



Christ And The Cultures

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In our programme of missionary training at the Selly Oak Colleges it is our custom to introduce the students at an early stage to something of the wide variety of ways in which Christ is pictured in different cultures. On a wall covered with vivid posters one can see together the Orthodox Pantocrator serenely ruling all the worlds, the Latin American freedom fighter with rifle over his shoulder, the black Christ, the tortured and defeated Victim of the medieval crucifix, and the blue-eyed golden haired boy from the neighbourhood of Dallas, Texas. Beyond these visual reproductions one thinks of the pen-portraits sketched in the innumerable lives of Jesus in the era of liberal protestantism, each reflecting the writer's ideal self-image, all sharing one feature in common – that the Christ portrayed might be a likely candidate for redundancy but an improbable one for crucifixion.

The question for the young missionary candidate is, of course, clear: is the Christ whom I am going to preach just one of this gallery of culturally determined images? Who is the Jesus Christ in whose service I go?

I

(I) Take as a starting-point the experience which I have often had of standing in a village street and preaching to a crowd of people for whom the name of Jesus Christ means as much and as little as the names of Smith, Jones, or Robinson. I preach about Jesus Christ. I tell stories about him and I tell the stories that he told. But if the hearers are interested enough to begin to ask more about him, how do I begin to say who he is? There is no way of saying it except by using the language of my hearers. But this language embodies the world-view, the models, the myths by which they already make sense of their world. These models are not neutral tools which can be used for any purpose; they are commitments to a way of understanding and dealing with experience, commitments which are

in many respects irreconcilable with the Christian commitment. Which model, then, shall I choose to explain who Jesus is? I have heard Indian evangelists using many models. They may speak of Jesus as *swamy* – Lord. But – as in St. Paul’s world, so in an Indian village – there are lords many and gods many, three hundred and thirty million of them according to the tradition. Is Jesus one of these innumerable lords? If so, there are more important matters to attend to. Or shall we use a word that the Tamil language has for the supreme transcendent God – *kadavul* – a word formed by a combination of the root meaning ‘being’ with the root meaning ‘surpassing’. Surely an excellent model-but if we use this name for Jesus we shall shortly have to explain who is the person to whom this Jesus evidently looks up and prays as Father? Or shall we take the Hindu concept of the *avatar* – the descent of God in creaturely form to restore the faltering rule of righteousness and put down the rising power of evil? But it is of the essence of the Hindu doctrine of the *avatar* that it is cyclical: the work of the *avatar* is for a time only, for that particular point in the ever-circling process of creation and destruction. The coming of another *avatar* can in no sense be the occasion for a final decision; it is just one more in a series. Or shall I simply tell the factual story of a man who lived two thousand years ago in a country four thousand miles away? I have heard an evangelist take that approach and seen the crowd melt away, for, in a Hindu view of the world, this is to identify Jesus with the world of *maya*, the world of passing events which in the perspective of reality, is simply illusion.

One could extend this list to include many other models which have been used to say, in Hindu terms, who Jesus is: the *satguru* who initiates the disciple into the experience of realisation; the *adipurushan*, the primal man who is the beginning of all creation; *chit*, the intelligence and will which constitute the second member of the triad *saccidananda* which *advaita* philosophy identifies with ultimate reality. In these and other ways Indian Christian evangelists and theologians have tried to answer the question: Who is Jesus? What all these answers have in common is that they necessarily describe Jesus in terms of a model which embodies an interpretation of experience significantly different from the interpretation which arises when

Jesus is accepted as Lord absolutely. There is no escape from this necessity. As an evangelist I have to accept it if I am to communicate at all.

(2) But, as will be already obvious, I have over-simplified the issue. For I, the preacher, who speak of ‘the interpretation of experience which arises when Jesus is accepted as Lord absolutely’, am myself also the product of a culture which has its own models and myths, in terms of which it tries to make sense of experience. Doubtless these models have been greatly influenced by the total fact of Jesus Christ: they are, however, certainly not completely determined by it. My confession of Jesus as Lord is conditioned by the culture of which I am a part. It is expressed in the language of the myth within which I live. Initially I am not aware of this as a myth. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly indigenous western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply ‘how things are’. It is ‘the modern scientific world view’. It is the corpus of axioms which are accepted as such by those who have received a modern western style education. No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are. Western man is no exception to this rule. As I stand in that village street and preach Christ, the Christ whom I have been trained to understand and interpret through the models provided by modern critical, historical, and other studies, what I communicate is shaped by these models. The Christ whom I set forth is the Christ who is understood in terms of the models developed at this particular moment in the long story of

the interaction between the Christian tradition and the culture of the north-western corner of the Eurasian continent. This also is a necessity from which there is no escape.

