



# A HUMAN GOD



Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios

**A**  
**HUMAN GOD**

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# **A HUMAN GOD**

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**Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios**

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## **A Human God**

**Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios**

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## **PREFACE**

The articles in this volume were written in different contexts for varying audiences and occasions, sometimes in India but mostly abroad. They reflect stages in my own uneven theological pilgrimage (1960-1990) reacting to and in dialogue with, western theological trends among Catholics and Protestants.

I have been on this theological pilgrimage for at least 50 years now. I still believe that bad theology can do harm, if not immediately certainly in the long run. But today I am inclined to be more reticent and restrained while speaking about the great mysteries of God's revelation.

I know that theology is not "divinity"; to me it is very human, and full of the contradictions of being human. Especially when it is one individual's theology, coming from the academic desktop, not rooted in the life-experience of worshiping and serving communities. Theological talk is not always edifying. Sometimes, by trivialising the Truth, Theology can be counter-productive for spiritual growth. It is for this reason that I have not so far attempted a systematically theological work.

Most of the papers in this volume may prove to be heavy going for many. There are several reasons for this. One is that my own writing style is not as lucid or felicitous as my speaking style. I wish I had an editor who could put this into readable English. Second reason is that very few people have the theological interest, training or background to follow some of the abstract arguments. Many are satisfied with unexamined conclusions.

However, there may be certain affirmations scattered through these writings which could be well worth pondering, even after I am gone.

Eastern Orthodox theological reflection has still to come out of a depression. Because no Eastern Orthodox culture has the economic and political clout to impress the contemporary world; because our reflection is still unable to deal with today's critical issues like the nature of this new secular civilisation within the framework of which we have to bear witness to the Truth; because the Orthodox themselves are fiercely jealous of each other and unable to work together for the good of humanity, the Eastern Orthodox voice in today's world will continue to be feeble and unheeded. The temptation to dogma besets our theology too.

I believe that the Eastern Orthodox tradition remains much more faithful to the apostolic faith than the Western traditions. One aspect of that faithfulness is the low emphasis Eastern Christianity puts on theological formulation as a less important way of expressing the truth. Of course Eastern Fathers too have been tempted to follow the western path and sought to produce voluminous verbiage of very limited value. But the basic insight of the East remains constant. What really matters is worship (both personal and communitarian) and working out the life of Christ in the church's life in the world. The twofold task of the church as Royal Priesthood (*Basilikon hierateuma*) is to take the creation to God in worship and sacrifice, and to manifest God to the creation in life and love. Humanity's call is to be a mediator, a frontier being straddling both realities - the Creator and the Creation.

What am I saying in this book? First, that God is not a topic for talk or a subject for study. We can sing to God, praise God, thank God, bow before God, worship God, love God, serve God, trust in God, repent and return to God when we have gone astray. We can know God as a person, but cannot know God as an object of our cognition. God is not in the same category as objects in the world. If God is Three-in-one, as Christians attest, that cannot be like any other three-in-one in our experience: Number applies strictly only to finite and corporeal entities; even the notion of "three-in-one" is a numerical formulation and cannot strictly apply to God, as St. Basil himself showed.

God remains beyond our comprehension; but God has come to us in a human form - a divine-human person with whom we can deal better. That person, Jesus Christ, cannot be merely an instrumentality for our salvation. Christ remains God while being human. This too is beyond our conceptual or logical comprehension. In Christ we are seized by God's incarnate love,



and in union with Christ, we respond to God in faith and gratitude. The end is not "Beatific Vision" or the mind's direct encounter with God, as the Western tradition taught. The vision is only a beckoning - a call to be reshaped, so that through the divine-human person that Christ has become, we too might become truly divine-human, sharing in Christ's nature and growing into him. What Christians should seek is not the experience of the Beatific Vision but participation in the transfiguring process by which humans grow towards the image of God. This process is infinite, a horizon that always reveals new things, but always also recedes, beckoning us to advance further. We see light, but then we may soon have to pass through darkness, towards that Horizon that infinitely beckons. Even our knowledge has to be laid aside, as we pass through the cloud of unknowing. It is not knowledge that helps you advance, but the love that transfigures.

The third essay is on the Death of God Theology which raged in Protestant circles in the early sixties, when I had just moved to Geneva (1962) and had some responsibility to lead the world-wide ecumenical movement. I suggest that if the Augustinian notion of God which had prevailed in the West since the 7th Century had died a natural death, we should say *requiescat in pace* and rejoice in the downfall of a false notion of God. The dualist God of western Christian theism is a fiction. There is no duality or opposition between God and Humanity. There are, of course, fundamental differences; but the affinity far exceeds the differences. Once we see the differences and affinities properly, there will be no need to do what the Death of God theology was trying to do on behalf of aggressive western culture - attempted patricide, in order to come into the paternal property.

"What do you think of Christ? Who is He?" This is a question addressed to so-called Christians as well as to so-called non-Christians. Very simply put the options are few: (1) Either Christ is God or Christ is not God; and (2) God the Son did become a human person, or God the Son did not. Both options relate to the two great mysteries of the Christian faith : the affirmation of the Holy Trinity and the affirmation of the incarnation of the Son of God. The early sects like Arians and Gnostics denied both. That denial now recurs, though in a veiled form, in some versions of Roman Catholic and Protestant christology. If one is tempted to adopt these new christologies, one must at least realize that one is departing radically from

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the foundation of Apostolic Christianity. This is the point of the two articles on christology.

Two articles on the church and salvation conclude the work. On both of these topics, there are fundamental differences of perception between the Eastern tradition and the Western. All these are *ad hoc* papers- Bible Studies and conference addresses which in the originals, did not follow any logical sequence. They are put together now in some logical order. These could start a debate or dialogue between East and West. The fact that the MS of this book has been rejected by two western publishers who requisitioned it must be significant.

I am grateful to the Mar Gregorios Foundation for undertaking its publication and to Mr. K.V. Thomas, whose generosity made it possible. I hope theologians and theological students will try to come to grips with these papers. Even if they reject the arguments and affirmations, exposure to them could broaden their horizons and open up new perspectives.

I am grateful to Fr. C.C Cherian, whose untiring efforts have borne fruit in the publication, and to Micro Graphics and Premier Offset Printers, Kottayam, who has efficiently executed a difficult, multilingual printing job.

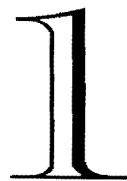
The Grace of God be upon us all

**Paulos Mar Gregorios**

Orthodox Seminary,  
Kottayam.  
Feast of the Invention of the Cross, 1992

**A**  
**HUMAN GOD**

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# God - Who is He?

