, Girard argues, this logic gradually loses its force. Myths become less credible, they become more short-lived; the power of the sacrificial mechanism does no

longer bind communities as strongly as it used to. This, incidentally, is where Girard most obviously is post-modern, and where he has been received in post-modern debates (cf. G. Vattimo). Christianity has done something to this world which continues to exert influence whether or not people are specifically Christian. A truth once revealed is a genie that cannot be put back in his bottle. The powerful forces, values and rules that ruled in traditional societies have, for better or worse, been weakened. Violence does not disappear, but becomes in need of explanation and disappears largely from public view. This still allows for excesses of violence far worse than in previous centuries or in former societies, perhaps it even offers an explanation for that.

Be this as it may, where is the connection with soteriology? On the backdrop of the theory that we have just seen develop it must appear as if the 'official' development of a 'sacrificial' interpretation of the death of Jesus is almost a perversion of the actual meaning of this event; it is a triumph of the old order, almost a revenge of traditional religion. It is a myth covering up the truth revealed in the Bible. It is just totally and utterly false. Instead the relevance of Christ for the Christian would be that he offers the paradigm to imitate without being in danger of mimetic rivalry. For Christ's own desire follows a different logic, the logic of divine love, which therefore made him capable of following his way to the very end. Imitating this desire we may be able to break free from the logic of mimetic rivalry and ultimately violence. Christ's death opens up our eyes to the reality of suffering and scapegoating around us; this is a work against the stream of constant myth-making with its tendency to gloss this over. Nothing, then would seem farther from the truth than seeing his life and death within the 'mythical' paradigm of sacrifice.

Or is it? One of the quite remarkable developments over the past few decades has been that Girard's theory drew a considerable theological fellowship which increasingly argued that working from Girard's own premises one could – and actually should – reach the opposite conclusion. The most astonishing result of this development perhaps has been that Girard himself has accepted, at some point during the 90s, that this is indeed a legitimate interpretation of his work.

The argument runs thus. According to Girard, mimetic desire is something which, within humanity, does not stop. Neither does, accordingly, mimetic rivalry and violence. What, then, is to be done about them? Is it not, in fact, the very best humanity could be offered, that someone has been sacrificed once and for all, in a way that merely requires regular re-enactment, without the spilling of blood, namely in the Eucharist? Does not, in other words, the sacrificial interpretation of the death of Christ, provide the best answer to the one question Girard himself could not answer: what is to become of humanity with its innate tendency to violence, but without a means to quell it? The sacrificial interpretation would thus have been the answer which actually can make a difference to human beings as they are. They are offered a ritual, which does not hurt nor harm anyone, but allows them to discharge their negative energies, we might almost say.

I think that both interpretations are legitimate and an expression of what one might call an idealist and a realist side in Girard's own thought. On the one hand, he seems to believe in a theology of history, a narrative in which the force of sacrificial logic is increasingly effaced through the counter-narrative of the Bible. Yet there is also the notion that human beings as they are do not change, but remain solidly imprisoned within their mimetic structures.

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Let me add, at the very end of this series, a few thoughts about the results of this overview over some strands of Christological thought in the 20th century. I started by observing how pivotal the figure of Jesus was for theological reflection and – as a matter of fact – for much non-theological thought in the 20th century. In a sense we have seen that it was perhaps more central than before. The reason for this might be that other theological insights, which for a long time could be taken for granted, such as the existence of God, have now become so controversial that theologians realise they might as well focus on the central figure of their faith straight away. Yet the conceptualisation of Jesus has itself been controversial, as we have seen. The series started by pointing to the crisis of the 'historical Jesus' which serves as a reminder of how difficult it is to paint a coherent picture of the human side of Jesus. Yet it is equally, or more, interesting to observe how this crisis resulted in an

'ahistorical' Jesus only for a brief period after which the insight returned with full force that the concrete historical existence of Jesus, however much or however little we know about it, is an absolutely central aspect of his humanity. The case of Karl Barth, who moved from an early, almost Gnostic Christology to a very full version of an incarnational theology, is particularly telling. Yet we ought to see that the soteriological and ethical applications of Christology, which we have studied in Bonhoeffer and Girard, equally presuppose a robust view of Christ's 'concrete' humanity, specifically his passion.

This is not to say, I think, that there is an overall tendency towards a merely human perspective on Jesus. Such a tendency is probably evident in more popular views; the main example we have considered in this series was Hick's account in MGI. Yet it became clear at once that such a perspective offers not only a minimal version of Christology, but a defective concept of soteriology which makes it all but impossible to account for the special place Jesus holds within the Christian community.

So is the upshot of 20th century Christology the ultimate vindication of the orthodox, Chalcedonian formula; is there nothing to be said beyond a reiteration of its formula? I think the truth is that Chalcedon is one attempt at formulating the insight that Christians in their encounter with Christ identify him as the originator of a unique experience of a transformation of the self. Chalcedon is one, influential answer to the question of why he can have this effect on us. It is an answer that is based on terminological and conceptual assumptions which many or all people today neither fully understand nor share. In this sense, it cannot be the sufficient answer to today's need for a Christology though it will remain an answer one needs to study and to grapple with in the continuing quest for an understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and his significance for human beings who live now.