(3) But there is a third element which has now to be brought into this picture of the meeting of cultures. As a Christian preacher I do not arrive in the village empty handed. I bring, it is to be hoped, a Bible translated into the local language, or if not the whole Bible, at least the New Testament. In parenthesis let it be said that we are here passing over without touching the enormous cultural and theological issues involved in that work of translation. We are assuming that the translation has been done and that there will soon be people, probably in the first

instance young people, in the village who will start to study the Bible for themselves. Contrary to what one would gather from the reading of much scholarly work on the New Testament, the first reading of it, especially of the Gospels, makes an immediate and profound impact on the readers. The figure of Jesus stands out of the pages and confronts them with all the force of a real personal meeting. And the person who meets them is not clothed in the garments of a twentieth-century Englishman. He comes to them as one who belongs to a world which is much more familiar to them than the world of modern European or American Christianity.

There is now a new factor in the situation. The people of the village have in their hands a story which provides a critique both of their own cultural world and of the cultural world which the missionary has introduced to them in the name of the Gospel. A triangular relationship is set up between the local culture, the invading culture, and the Bible. The stage is set for a complicated and unpredictable evolution of new models of thought and action. This evolution will occur not only in the receptor community but also, if he is serious, in the missionary and therefore in the community from which he is sent.

A massive illustration of the first of these possibilities is furnished by the development of the so-called African Independent Churches. These churches have broken away from the churches which resulted from western missions, and have developed forms of life and teaching which – while sharing much that comes from the local culture – also demand a very sharp break both with the older churches and with aspects of the native culture. David Barrett in his study which touches more than 5,000 of these movements has demonstrated that there is a very high correlation between the development of independent church movements in a tribe and the publication in the language of that tribe of the Scriptures, especially of the Old Testament. In a sample group of 742 tribes, the percentages of those within which independency has occurred are as follows:

Where no Scriptures have been published	10%
Where portions of Scripture have been published	56%

Where the whole New Testament has been published	67%
Where the whole Bible has been published	81%

Barrett summarises the impact of the Bible on peoples converted through the work of modern missions as follows: ‘With the translation of the complete Bible, however, African societies gradually began to discern a serious discrepancy between missions and biblical religion in connection with the traditional institutions under attack. The missions were assaulting their institutions, but biblical religion emphatically upheld the family, land, fertility, and the importance of women, and also appeared to endorse polygamy and respect for family ancestors. With a few exceptions all the institutions listed above (community structure, land and property,

laws and taboos, religious concepts, leadership and symbolism, magical concepts and rituals, and practices in worship) appeared to African readers to have close parallels or even tacit approval in one or other parts of the Old or New Testaments' (Barrett: *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, pp. 131 and 268).

A small personal illustration of the second possibility may be allowed. I recall my experience as a young missionary, struggling with the language, called upon to conduct the study of St. Mark's Gospel with a group of village teachers. Before long I was deeply involved with the miracle stories, trying to put into Tamil the way of making sense of these which I had learned in an English theological college. My class watched me with visibly growing impatience till finally one of them said: 'Why are you making such heavy weather over a perfectly simple matter?' and proceeded to recount half a dozen examples of miraculous healings and exorcisms from the recent experience of his own village congregation. What was – within my culture – a perplexing problem, was, in his, no problem at all. Christ was already known as the one who heals and casts out devils.

(4) I said that this triangle of forces made up by the local culture, the invading culture and the Bible sets the stage for a complicated and unpredictable evolution. Sometimes the impact of the experience of salvation in Jesus Christ is such that questions concerning the traditional culture drop into insignificance. They are regarded as *adiaphora*. Only after some

time do the converts begin to draw from their new experience critical questions about their traditional culture. More often the first response is a strong reaction against the traditional culture. It is 'the world' which is still in the power of evil.

The new life in Christ is so absolutely new that the old must be put away. At this stage it is the Christ of the invading culture that is accepted and welcomed. The message is so closely linked with the messenger who brought it that there is no desire to separate them. There is a sharp rejection of elements in the old culture which, even if not evil in themselves – such as music, drama, and visual art – are felt to be evil because of their association with the rejected world view.