## An Eastern Christian Perspective

The topic assigned to me was "Christian View of God". If I were to speak to that subject, I would have had more or less to read out the title, go into a fairly long period of silence, and then conclude with "thank you, friends, for sharing with me the Christian View of God", for in our silence, you would also have expressed the Christian View of God. And please do not imagine that the length of the silence period would have been due to my going into a trance or something of that sort. It simply happens to be the case that silence would be the best way to speak about our ignorance of God, and it takes time to give adequate expression to that ignorance.

That ignorance can, however, be of two kinds; one natural and the other taught. The natural ignorance is not to be regarded as somehow superior to the taught or acquired one. In this particular case, the movement from natural ignorance to taught ignorance (*docta ignorantia*) is itself a process of growth and self-realization which makes the acquisition of the knowledge of the unknowability of God itself a creative process of considerable value.

But, we, especially religious leaders, do a lot of talking about God, not always knowing what we are talking about. Here in this paper, I shall talk about three things, mainly :

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● A paper presented to the International Metaphysics Society.

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- (a) Is God a comprehensible reality?  
What of God is a legitimate subject for discourse?
- (b) To what does the christian doctrine of the Triune God refer?
- (c) What is really meant by speaking about God's transcendence and immanence?

The perspective from which I talk is that of an Eastern Christian trained in the West. That may in itself lead to contradictions, which my friends may be able to detect and tell me. But the basic ideas come from a tradition which Eastern Christians regard as the authentic Christian Tradition. This tradition does not follow the thought of an Augustine or a Thomas Aquinas or a Karl Barth. It was shaped through the centuries, and formulated to a fair extent by the three Cappadocian Fathers - St. Basil of Caesarea (died ca 379 A.D.), his younger brother St. Gregory of Nyssa (died ca 395 A.D.), and their friend and colleague St. Gregory Nazianzen (died ca 390 A.D.). They were Asians from what is today the north-eastern part of Turkey. On the foundation which they formulated, subsequent Eastern Christian thinkers have built - among the Byzantines Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas, among the Slavs Khomiakov and Soloviev; the foundation still remains adequate to the needs of this modern age; and what I say here owes much to this eastern heritage.

#### **The Incomprehensibility Of God.**

St. Gregory Nazianzen, in his second Theological Oration, quotes Plato who had said that it is difficult<sup>1</sup> to conceive God, but that to define him in words is an impossibility. The Christian Father then goes on to pull Plato's leg, by saying that this is clever of the Philosopher in that he gives you the impression that while Plato himself has been able with difficulty to conceive God, he has no responsibility to tell us what he has conceived since in his view it is impossible to "tell every one about him". The Nazianzen then goes on to say :

"But in my opinion it is impossible to describe him, but yet more impossible to conceive Him."<sup>2</sup>

And he continues in the next para:

"It is one thing to be persuaded of the existence of a thing, and quite another to know what it is"<sup>3</sup>

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It was Gregory of Nyssa who made this point philosophically clear. The Nazianzen was of the view that it was the feebleness of our equipment, the limited nature of our mind, that causes the incapacity to comprehend. He even hoped that some day we will overcome this incapacity and know God, so that we would know him as we are known.<sup>4</sup> His colleague Nyssa went further, and made certain basic clarifications:

- a. that God is of a different order of being than anything else, and that his incomprehensibility is related not so much to the limits of our mind, as to God's nature itself;
- b. that there is a difference between God's *ousia* or his is-ness, and his *energeia* or operations in the creation;
- c. that the knowledge of God, when it comes, is never strictly intellectual nor simply mystical, but a form of self-knowledge which happens when that self has become more truly the image or created finite manifestation of God.

Nyssa agrees that we can have faint and scant apprehension of the nature of God through our reasonings about what God has revealed of Himself, but that this does not amount to any comprehension.<sup>5</sup> This unknowability is not, however, a unique characteristic of God alone. The creation itself shares this unknowability. For example, can we claim to know, exhaustively, notions like space or time or even the human mind, Gregory asks. We can have notions about them, but we also know that these notions have to keep changing again and again in the light of experience.

Nyssa insists on the basic distinction and difference between the Self-existent and the Contingent, or the Uncreated and the Created. The Platonic assumption of the co-eternity of Creator and Creation is explicitly rejected by Nyssa as well as by the Cappadocians. Basil stated that the universe had a beginning, that this beginning is also the beginning of time, and that time and the world as we now know it will also come to an end.<sup>6</sup> Even heaven is not co-existent with God, but was created and therefore has a beginning.

Nyssa made the same distinction between "He who is" and "the things that are" (*ho ontos on* and *ta onta*). The "one whose being is" is not in the same class with "those that merely exist".

In fact Gregory has three classes:

1. the Being who has being by His own nature;<sup>7</sup>

2. non-being, which has existence only in appearing to be;<sup>8</sup>  
and in between these two;
3. those things which are capable of moving towards being or  
non-being.<sup>9</sup>

The two latter are negation of, or derived from the first, i.e., He who is.

The distinction between the Uncreated and the Creation, in Gregory of Nyssa, may be summarised as follows :

<i>Uncreated Being</i>	<i>Created Existence</i>
1. Self-derived	other-derived
2. Self-generating	other-generated
3. Self-subsistent	Contingent upon the will of the Creator
4. Not subject to non-being	Capable of moving into being or non-being
5. Perfectly good	Capable of good and evil
6. Is what it wills and wills what it is, hence does not have to move from <i>arche</i> to <i>telos</i> , nor is in process of becoming.	Always has to become what it is, or move into non-being - hence always becoming, or perishing.
7. Simple	Compound

The simplicity of God does not, however, preclude either conceptual distinctions or distinction of persons. One of the conceptual distinctions made classical for Eastern thought by Gregory of Nyssa is the distinction between *ousia* and *energeia*. It was not a distinction created by him. Most likely it was created by his adversary, Eunomius of Cyzicus. Gregory used the distinction as a major tool in vanquishing his adversary the Arian heretic. Eunomius had developed the distinction between being, operative power, and operated effect, i.e. *ousia*, *energeia* and *erga*. The distinction had an epistemological function, namely that human reason could deduce the nature of the operative power from an understanding of the operated effect, and from the understanding of the operative power to the nature of its being. The *erga* or operated effect can be an object of our understanding.

which then becomes the first step to ascend to the second step of understanding of the *energeia* and then ascend to the third step of understanding the *ousia*. Knowledge moves thus from created things to the very essence of God, according to Eunomius.

This is what Gregory refuted. He held that there was no clear road from *erga* to *energeia* to *ousia*. The wind is the *energeia* which creates the *ergon* of a sand-dune. But if you did not know what the wind was, how can you move from the knowledge of a sand-dune to the knowledge of the wind? Or in today's terms would a photograph and a green leaf constitute sufficient ground to understand the nature of light? Can you understand a human being from his excretions or from a ship which are both his *erga*?

Gregory thus denies the assumption that we can move from the knowledge of Creation to the knowledge of Creator.

He rejects also the principle of *analogia entis* (analogy of being) or *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith). The only analogy he concedes is the *analogia metousias* (analogy of participation), but this does not lead to a knowledge of the *ousia* of God. The *analogia metousias* helps only to compare the degree of being of created entities in terms of their degree of participation in the *energeia* of God. The degree of participation is measured by the degree of conformity to the good by the impulsion of the will of each towards the good. The *energeia* thus does not lead to knowledge of God's being. It is only God's *energeia* which we can know or apprehend.

Words about God can serve a useful purpose in so far as they lead to the worship of God, or to greater participation in the Good.<sup>11</sup> But they cannot capture or conceive God nor can they adequately express His being.

As Gregory of Nyssa says :

"After all, God is not words, neither has He his being in sound and speech. God is in Himself as He is ever believed to be, but he is named by those who invoke Him, the name not being the same as what He is (for the nature is ineffable); but He has names given to Him in accordance with what is believed to be His operations in relation to our life".<sup>12</sup>

To sum up then, words about God are certainly not descriptive but evocative. Their main purpose is not to provide knowledge, but to lead to worship. His names as well as any descriptions we make about Him are our



creations, related to our experience of His operations. His *ousia* or being remains beyond all grasp. For He is not like the things that make up the created order. His being is *sui generis* and no analogy or reasoning can comprehend it. There is no concept adequate for apprehending the Truth of God.

## II. The doctrine of the Trinity

All doctrines are verbal. And that applies also to the Doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine composed, after all, of words. It is a human creation, developed out of the understanding of the *energeia* of God that reaches out to us.

The central *energeia* that has reached out to us is the person Christ, Christians believe. The central form in which God's *ousia* impinges upon us through His *energeia* is the form of a man who was born in Palestine 2000 years ago. This is the heart of the Christian faith and experience, and it is from this that the doctrine of the Trinity takes shape.

But this doctrine is much mis-understood, not merely by Muslims and Jews with their more strict monotheism, but also by very many Christians. St. Basil makes it clear that one cannot attribute any kind of number to the Godhead, because Divinity is without quantity and number relates to quantity.

In reply to those who slander us as being Tritheists, let it be said that we confess one God, not in number but in nature (*ou tot arithmoi, alla tet phusei*). For not everything that is called one in number is one in reality nor simple in its nature, but God is universally admitted to be simple and uncompounded. Yet God is therefore not one in number. Number pertains to quantity; now quantity is joined as an attribute to corporeal nature; therefore number is an attribute of corporeal nature.

Here our logic comes to a standstill. The Cappadocians insist that they are not Tritheists, and yet they do not want to ascribe the number One to God without qualification. A heroic effort is made to explain this problem in the famous Epistle 38 attributed to St. Basil, but which was probably from the pen of his brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa. Yet another vigorous effort is made by St. Gregory in his oration: "On Not Three Gods" to defend himself against the charge of Tritheism. But the result seems to be unsatisfactory.

If the Unity of God is in the same genre as the unity of the gold in three gold coins, then we are justified, by the ordinary use of language, to speak of three Gods, as we speak of three coins.

But this certainly is not the intention of the Cappadocians. A more mature point of view is expressed by Nyssa in his first book against Eunomius. He had already made a distinction between the operation of God *ad extra*.<sup>14</sup> and the natural immanent relations within the Godhead. There he also makes clear that enumeration is possible only for circumscribed finite realities. The Divine life has no parts or boundary. The names which we give to God, including those of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, have "a human sound, but not a human meaning".<sup>15</sup>

"There is nothing by which we can measure the divine and blessed life. It is not in time but time flows from it ..... The Supreme and Blessed Life has no time extension accompanying its course, and therefore no span or measure".<sup>16</sup>

"In whom there is neither form (*eides*) nor place, no size, no measure of time, nor anything else of those things which can be comprehended".<sup>17</sup>

No number, no measure, no duality or non-duality, no monism or non-monism - all our usual categories have to be folded up and laid away. You must forgive me therefore if I fail to give you a satisfactory metaphysical account of the Three-in-one. I do not have any understanding of the mystery. The doctrine bears witness to a great mystery, of that I am sure because of my faith. But I have no concepts, analogies or illustrations by which to explain the Holy Trinity. These things I derive from that doctrine.

"that God is love, and that in the divine being there are three persons or centres which respond to each other in freedom and love; that God is a community of freedom and love; that in this freedom and love is also the good, the true being of all that exists."<sup>18</sup>

The patristic tradition has examined all efforts to explain the Trinity in terms of analogies in creation, and have rejected them as inadequate. Even the Nazianzen who sometimes used the analogy of the human mind and human word to denote the relation between the Father and the Son, had to say :

"I have very carefully considered this matter in my own mind, and have looked at it from every point of view, in order to find some illustration of this most important subject (the Holy Trinity), but I have been unable to discover anything on earth with which to compare the nature of the Godhead".<sup>19</sup>

He mentioned expressly the source, the fountain and the river, the sun, the ray and the light, and then concludes :

"Finally then, it seems best to me to let the images and the shadows go, as being deceitful and very far short of the truth."

Gregory Nazianzen, as well as Gregory of Nyssa, who had both a fairly high view of the use of philosophy, would both admit that philosophical language is not at all suited for the discourse about God. It is better to be silent, or if you must give utterance, to use the hymns of praise. And the Nazianzen himself has given us many such hymns, for example:

All abide in thee, All follow thee,  
Thou art the end of all things  
Thou art one, Thou art all  
Thou art Naught, Thou art neither One nor All  
How shall I call thee, O Thou  
Whom all names fit, and yet the only One no one can name.<sup>20</sup>

### III. God's transcendence and immanence

If God is not a body, then there is already something awkward about speaking about God's transcendence and immanence because these have to do with location, and location for non-spatial entities is inconceivable for us.

Whitehead's effort to find a non-spatial or temporal transcendence has not quite clicked yet. The kingdom that is always in the future denotes only the transcendence of history itself. Those who speak about the future of God as the future of history commit the double iniquity of identifying God with human history in a manner that is not legitimate and of taking human history to be the whole of the universe.

On the other hand, those who claim that God's being is independent of the being of the universe, shoulder the heavy burden of explaining the state of that independent being in relation to the universe. The difficulty for

me is to understand words like 'independent' or 'self-sufficient' in relation to God. Sufficiency and dependence are terms that belong to quantity and relation in a created world and to apply these, even in a negative sense, to the Uncreated Being seems difficult.