(5) And yet, even at this early stage, there are strong forces which compel the young church to develop its own answer to the question: 'Who is Jesus?' The new converts have to explain their new allegiance to their relatives and neighbours, and for this purpose must use the language and the models familiar to them. Frequently this is a quite unconscious process. The message is – so to say – screened unconsciously and inserted into the thought-world of the hearer. Thus in the mystical environment of Central Java where the crucified Christ was preached in terms of the sixteenth-century Dutch Reformed dogmatics, what was actually heard by the Javanese people was much more a message of the crucified as the great harmoniser who gives peace. (For this example, and for other insights in this matter, I am deeply indebted to the wide-ranging researches of Dr. Hans-Ruedi Weber. See his *Kreuz & Kultur*, pp. 201f and 215.) More systematically there will be a deliberate attempt as part of evangelistic preaching to find in the local culture models which can at least point to the reality whom they are coming to know in Jesus. The sympathetic outsider will be aware all the time that a great deal of the old thought forms is still shaping the use of language about Jesus. He will note, for example, that even those groups which insist most strongly on a total break with Hinduism, are working with Hindu models for the interpretation of Jesus. And, on the other hand, the Hindu who overhears the talk of Christians will discover that old words are being used to convey new meanings far beyond their normal sense outside the Church. When, for example, Jesus is described in the

Tamil Church as 'Saviour of sinners', the words employed mean, in normal secular usage, 'one who provides free board and lodging for down and outs'. The meaning that the words have within the Christian community arises from the whole lived experience of the community in Christ. It cannot arise from any other source.

(6) After the passage of some years, often in the second or third generation of the church, a new situation arises. The church has now become so much at home in a new thought world that the old no longer poses a threat. The old culture has been – for these Christians – de-sacralised. Its music, art, dance, and social customs are no more feared because of their pagan associations. They begin to be prized as part of the world which God loves and which he has given to men. The church begins for the first time to think about the relation of Christ to culture. It begins to experiment with the variety of possible models for this relation. In some cases, as for example in many of the South Pacific islands, a new *corpus christianum* comes into existence. There is a practical identification of church and society, and Christ is seen as the one who harmonises and reconciles the old culture. In other situations, especially where the church is a small minority, there is a strong effort to reverse the alienation from local culture which marked the first conversions and to approach the older culture in a spirit of acceptance and openness. The tendency then will be to seek for christological models which can be accommodated within the thought-world of the older culture. And again there will be movements of renewal which often take the form of a sharp attack upon elements both in the church and in the old culture. There is an almost infinite variety of different situations and none of them is static.

(7) Since the present paper is written and discussed within the thought-world of one particular culture and in one particular language, it will be in order to refer to some of the special problems which arise when what are often called 'Third World Theologies' are written in English. Here a complex double translation is involved. In paragraph (5) I have referred to the basic and original form of an indigenous christology which arises from the effort of the Christians in a particular culture to explain to their neighbours who Jesus is. This ex-

planation must be in the mother tongue and can only be given by making use of the models provided by that culture. This indigenous christology is taking shape whenever the Christian talks to his neighbour about Christ and the evangelist stands up to preach Christ. However, it is also the fact that up to now the greater part of systematic teaching, writing, and discussion on theology in the churches of the Third World has been carried on in a European language and under the leadership of scholars trained in the seminaries and universities of Europe and North America. It has therefore been shaped by logical models and a conceptual framework derived in large measure from Greek and Latin sources. A tension is thereby set up between the theology of the seminary and the theology of the congregation and the home. This tension is further compounded by the psychological pressures of colonialism. It is in these circumstances that theologians of the Third World, trained in the models provided by a western culture, try to use these models, as embodied in the European languages, to express a theology developed by the use of the indigenous models. This process of double-translation, or rather double re-conceptualisation, is a very difficult one, and not often successful. It will only be when there is a full development of theological writing and reflection in the languages and concepts of the Third World, and when the languages of Europe no longer exercise their present domination over the whole ecumenical theological enterprise, that it will be possible to find a framework within which the problem of Christ and the cultures can be truly faced. When that time comes it is by no means to be assumed that a truly 'ecumenical' Christology will be in the form of systematic statements framed in the

style of Western philosophy rather than in the form of story and parable typical of much Asian and African thought – and typical of the Gospels!