In the first place, as Gregory of Nyssa says, to be infinite is to transcend all boundaries, whether of conception or of time-space. The infinite cannot stop at any boundary and must by necessity transcend all - whether the boundaries be intellectual, quantitative or qualitative. And Gregory insists that every finite being must of necessity come to the boundaries of its finitude, whether in concept or being, and the infinite always extends beyond. The definition of the infinite is not that beyond whose boundaries there is nothing, but that beyond every boundary, being is.

The transcendence of God is thus not merely conceptual or qualitative or temporal or spatial. It is in transcending every boundary that the infinity of God is manifesting.

But let us beware about the false statements: (a) that God is beyond the creation, as if God were non-existent this side of the boundary of creation; or (b) that God is "wholly other", so that the creation can exist *along-side* of God as His "other".

Both ideas, to which Professor Boyce Gibson refers in the slender volume of essays edited by Professor John Smith, i.e. the idea of God's self-sufficiency and non-dependence on the one hand and his "wholly otherness" with occasional sorties into the universe, are in that form unacceptable to the Eastern tradition. Neither an "Immobilist" view nor an "interventionist" view of God is acceptable.<sup>21</sup> Boyce Gibson completely misunderstands the authentic Christian tradition of creation when he asserts:

"It is just not possible to say that creating makes no difference to the creator; for the something which is there, and formerly was not there, is in relation to Him; He is related where formerly He was unrelated".<sup>22</sup>

Gibson's mistake is in using the adverb "formerly", for the authentic tradition holds that time has its beginning only from creation, and that there was not, to parody the Arian formula, a "then when the Creation was not", though it has come from non-being into being. Perhaps his bigger mistake is his insistence that theology "is committed to getting the analysis straight".<sup>23</sup> What presumption!

The analysis of God's transcendence and immanence cannot be straightened out in such categories as apply to relations within the creation.

Gregory of Nyssa does the trick more dialectically than most modern philosophers. The principles of logic applying to the spatio-temporal creation cannot be applied to the Godhead. There we can only say that from the side of the Universe, we experience both discontinuity with and participation in God. What it would be like from God's side we cannot conceive.

God's immanence also is understood by Gregory in a fairly sophisticated way. We can only indicate that understanding in fairly quick shorthand. God's operative energy is the ground of the creation. It begins, it moves, and it reaches its appointed destiny, only by virtue of God's will and word. The creation is God's will and word, and that is the principle of immanence. Existence is always by God's will and word, and when the will-and-word is withdrawn, there is only non-existence. Thus the authentic Christian tradition does not regard the cosmos as the body of God, or as something outside of God, for outside God, there is only non-being. It is in God's will-and-word that the universe has its existence, and it is by will-and-word that God is immanent in Creation.

### The Concept and the reality

Reason or *ratio* is always a proportionality between reality and knowledge. The dualism between reality and knowledge is itself grounded in the other dualism of subject and object which in turn generates the concept of the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi*, the object-in-consciousness and the object-in-itself.

All these dualisms cry out to be overcome. But they will not be overcome by reason or *ratio*, which is what generates the dualities. The irrationality of reason, exemplified by the classical antinomies of Kant, cannot be overcome by reason.

The concept as such belongs to the realm of reason and stands in need of overcoming. It is a kind of puerile naivete that drives logicians and philosophers to capture reality in a net of concepts. We are part of that reality, and no equipment we have is capable of subducting reality under our brainshell. Let us give up that wildgoose chase.

For a thinking person, the word God should not stand for a concept. It is a symbol pointing to many things:

- a. an affirmation of the contingent, therefore, unself-sufficient and dependent character of our own existence as well as of the reality in which we participate - the reality we call the universe;
- b. an affirmation that the cause of all causes is of a different genre than the links in the casual chain;
- c. an affirmation that all created things have to move towards a goal which is ultimately good.

This is also what the Cappadocian Fathers meant by the term Creator. The Creator, who does not owe his being to someone else, has caused this universe to begin, keeps it going and will lead it to its destined end. The one who does that is personal, i.e. capable of responding in freedom to others. He is also love and wisdom. He cannot be captured in concepts. But he can be loved and united with. There all duality gives place to the union of love.

In fact it is God's freedom which makes Him beyond the search of our finest grasp. Man, with his great capacity to understand, has also the great capacity to bring that which he understands under his control. Every science generates its own technology. If we could comprehend God, we would also devise the technology to control Him and use Him, i.e. to enslave Him. The freedom of practically everything else is such that despite its freedom, it can be subdued by our analytic reason at least to a certain extent. Even man, the highest and most evolved element in creation, we so seek to understand, control and manipulate. Do philosophers expect that God would place himself as an object of our comprehension, so that he too can be enslaved by us? Ask love for the answer.

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1. The English Translation of *Timaeus* 28 E, by H.D.P. Lee reads: "To discover the maker and father of this universe is indeed a hard task, and having found him it would be impossible to tell every one about him".
  2. Second Theological Oration: IV.
  3. *Idem*: V
  4. *Idem*: XVII
  5. *Contra Eunomium* II: 130 PG 45:953.B.
-

6. Hexaemeron I:3
7. *to on. ho tei heautou phusei to einaí echei*
8. *to me on. ho en toi dokein einaí monon estin*
9. *Sec de Vita Moysis*. PG 44:333, *Gregori Nysseni Opera* Vol. VII:1:40
10. *Contra Eunomium* .1:274-275 PG 45.33 D GNO 1:106-107
11. *Contra Eunomium* II: 136 PG 45:956
12. *Ibid* II: 149 PG:45:956
13. *Epist VIII*: Tr.Roy J. Deferrari, St. Basil *The Letters*, Loeb Classical Library, Vol.I. P. 52
14. *On Not Three Gods* NPNF. VOL.V. P. 334
15. *Contra Eunomium* BK. 1:39 NPNF P.93
16. *Contra Eunomium* I: 26 NPNF P. 69
17. *Contra Eunomium* I : 26 NPNF p. 69
18. My own formulation.
19. *Oratio Theologica V: XXXI* NPNF. Vol. VII.P.328 - A
20. Cited by J.Plagnieu, *S.Gregoire de Nazianze, Theologien*, p. 333 Note The French translation by Bossuet reads:  
 Tout demeure en Vous, tout court après Vous  
 Vous êtes la fin de toutes choses;  
 Vous êtes un, vous êtes tout;  
 Vous êtes rien; vous n'êtes ni un ni tout;  
 Comment Vous appellerai-je, O Vous  
 A qui tout nom peut convenir  
 Et le seul qu'on ne peut nommer.
21. A Boyce Gibson: "The Two Ideas of God" in John E. Smith (Ed). *Philosophy of Religion* New York, London 1965 p. 61 ff.
22. *Ibid* p. 65
23. *Ibid* : p. 67

# 2

## A Human God ?

### God's becoming a human being and human beings becoming God

#### A brief introduction to the Christian Doctrine of Theosis.

The word *theosis* must be unfamiliar to most of you. It may also be unpalatable to some. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian church does not have an entry under *Theosis* or its equivalent *Divinisation*. Nor would most Protestant or Roman Catholic dictionaries of Theology - not even the seemingly exhaustive thirty volume *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*.