(8) Meanwhile it is possible to speak of a provisional framework in the experience of the ecumenical movement. The Assembly at Nairobi brought together Christians from a vast variety of different cultures, each bringing an answer to the question ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ framed in the terms of his own culture: some of these answers are so mutually contradictory that it was a serious question whether they could be held within

one framework of discourse. Would it not have to be confessed in the end that there is not one Christ but many, and that the claim of the Assembly’s theme: Jesus Christ frees and unites, would be proved untrue? That question was openly faced in the early days of the Assembly: at the end of the three weeks of meeting at least one participant would testify that the Assembly had experienced in its life the truth of the claim under which it met. The vast, bewildering and clashing multiplicity of the answers which Christians gave to the question ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ does not negate the fact that there is one Jesus Christ who is Lord and Saviour of all.

How then are we to do christology in a way which is faithful both to the one Christ and to the many cultures in which men seek to confess him? At this point we have to turn from a descriptive to a systematic treatment of the theme.

II

Let me begin by making as clear as possible the sense in which I am using the two terms of the title.

From my dictionary I take the following definition of culture: ‘The sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another’. Four elements in that definition are important for our understanding of culture in a theological context. (a) It is a product of human initiative, not an unchangeable datum. (b) It is a social product created, valued, and transmitted by a group. (c) It exists in transmission. It is a living thing, and if transmission were to cease, the culture would be dead. (d) It is the sum total of a vast variety of human ways of living, including language, all the media of communication (verbal and non-verbal) the stories, myths, and proverbs by means of which experience is grasped and shared, science, art, learning, religion, methods of agriculture and industry, systems of political and economic organisation and judicial systems. It includes all of that which constitutes man’s public life in society. When we speak of culture in the course of a theological discussion we are speaking about humanity in its public, social, and historical aspect.

For my definition of the other term in the title I shall not go to a dictionary. I speak of Jesus Christ as the one whom I know and confess as Lord of all that is, whom I know through

the witness of the Christian tradition primarily embodied in the canonical Scriptures, and whose coming to consummate all things I await.

Standing within these definitions of the terms, I believe that the question implied in the title has to be answered first in an eschatological perspective. That is to say that the full answer to the question ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ can only be given when the fulness of humankind has been gathered into the confession of his name. When any one, standing within any of the cultures of mankind, says : ‘Jesus is Lord’, the meaning which is given to the word ‘Lord’ is shaped by, and therefore limited by, the culture in which he speaks. The full content of the word ‘Lord’, the full meaning of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, can only be that which it will have when every tongue

shall call him Lord. Till then, every confession of his Lordship is partial and provisional. It follows that a true Christology must be Christology *in via*, and the way is a missionary way, the way which the Church must take from the culture of first-century Palestine to all the nations and their cultures, to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.

It follows from this perspective that three conditions have to be satisfied if Christology is to be faithfully done. It must be done in the openness of dialogue with the varied cultures of mankind; it must be done in the openness of learning within the ecumenical fellowship of all Christians; it must be done in faithful adherence to the given tradition. These three conditions are mutually interlocked but I shall try to deal with them *seriatim*.

(i) In dialogue with other cultures

In the perspective which I am advocating it is clear that the full meaning of the confession 'Jesus is Lord' has to be learned by the Church as it goes to meet the cultures of all mankind bearing this confession. The most primitive Christologies discernible in the New Testament which confess the Lordship of Christ by means of models drawn from contemporary Judaism can only be the first and not the last word in Christology. The struggle to confess Jesus as Lord in terms of the models in which the world of classical culture interpreted its experience led to the formulations of Nicea and Chalcedon. The Church

would have been unfaithful if it had simply continued to repeat the formulae with which the primitive Church of Jerusalem confessed Christ. It had to use the models provided by classical Graeco-Roman culture. But it had to recognise that these models provided no place ready made for him. In using these models it had to take the risk that Jesus would be understood as simply one of the semi-divine saviours in a pantheistic cosmos, in fact that the model would prove too strong for the message. What did in fact happen, as it is memorably chronicled in Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, is that the classical world view disintegrated and that its fundamental axioms were dissolved in favour of a new set of axioms. The absolute dichotomies of sensible and intelligible which governed classical science, and of virtue and fortune which governed the classical view of history, simply dropped away in favour of the new set of models developed at Nicea and Chalcedon, and the way was prepared for a new attempt in the work of St. Augustine to grasp the meaning of human experience as a whole.