Because - neither the word nor the concept has been acceptable to the west - in general. *Theosis* is not *Beatific Vision*. And perhaps to say how they differ is the best way to clarify what *Theosis* is.

The *Beatific Vision* is a Platonic expression. *To makarion theama* is a term developing from the passage in *Phaedrus*, where Plato's Socrates speaks about the sights which the soul ascending to heaven sees - "many blessed sights in the inner heaven". It is this *opsis makarios*, which in Plato is an intellectual experience of the individual soul as it ascends with wings into the *kosmos noëtos* that later becomes transformed into the *Beatific Vision* of the West. The *Beatific Vision* or *Intuitive Vision* of God, is defined by the *Dict. Theol. Catholique* (by A. Michel) as the "the act of the intelligence

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● A paper read before a Faith and Order Study Group in Pendely, Athens, Greece.

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by which the blessed know God in Himself, clearly and immediately". In the Western tradition, seeing God is primarily an intellectual act, of the blessed in heaven, which can be foreshadowed in human experience on earth. The object of this experience is God Himself - not some analogy or image of God. It is direct, unmediated vision; not abstract, conceptual knowledge composed of qualities perceived by the senses. The Latin terms vary - *visio beatifica*, *visio beata*. It is the beatifying vision - the experience which imparts beatitude. It is a "supernatural" experience, impossible for the natural faculties of the human being, according to the Western tradition.

The formal definition in the West was given by Pope Benedict XII, in his *constitutio* called *Benedictus Deus* (January 29, 1336).

"They (the elect) will see, and do see the divine essence in an intuitive and face to face vision, the divine essence appearing to them immediately, without a veil (*nuditer*), clearly and openly, so that in this vision they might enjoy the divine essence itself".

Pope Benedict took his position so seriously that when some Armenians sought union with Rome five years later (1341), the Pope counted as one of the Armenian heresies that they denied the blessed vision of the essence of God to Christians".<sup>1</sup>

Pope Benedict's views were in turn based on scholastic *scientia*. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (III: 51, 54, 57) and in the *Summa Theologica* (Prima: Q.12), expressly cites St. John Chrysostom (*Commentary on John*, Homily XV), and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (*de Divinis Nominibus* I:5) who say that God's essence cannot be comprehended by human knowledge. According to Thomas, God cannot be comprehended, but still the human mind can have a direct unmediated, intellectual, intuitive vision of the essence of God, though it cannot be fully understood. On the basis of these passages in Thomas, Western scholasticism developed this distinction between vision of knowledge and vision of comprehension, the second alone being impossible.

To the Eastern tradition, the scholastic position seems perilously close to the Eunomian heresy which in the 4th century claimed that the essence of God was in His un-originateness (*agennésia*) and that this could be comprehended by the human intellect. Western theologians like the Jesuit Gabriel Vazquez (1551 - 1604) would expressly support Eunomius :

"Eunomius was after all not mad, in maintaining that the idea he could have of God was equal to the idea and knowledge God has of himself". (*Commentaria ad disputationes in primam partem S. Thomae*, Vol.I, Antwerp, 1621, pp. 195-200)

This is the paradox of Western spirituality - that on the one hand it exalts the human intellect to the point of equality with the Divine mind now, but yet on the other had maintains the sinfulness and utter helplessness of the human being. Praising the human mind, it yet condemns human nature.

Eastern theology has the opposite paradox - it lacks this great sanguinity about the power of the human intellect, but still passionately holds to the perfectibility of the human to become the icon of the Divine.

The time of the "Armenian Controversy" in the Roman Catholic Church is also the time of the dispute between Gregory Palamas, the medieval ascetic theologian of Thessaloniki and Western scholasticism, Fitzralph, who studied the "Armenian heresy" for the Pope, also probably regarded the teaching of Palamas as "ridiculous dogmas" (*ridicula dogmata*), as a later writer, Denis Petau (1583-1652) regarded them - if he knew about Palamas at all.

The major Byzantine heresy which Petau attacked in the seventeenth century was the doctrine of the "Uncreated Light" which the blessed could see with their eyes - such as the Apostles saw on Mount Tabor, the mount of transfiguration. This doctrine, that what Moses saw on Mount Sinai and James, John and Peter saw on Mount Tabor, is the reflection of the glory of God, that it is different from all created splendour, and that it is this uncreated light that the blessed can see when God grants them the grace to do so, was not acceptable to 17th century Roman Catholic thought. For Petau this is a "senseless and barbarous fable". Prof. Vladimir Lossky discusses this controversy in the first chapter of his *The Vision of God* (Eng. Tr. Faith Press, London, 1963).

In this paper we shall try to summarize briefly the very rich tradition of Eastern (not necessarily Byzantine) or Asian -African spirituality on the "divinisation of human beings" (*theosis*) and the vision of God. It cannot be a comprehensive summary. The best that one can do is to lift up the more important aspects of an inexhaustibly rich spiritual tradition, rich not so

much in intellectual achievements as in depth of experience and perception.

We should start with Scripture, as the Eastern tradition always likes to do. The word of God to Moses in Exodus 33:20 - 23 is decisive for our tradition:

"And He said, You are not capable of seeing my face; for no human being (*adam*) can see me and live".

The special concession to Moses is that after the glory of God passes over the cleft of the rock in which God hides Moses to protect him, Moses can see the "back parts" (*achorai*) but His face (*panai*) cannot be seen (Exodus 33:23).

This tradition is re-affirmed in Judges 6:22, 13:22, Isaiah 6:5 etc. Elijah has to cover his face with his mantle when Yahweh appears to him (1 Kgs. 19:13). What Gideon saw face to face was only the "malak-Yahweh" (the sent of God, Judges 6:22), and it was *malak-Yahweh* that appears to Manoah, the father of Samson (also called Man of God - (*Ish-ha-elohim*, Judges 13:6, but with an appearance that is awesome) to Abraham (Gen. 18:1 ff), to Jacob (Gen:32:24-30), to Isaiah (IS 6:1 ff), to Ezekiel (Exekiel 1,8,10), to Daniel (8:15, 10:6, 10:18), and to all the congregation of Israel (Numbers 16:19 ff), to Solomon (1 Kgs. 3:5, 9:2, 2 Chro 1:7), to David (2 Chro 3:1), to Job (42:5) and so on.