Evidently, if the perspective which I propose is the right one, the formulations of the third and fourth centuries, while part of the tradition within which we stand, are not its last word. For a thousand years following the work of Augustine Christianity was the religion of a small peninsula of Asia, cut off by Islam from real contact with the great religious cultures of the East. Now that there is again intimate contact, Christology has to be done in dialogue with these as with the other cultures of mankind. As I have suggested, Hinduism (to speak only of the one with which I have some acquaintance) provides a number of possible models within which one may try to make a provisional statement of who Jesus is. There has to be room for a great deal of experiment, for the taking of risks, and for critical reflection in ecumenical debate on the results of these experiments. As an outstanding example of the kind of experiment I mean, let me quote the series of essays on *Karma and Redemption* written by A. G. Hogg in 1904 and 1905. Hogg undertook a profound study of the doctrine of *Karma*, from which he came to appreciate both its enormous strength and its weaknesses. He confesses that this study led him back to a fresh study of the biblical revelation itself. And it led him on to propound an interpretation of Jesus as the one in whom the

author of the law of *karma* himself bears the *karma* of humanity. The power of the argument is such that the essays have to be reprinted seventy years later, and still challenge the serious attention of a Hindu thinker (e.g. C. G. S. S. Srinivasa Rao in *The Indian Journal of Theology*, vol. 25, No. 1, 1976, pp. 30-7). Here is an example of Christology done in faithful dialogue with another culture. The model is provided by Hinduism, the concept of *karma*. The Hindu reader hears himself addressed wholly in terms with which he has learned to understand his world. He is not required to master another set of models as a precondition for considering the Christian confession of Jesus. But he is introduced to Jesus as one who, standing within that familiar model, bursts it open with the power of a wholly new fact.

(I take a special pleasure in giving this example, because of its intrinsic interest, because Hogg was a revered friend and colleague whose name is not as widely remembered as it should be, and because there are so many contemporary writers who appear to believe that inter-faith dialogue was first invented about ten years ago!)

The two words which Hogg liked to use as defining the proper character of Christian theology in a Hindu context were the words 'challenging relevance'. The formulation of the theologian must be seen to be relevant: it must work with the models which the Hindu is accustomed to use. It must also be challenging, not accepting these models as of ultimate authority but introducing by their means the new fact of Jesus whose authority relativises whatever authority they have. It would be instructive to apply this test to current attempts to do Christology in terms of the models provided by our contemporary western culture. One would need to ask in each case two questions: (a) does it enable the inhabitant of this particular culture to see Jesus in terms of the models with which he is familiar, or does it require him as a precondition of seeing Jesus to emigrate from his own thought – world into another – perhaps from the past? (b) Does the Jesus who is so introduced judge and determine the models used, or is he judged and determined by them in such wise that only those elements in the portrait are allowed which are acceptable to the contemporary culture? By the answers to these questions

one determines the faithfulness or otherwise of any particular christological formulation.

(I am not forgetting that in fact 'modern western culture' is not a single but a multiple reality. Nor is it unimportant that much recent theology has attempted to use the models provided by existentialism—a view of life typical of western middle-class culture—and has been much less ready to use the model provided by Marxism, which would speak more directly to working-class culture. A rather violent movement in the other direction is provided by contemporary Latin American liberation theology.)

(2) In the Ecumenical Fellowship

The perspective which I suggest for the doing of Christology, namely the perspective of the eschatological confession of Jesus as Lord by peoples of every culture requires that Christology be done in an open fellowship of mutual learning and of mutual correction among all of every culture who now confess him as Lord and who seek to make their confession challengingly relevant in their several situations.

If the necessary and risky enterprise of doing theology in faithful dialogue with other cultures is not to run out into a medley of mutually contradictory types of Christology, those who are engaged in the enterprise must be open to one another in mutual learning and criticism. If this were not so, the global effect of the Church's witness would be a negative one. It would be a practical denial of the claim that there is one Lord Jesus who is Lord of all.

The problem which confronts us here is more complicated than is indicated by merely referring to the vast variety of human cultures. There is also the fact that the Church within a given culture does not retain a fixed relation to that culture. As already indicated in I (4)-(6) above, this relation will normally be an evolving one, and the pattern of its evolution is complex. Thus a Church which is at one period in a polemical relation to the traditional culture of its people may at another time see its role in the opposite way – seeking to provide spiritual resources for the renewing and strengthening of the culture. One could cite many examples of Churches in Asia which, fifty years ago, were primarily concerned to