It is always a human form, one like a Son of Man (human being), in glory, in which God appears to human beings though occasionally he appears as fire, lightning, thunder or the still, small voice. In connection with the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see again a repetition of these appearances of the Angel of the Lord. The *melak-Yahweh* of the old Testament is the *angelos-kuriou* of the New Testament, who appears to Joseph (Mt 1:20, 2:13, 2:19), to Zachariah (LK 1:11 ff), to Mary (LK 1:26 ff), and to the shepherds (LK 2:9 ff). It is the angel of the Lord who opens the doors of the prison for the Apostles (Acts 5:19), and speaks to Phillip (Acts 8:26) directing the Apostles as well as Phillip in the mission of the Church. The angel appears to Cornelius (Acts 10:3 ff), and breaks the chains of Peter in prison (Acts 12: 7-8).

It is one of the deepest mysteries of God's reality - this relation between God, the Spirit of the Lord, the Angel of the Lord, the Son of Man, and us human beings. Angels are in a sense counter-parts of the human person,

devoid of sin, humanity's true destiny. In heaven all children have their counterpart angels, "beholding ever the visage of my Father" (Mt 18:10), says Christ to me, and I do not claim to have penetrated the deep mystery of the meaning of our Lord's word.

For the Eastern tradition this divine manifestation as the Angel of the Lord who is also the Son of Man in glory (mount of transfiguration) is further the destiny of human beings.

This is the meaning of Transfiguration for us. The uncreated light of Mount Tabor was in three *human* beings - Jesus Christ, Moses and Elijah, and this is the true destiny of us all.

Isaiah's Angel of the Presence - (*melak-panau* the angel of his face) is what accompanies Moses as he goes away from Yahweh's direct presence. "My presence (*panai* = my face) will go with you" says Yahweh to Moses and Moses replies: "If your presence (*paneyka* = your face) does not go with me, do not take us up from here" (Ex 33: 14-15). It is the face of the Lord that is the presence of the Lord; and it is this face that we see in its fullness in Jesus Christ, but also, in proportionately lower measures, on the face of Moses and Elijah, and of every believer in whom Christ dwells, and who is a child of God (*teknon theou* : I John 3:1)

It is this sharing in the life and consequently in the glory of God that we in the Asian-African tradition of Christianity call *Theosis* or Divinisation.

In the brief compass of this paper, it is not possible to go through a comprehensive study of the Asian-African Christian Fathers, but we shall take two Eastern Fathers, perhaps the most philosophically articulate of the classical fathers - Gregory of Nyssa (ca 335 - ca 398), and Cyril of Alexandria (370-444).

Gregory's most erudite work is the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, which still remains untranslated into English. His *Homilies on the Beatitudes* would be the best place for us to start. Or, perhaps, his *Life of Moses* may be easier to follow. For a proper understanding of the Asian-African, or pre-Byzantine heritage in this regard, however, there is no better literature I know to which I can draw your attention, than the writings of Gregory of Nyssa.

He has been attacked - by Platonists like Evagrius, or by Western Augustinianists who always accuse him of "Semi-Pelagianism". But

Gregory is neither Platonist nor could Augustine have made all the big mistakes he did make had he cared to read and understand Gregory.

Gregory of Nyssa agrees with that other (non-intellectual) spiritual genius of Asia, Ephraim the Syrian, in opposing theologians like Eunomius, who, cocksure about the unlimited capacity of their intellects, proceed to "scrutinize" or analyse God, as if he were an object or a concept. Eunomian rationalism, inherited by Europe, is perhaps the greatest enemy of the true knowledge of God.

Along with the Asian Gregory of Nyssa I would offer another - an African of outstanding spiritual perception - far superior to that other African contemporary Augustinus of Hippo - St. Cyril of Alexandria who died in 444 AD. (Augustine died in 430).

In St. Gregory and in St. Cyril, the final end of human beings is neither the knowledge of God nor the "possession" of God, not even a "beatific vision". The final end is *metousia* or *methexis*, participation in the divine life, and this is transfiguration - being transformed inwardly into the image of God.

The word deification or theosis actually comes from St. Cyril, though the concept is already in St. Gregory.

The main point in earlier Asian writers like Irenaeus is the transformation of the corruptible and death-bound human body into the incorruptible and immortal resurrection body (see Irenaeus *Adv: Haer.* IV, 38, 3-4). But in Irenaeus, though the notion of a face to face vision of God is still there, we are transformed to be God-bearers - not to become like God. The suggestion is already there, though not worked out in detail, that in so far as we are adopted to be children of God, our very nature is transformed into the nature of God. Incorruptibility and immortality are aspects of the divine nature, that nature "which became what we are" in order that we ourselves may share in the Father's nature. It was Clement of Alexandria, who in his *Protreptique*, made the classical statement "The word of God was made a human being in order that you can learn from a human being how a human could become God" (*anthropos genétai Theos*, Prpt. 1:8). Clement was also the first to use the word *theopoiein*, (to make God, to divinise) and this process of divinisation was to take place through a process of disciplined instruction - a pedagogy which was more than merely intellectual training.

Gregory of Nyssa was emboldened by his brother St. Basil's teaching

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that the Holy Spirit who defies human beings must himself be divine (*de Sancto Spirito*: 23). Basil uses the expression *Theon genesthai* = "to become God", or "to be made God", and echoes St. Athanasius, *de Incarnatione*: 54 - where the formula was :

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"He became man that we might become divine" (*autos gar enéthropésen, hina humeis theopoiethomen*).

On the basis of the Scriptures, and of the interpretation strongly attested in the tradition by both St. Athanasius and St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa works out his doctrine of *Theosis* as an infinite process.

The governing concept for Gregory's doctrine of *Theosis* is that of the Image of God - the *eikon theou*. Gregory was strongly opposed to any notion of an intellectual and intuitive direct vision of God. He would put it this way:

"Knowledge (*gnôsis*) has something like a commercial (*emporike*) disposition; towards accumulating that which is known. That is not the way the faith of the Christians works. The substance of faith is not what is known, but what is hoped for. Once we have mastered or owned something, we do not go on hoping for it..... That which evades our comprehension, faith makes our own, by its own certitude, pledging to us that which is not seen.... Vain is he who says that he is able to know God's being through the knowledge that puffs up ..... Learning then how transcendent that nature is, let us humbly remain within our own limits of silence. It is both safer and more devout to believe that God is more majestic than our minds can conceive, than, after having circumscribed his glory by some conception of ours, to think that there could be nothing beyond that."

(Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book*, PG 45:941-944. NPNF, Two: V: pp. 259-260, E.T. author's).

So then knowledge of God, or an intuitive beatific vision of God is not the issue for Christians. It is transfiguration into the glorious image of God that matters.

But, for Gregory of Nyssa, there is a central image for this growing into the image of God - that of *epektasis*, the infinite stretching beyond of the human soul towards its archetype, namely God. The concept is Pauline :

"Not that I have already attained, or that I am already perfect. But I press on, in order that I may perchance lay hold of that for which I am laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have attained; but one thing I can say: forgetting the things behind me, towards those things which are ahead I reach out (*epekteinomenos*). I press on towards a goal, for the prize of the calling from high of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3: 12-14).

The goal, the horizon that beckons ever, is indeed God; the bridegroom who is always a few steps ahead, and after whom the Bride has to run. To be human is a project - a race to be run, a constant going beyond. To be Christian is to be put on the right track and to be given a community in which the race can be better run - the race of *theosis*.

It is a race towards the light, but the course is through darkness - through the cloud of unknowing, through the difficult task of laying aside the false and puffed up knowledge that separates us from God. The theophany appears to Moses as light - the burning bush. But as he goes up Mount Sinai, it is in the darkness of the cloud that God encounters him. Gregory explains it thus :

"The word teaches us that knowledge of true faith becomes light at first, to whomever receives it. For the opposite of what we know by faith is darkness. So the turning away from darkness happens by participation in the light. But the more the mind advances (in the light), by an effort always greater and more perfect, to achieve comprehension of the existents, the more he understands that the divine nature transcends all these, and that it is invisible (*atheoreton*). Leaving aside then all appearances, and not only what the senses perceive, the mind tends towards the more interior reality, until it goes beyond the manifold preoccupations of the mind to the invisible and incomprehensible, there to see God. For in this is the true knowledge of the one who is sought, and in this not knowing is truly to know, for the sought one transcends all perception, protected on all sides by a darkness of incomprehensibility. That is why the lofty St. John, who has already penetrated this luminous darkness, also says: "No one has ever seen God", making it clear

by this negation that the knowledge of God's *ousia* is inaccessible not merely to human beings, but also to all intelligible natures".

(*Life of Moses*: 162-163 Sources Chretiennes: pp 210 ff.)

Gregory describes then how, having laid aside all human knowledge, Moses advances towards the tent not made by human hands, to the very sanctuary of the presence of God, always going up, and always stretching beyond oneself. As Moses leaves the lower part of Mount Sinai, and gets to the top, he hears the trumpets sound. After this he moves up further to enter the secret dwelling-place of the knowledge of God. But there too he cannot stop - even when he has climbed as far as he can go on solid ground. Beyond is "the temple not made with hands". The trumpets reveal the admirable harmony of the upper regions of the creation. But what lies beyond is the darkness - of unknowability and invisibility - the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies where God dwells. And you have to have special priestly robes to enter this sanctuary, the tunic of virtue and incorruptibility given to us at baptism and the decorations of good faith and good deeds (the golden bells and the pomegranates that decorated the high priests' robe). It is the inner beauty of the human person, shaped by faith and the practice of the good that one needs to enter the sanctuary of the presence of God.

At the top of the ascent of Mount Sinai, Moses does not see God face to face - though because of the ardour of his love for God, he makes the demand for such a face to face vision which God in turn refuses: "You are not able to see my face. No man can see my face and live" (Ex.33:20). Once again Gregory explains that this is not a case of seeing God leading to death, but a simple assertion of the fact that the Infinite cannot be comprehended, for that which comprehends has to be greater than that which is comprehended.

"So the unbounded nature cannot be comprehended. So no one can comprehend the incomprehensible nature. But all desire for the good, which draws one into this ascent, never ceases to stretch itself beyond itself, in this race for the good. And that indeed is seeing God - this never finding satiety for one's desire of the good. It is necessary, seeing through all that can be seen, to burn inside with the desire to see more. Thus there can be no stopping or interruption on the ascent towards God, for the good does not have a limit at which one



stops, and the desire for the good knows no satiety which stops the desire itself".

(*Life of Moses* 238-239 S.C.p. 270)

But what does it mean that Yahweh says to Moses :

"Behold, here is a place beside me. You shall stand on a rock. And as my Glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock. I will then cover you with my palm during my passing. Then I will remove my palm, and you shall see my back. But my face, it cannot be seen."

(Exodus 33:21-23)

"Here is a place by me, a rock." That rock is Christ, says Gregory, - Christ the fullness of all good. Christ is the rock on which God establishes us, when we have reached the summit, in a stable way, and the cleft of the rock is the true temple not made with hands, the Body of Christ, prepared in heaven for us for the time when this perishable temple is put away. Yes, for Gregory, it is the time of the end of this life when real un-knowing begins, and at the end of this earthy life, when we are moved by the intense desire to see God face to face, God establishes us more firmly on the Rock of Christ, and in the temple not made with hands, where one is securely protected by the palm of God, where one can know that the glory of God is passing by, and later even see the trailing back parts of the glory of God as Moses did.

That is where *theosis* leads us - into the heavenly temple, the cleft of the Rock that is Christ, into His very body, the paradise of delights, the eternal tabernacle, the dwelling place in the presence of God, the bosom of the Patriarchs, the land of the living, the waters of rest, the heavenly Jerusalem, the kingdom of heaven, the crown of grace, the crown of delight, the crown of beauty, the treasure-house of all good.

And in that treasure house the *epektasis* goes on; there one hears again the voice of the eternal bride-groom, saying "come, follow me". And the journey goes on, with the Bridegroom, into greater and greater delights, joys, beauties. That is why you see only the back parts of the glory of God. You have to keep on following that trailing glory. You do not see God face to face; you see only the back parts; but still your own face would be shining with the reflection of the glory of God.

So then, what is perfection? Perfection is in progress. Or, as Gregory

puts it in his concluding para of the Life of Moses :

"For this is true perfection (*teleiotes*), - neither to leave your evil life for slavish fear of punishment nor to do good in the hope of re-compense, trading the virtuous life with a calculating and selfish mentality, but, trusting firmly in the promise that all good things are kept in store for us, not worried or anxious about anything except to fall from the love of God, estimating nothing more honourable and precious than to become the beloved of God, which is according to me, the perfection of life".

(Para 320, S.C.P. 326 )

## **GOD AND HUMANITY**

### **The Search and Reach of Love.**

The concept of *epektasis*, the infinite stretching towards God-form, takes on a more engaging metaphor in Gregory's commentary on the Song of Songs. God is not possessed; He is infinitely reached after by the desire of love. This may be a bit difficult for puritan minds to grasp, but the only possible Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs is to conceive the Bride as the Church, or as Humanity as a whole, or as the personal soul, striving in love and desire for union with God in Christ.

Christ is the Beloved, with whom we are already united by Baptism and Chrismation. But that union is the beginning of a process - an infinite process, of knowing the Beloved more and more deeply, becoming more and more like the Beloved.