emphasise their separation from their culture and are today deeply concerned about strengthening and renewing these cultures as they struggle towards fuller life in their nations. Ecumenical fellowship is made difficult by the fact that at any one moment churches in different cultures will be in different relations to their cultures. The whole spectrum of relationships described in Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* can be illustrated at one moment in time in different places, and this makes mutual understanding extremely difficult. A North American Christian, for example, highly critical of his own culture and very sympathetic to the relatively strange culture of India, is repelled when he meets a city congregation in India which is relatively unsympathetic to traditional Indian culture and very open to the West. Indian Christians coming to Britain are hurt to discover that Christians in Britain are much interested in Hinduism but much less interested in Indian Christianity. Within any one culture there are always conservatives for whom the foreign poses an unwelcome threat and radicals for whom the foreign appears as a welcome ally in their struggle with their own tradition. The culture-critics (Niebuhr's first category) who belong to Church A and are in revolt against culture (a) will happily fall into the arms of the conservatives (Niebuhr's second category) who belong to Church B and seek to cherish and safeguard culture (b); but the mutual esteem is deceptive because it rests on a concealed contradiction. Both cherish culture (b) and both reject culture (a), but their reasons for doing so are mutually contradictory. Thus the radicals in India will be tempted to imagine that Christological models must be imported from Oxford or Tübingen, while the radicals in Britain will want to import theirs from Bangalore.

Real mutual understanding, learning, and criticism have to go on in the midst of these extremely complex and constantly changing patterns of relationship between Church and culture. This calls for qualities of discernment and sensitivity, but this is the very heart of the ecumenical task, and it is one of the conditions of the Church's faithfulness to its mission.

One of the conditions, but not the only one. Mutual openness is not enough. There must also be faithfulness to the given tradition. The ecumenical exchange must take place within

the one Tradition. But how are the limits of that Tradition to be discerned? How can and should the Church discriminate, in all this complex, changing and mutually interacting pattern of relations between Christ and culture, between faithful witness and unfaithful compromise, between true confession and heresy? This brings me to the most difficult part of my task.

(3) In Faithful Adherence to the Tradition

In my preliminary definition I spoke of Jesus Christ as 'the one whom I know through the witness of the Christian tradition primarily embodied in the canonical Scriptures'. The ecumenical task of mutual learning and correction is centred in and governed by the common tradition of which the Scriptures are the centre; it is not just a conversation between churches but a conversation of which the Bible is the centre. The missionary dialogue with other cultures is not simply a dialogue

between cultures; the Bible functions decisively (as I have tried to show) as a third and independent party in the developing relationship.

As soon as I make these affirmations I am aware, as a product of modern western culture, of the questions which are posed against them in my own mind (questions which would not be posed if I were a product of an Indian or African culture).

(a) The Bible itself represents the experience of one particular culture or complex of cultures. The New Testament speaks the languages, uses the models of a particular time and place in human history. It is no Switzerland among the cultures of the world, no 'neutral zone', no 'non-aligned state'. It arises out of the experience of a people, or a group of peoples, among all the peoples of mankind. It is indelibly marked by their cultural peculiarities and it is embodied in their languages. How, then, can it be absolutised, given an authority over the products of other cultures?

(b) Within the New Testament itself there is a variety of Christologies. Some appear to be shaped by models drawn from the Old Testament, some from Iranian mythology, some from the world of Greek philosophy. How can this collection of varied models, all related to particular temporary and local forms of culture, provide criteria by which all future models, based on the whole range of human culture may be tested?

(c) Critical study of the New Testament, using the tools of modern historical research, has led many scholars to believe that it is impossible to have any knowledge of the life, character, and teaching of Jesus sufficiently reliable to provide a criterion for judging the future developments. We cannot, it is said, be sure how far the material in the New Testament represent the character and message of Jesus himself and how far the beliefs of the primitive Church.

These three questions obviously raise issues which could only be adequately discussed in a series of volumes, but my paper would be left hanging in the air if I did not attempt at least to sketch the outlines of the answers I would want to give.

A. It is of course unquestionable that the Bible has its locus in one particular part of the whole fabric of human culture. This fact is indeed the constant horizon of the biblical narrative from the time that it is said that God chose the clan of Eber from among all the seventy nations that made up the human family. Here is a primitive expression of the dogma, which is central to the Christian tradition, that God has chosen one people among all the peoples to be the unique bearer of his saving purpose for all nations. In contemporary western culture this is confronted by the statement that it is impossible to believe that one among all the cultures should have this unique position. The alleged impossibility rests upon another dogma regarding the meaning of human experience. Here two different dogmatic systems confront one another, and I know of no set of axioms more fundamental than either of them, on the basis of which it would be possible to demonstrate the truth of one of these dogmas and the falsity of the other. According to one dogma, world history is in some sense a coherent whole, and it is therefore possible to affirm that certain events have a unique significance for the entire story. According to the other dogma there are no events which have such unique significance and therefore no universally valid affirmation can be made about the meaning of history as a whole. The Christian affirmation about the unique significance of these events is a dogmatic statement made as part of the total faith-commitment to Jesus as Lord. The contrary affirmation rests upon a different dogma which belongs to the dominant 'myth' of contemporary western culture. Here the question at

issue is not one of 'translation' from one cultural world to another, but of ultimate faith-commitment.

However, the acknowledgment that this particular part of the whole fabric of human culture has a unique place still leaves open the question about the manner in which this uniqueness is to be interpreted. Does it mean that the cultural forms of the Semitic world have authority over all other cultural forms? Are those who accept the uniqueness and finality of God's revelation of himself in a Jewish male of the first century obliged to accept the cultural forms in which that revelation was given? Plainly no, for the New Testament itself records the debate which arose within the primitive community at the point when the testimony about Jesus moved from a Jewish into a Greek culture. The answers given to the question were not clear-cut, for the 'decrees' recorded in Acts 15.29 include purely Semitic elements which could not be and have not been accepted as permanently valid. But the answers given do make plain that incorporation into the community of Jesus Christ did not mean acceptance of the cultural world in which Jesus himself had lived and which he had accepted. Jesus himself apparently never questioned the law of circumcision. The decisive mark of membership in the new community was nothing definable in terms of culture; it was a reality – apparently quite unmistakable – which was recognised as the presence of the Holy Spirit.

With this I have already moved into the second of my three questions, that of the variety of voices with which the New Testament speaks of Jesus.

B. The fact that the New Testament contains not one but several Christologies prompts the following reflections:

(i) The first is a negative one. There is a variety but not an unlimited variety of Christologies in the New Testament. In determining which of the traditions regarding Jesus should be included in the canon and which should be excluded, the Church was guided by the belief that the name of Jesus referred to a real man who had lived at a known time and in a known place, and that therefore traditions must be verified against the testimony of original witnesses or of those who were related to the original witnesses by a continuous tradition of public teaching. By this test certain interpretations of the person and

teaching of Jesus had to be rejected. Those which were accepted, varied as they are, were united by the fact that they were judged to be reliable reports about the same person. The testimony of sixty generations of ordinary readers of the New Testament is a confirmation of that judgment which cannot be easily ignored.

(ii) The second reflection is positive. It is important for a faithful doing of Christology that we should affirm and insist that the New Testament contains not one Christology but several. This is not an unfortunate defect to be regretted or concealed. It is, on the contrary, of the essence of the matter because it makes clear the fact that Christology is always to be done in *via*, at the interface between the Gospel and the cultures which it meets on its missionary journey. It is of the essence of the matter that Jesus was not concerned to leave as the fruit of his work a precise verbatim record of everything he said and did, but that he was concerned to create a community which would be bound to him in love and obedience, learn discipleship even in the midst of sin and error, and be his witnesses among all peoples. The varied Christologies to be discovered in the New Testament reflect the attempts of that community to say who Jesus is in the terms of the different cultures within which they bore witness to him. If there were to be discovered in the New Testament one definitive Christology framed in the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus himself, the consequence would be that the Gospel would be for ever bound absolutely to the culture of first-

century Palestine. The New Testament would have to be regarded as untranslatable, as is the Qur'an among Muslims. We would be dealing with a different kind of religion altogether. The variety of Christologies actually to be found in the New Testament is part of the fundamental witness to the nature of the Gospel: it points to the destination of the Gospel in all the cultures of mankind. The unity of the New Testament, the fact that it contains not all Christologies, but only those which were judged to be faithful to the original testimony, and the fact that all are held together as parts of one canonical scripture, reflects the origin of the Gospel in the one unique person of Jesus.

(iii) These two reflections, negative and positive, lead to the affirmation that the New Testament, read as it must always be

in the context of the Old, provides us – in the variety and unity of its interpretation of Jesus – with the canon, the guide and regulator of our doing of Christology. It shows us that Christology must be always something which is in via, incomplete, but it shows us that the road has a real starting-point in the historic fact of Jesus Christ who lived, taught, died, and rose again under Pontius Pilate; that it has a real destination in the universal confession of this Jesus as Lord; and that the two conditions for the journey are faithful confession within the varied cultures, and faithful mutual openness within the ecumenical fellowship.

C. This brings us, however, to the third of the questions which modern critical study of the New Testament poses: do we, in fact, have such reliable knowledge of 'the historic fact of Christ' as would enable us to speak thus of a known starting-point for the journey of Christology? Obviously it is impossible to discuss such a large and much debated question here: it is, however, necessary to draw attention to one point in the debate which is relevant to the discussion.

The application of modern critical methods of historical research to the contents of the New Testament involves two distinct issues from the point of view of our present theme.

(i) It involves the asking of such questions as the following: What is the source of this tradition? Does it rely on eyewitnesses, or on verbal or written reports? What are the stages through which it has passed? What are the influences and interests which could have shaped the tradition as it was passed on? What independent evidence is there of the reliability of each of the witnesses or reporters? For the asking of these and similar questions scholars have continuously improved their tools and increased the volume of collateral information relevant to the answering of the questions. The community which stands in the tradition of faith in Jesus Christ as universal Lord is under obligation to press these questions and to use these tools for the investigation of the sources of its own faith. To seek to evade this kind of research would be to compromise the Church's confession at its very centre.

(ii) But historical enquiry is never an ideologically neutral enterprise. As with every other attempt to understand the

world of experience, the historian's attempt to understand the past must begin by seeking to grasp it in terms of the thought-world which he inhabits and to which he is committed. His effort is shaped by his culture. He can only understand the past by means of analogies in his present experience. The past cannot become part of his mental world except by being grasped through such analogies. This is why history has to be rewritten in each generation. 'History is a continuing conversation between the present and the past' (E. H. Carr). The data of the historian's work are those things which were remembered and recorded because they were significant for someone at

some time. The product of his work is an ‘understanding’ of the enormous mass of available data in terms of their significance for human beings now.

But what is ‘significant’? The answer to that question depends upon a decision of faith about the meaning (or meaninglessness) of the whole human story. The corpus of the New Testament writings was formed within a community which believed that the meaning of the whole human story had been declared in Jesus Christ. Within the limits of the historical methods available to them they sought to preserve and hand on a record which was faithful to the original testimony of those who had known Jesus in the flesh and who were the witnesses of his resurrection. The controlling belief which shaped the selection and handling of the material was that in Jesus the meaning of the whole of history is revealed. Within this perspective the ‘Jesus of history’ is the Christ of faith.

The ‘model’ of world history with which European scholars operated up to the period of enlightenment was that provided by this biblical faith. For the past two hundred years other models have been operative which in different ways see man as the bearer of his own history. World history is not taught in the schools and universities of Western Europe from the point of view that the coming of Jesus is its decisive turning-point. It is told from the point of view (usually unacknowledged) that some element in contemporary human experience, or, to be precise, in the consciousness of contemporary western man, provides the clue for understanding the past. It is natural that a historian whose work is part of modern western culture should approach the New Testament records from the point of

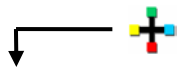
view of that culture. If within that framework of understanding he searches for the ‘Jesus of history’ he will certainly find, if he finds anything more than a faint echo, something other than the ‘Christ of Faith’, for the model in terms of which he understands history is based upon prior decisions which exclude the faith of the Church. When it is stated that the lineaments of the real Jesus are, for practical purposes, inaccessible to us, what has happened is that the history remembered and recorded within the community which confesses Jesus as Lord has been set aside in favour of a history understood on the basis of a different belief about history – one of the beliefs which shape contemporary western culture. From the point of view of a discussion of Christ and the Cultures, this is an excellent example of an inadmissible syncretism in which the confession of Jesus as Lord of all cultures is suppressed in deference to the requirements of a particular regional culture. The charge of syncretism, which has been made by some western theologians against Christians in Asia who are looking for models for an authentic Asian way of doing Christology, is now being thrown back with much more accuracy upon the theologians of Europe.

I conclude this third point by affirming my belief that ‘faithful adherence to the tradition primarily embodied in the canonical scriptures’ can be and should be accepted as one of the three conditions for the doing of Christology in the perspective which I have described, provided (and here I recapitulate) that three conditions are fulfilled.

(i) The Church in doing its Christology must be continually in earnest about re-examining its own tradition, seeking to grasp it afresh in terms of its new and expanding cultural experience, using for the purpose the best tools for critical research that are available to it, but always standing within the commitment of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

(ii) The Church in each culture must do its Christology in fellowship with other Churches, giving and receiving correction and illumination from the different experiences of those who seek to confess Jesus as Lord within different cultures.

(iii) The Church must do its Christology in dialogue with those who inhabit cultural worlds outside of the Church (whether these are religious or secular) in order to learn through



this dialogue more of the fulness of what Lordship means, a fulness which will finally be made manifest only when every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

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