"The soul, having gone out at the word of her Beloved, looks for him but does not find Him. In this way she is, in a certain sense, wounded and beaten because of the frustration of what she desires, now that she thinks that her yearning for the Other cannot be fulfilled or satisfied. But the veil of her grief is removed when she learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on in her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire continually generates a further desire for the Transcendent. Thus the veil of her despair is torn away and the bride realizes that she will always discover more and

more of the incomprehensible and unhopd for beauty of her Spouse throughout all eternity. Then she is torn by an even more urgent longing, and ..... she communicates to her Beloved the dispositions of her heart. For she has received within her God's special dart, she has been wounded in the heart by the point of faith, she has been mortally wounded by the arrow of love".

*Commentary on the Song of Songs*. PG.44: 773 C-D Engl.Tr.  
Herbert Musurillo, ed. *From Glory to Glory* London, 1961,  
P.45)

Gregory's notion of *theosis* thus postulates something quite different from what the mystical tradition in general has postulated. In all mystical traditions, *change* is regarded as untrue and undesirable. Even Augustine wanted to be delivered from this changing stream of time into that changeless eternity of God. Our Hindu spiritual tradition also defines truth as that which is changeless, and regards change as a consequence of *avidya* or *maya*, as something that needs to be overcome.

For Gregory of Nyssa, change is the essential character of all created existence (he also does not posit change in God), and there is nothing wrong with change as such. What matters is the direction of change. To be unchanging is impossible for created existence. Either one must change from better to worse or vice versa. Sin and the dominion of Sin create a situation in which change is towards death and disintegration, towards the worse - the spiral of evil, the *akolouthia tôn kakôn* (sequence of evils), and what Christ does is to rescue us from this moving spiral that takes us towards non-being and to put us into a spiral which is carrying upward, towards God, towards greater and greater participation in His being.

This is the ascent of Mount Sinai, but it is an ascent for which there is no stop. The good is infinite, its only boundary being evil. And so progress in the good never ends. And it is this infinite progress in the good, which goes on even after death, that Gregory regards as the highest good available to a created being.

And it is this, essentially, which the Eastern Tradition regards as Theosis or divinisation. The mutability of our human nature remains unchanged. And in this sense there can be no identity between humanity and God.

"One ought not then to be distressed when one considers this tendency in our nature; rather let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being *transformed from glory to glory* (2 Cor 3:18) and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth, and never arriving at any limit of perfection. For that perfection consists in our never stopping in our growth in good, never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation."

(On perfection: PG 46: 285 BC Eng.Tr. Musurillo, *op cit* p. 84)

We need only to give a brief illustration of the view of St. Cyril of Alexandria.

For St.Cyril also, "knowledge of God" is not key to *Theosis*. It is participation in God's being, transfiguration into God's image, to become sons and daughters of God, not by nature, but by participation, made possible by the Holy Spirit uniting us to God.

We are deified, says St. Cyril, by the Holy Spirit who makes us likenesses of the Son, the perfect image of the Father (*Commentary on St.John* PG 74:541). It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes *theosis* possible. Christ shining in us by the Holy Spirit is the basis of our glorification and sanctification. There is no separation between a so-called justification, sanctification and glorification as if these were three separate processes or stages in one process. It is the Holy Spirit who is the agent in all three processes, which are simultaneous - not three stages.

If there is any face-to-face vision of the glory of God in St. Cyril, it is the intuition (*ennoesis*) of the beauty of the God-nature of the Father as reflected in Christ, the incarnate, divine Christ, the glory of the one who shines forth from the Father (*tén tou pephenotos ex autou théoresantes doxan* - *Commentary on St.John* XVI.25 PG 73: 464 B). But it is this same glory we intuit in Christ that is imparted to us by the Spirit, and it is the glory of the Holy Trinity, to which we are united in Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Again and again, both in Western thought and in many aspects of what is Byzantine thought, there is a return to the Platonic position of the natural affinity of the soul with God, and therefore to a mysticism in which Christ

and the Holy Spirit play a devotional, but not a theological role. Evagrius Ponticus, lacking the philosophical sophistication of Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria, was probably responsible for this deviation. Evagrius does not abandon the notion of the incomprehensibility of God's nature or *ousia*. But he simplistically assumes that when the Trinity, by grace reveals himself to humans, the soul of the latter experiences direct or face-to-face vision of God. This is Platonism as shaped by Origen. And, of course, in good Platonic form, Evagrius denies any form or figure in the Holy Trinity that is visible to the senses. But Christology and Pneumatology play no distinct role in the experience, though it is avowedly Trinitarian. Evagrius' mysticism, however, remains, like much of Western mysticism, basically intellectualistic.

I am leaving out of account the later Byzantine developments- particularly Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas, since our tradition does not recognize these writers. Dionysius the (pseudo-) Areopagite is recognized in our tradition, and he is basically in the same line as Gregory of Nyssa, though the West has misinterpreted him as following the line of Plotinus and Augustine.

The most important points in Dionysius may be very briefly stated:

1. *Theosis* is a process of the dynamics of relations between communities and within each community.
2. *Theosis* takes place by the infusion of God's creative energies into created beings.
3. *Theosis* is a process in which there is both receiving and giving out of spiritual energy.
4. *Theosis* is not *theoria*, the vision of God, but the infinite and continuous transfiguration of all creation, in proportion to the capacity of each being, into the God-bearing image of glory. Ultimate union is beyond knowledge, through the cloud of unknowing.
5. In Gregory as well as in Dionysius, the *ousia* of God remains unintuitable, incomprehensible. It is only the life-giving energies that we can know and be transformed by.

But these energies or *dynameis* are God Himself in His operational aspect, indwelling the creation and transfiguring it. They are not progressively weaker emanations - as in Plotinus or Proclus. These transforming energies sustain, unify and transfigure the whole creation - co-operating with the will of the creature, the liberty of which is recognized and fostered.

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1. The Pope asked the Irish Primate, Richard Fitzralph, Archbishop of Armagh to make a study of the Armenian teaching. This study is in Fitzralph's *Summa quaestionibus Armenorum*.
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# 3

## ON GOD'S DEATH

### **An orthodox contribution to the problem of knowing God**

We are now assured that the "Death of God theology" has already become passe'. It has been weighed and found wanting. All the way from its recent origins in the Theologische Hochschule in Berlin, trying to adopt a methodological atheism in response to Bonhoeffer, down to the challenging absurdities of William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer, the movement seems to have helped merely to raise again some old questions about the issue of our faith in God.

The movement is really more significant than the theological establishment is willing to concede. For it marks the final spasms of the Western intellect trying to deliver itself from the paralyzing grip of its basically corrupt Augustinian tradition of theology. The Death of God movement is not simply the flower or even the ripe fruit of the Reformation and the Renaissance. It makes the last effort of Western Christianity to react against a costly deviation in Western Christian thought, stemming from Augustine of Hippo, and pervading both the Catholic and Protestant norms of Western Christianity. 1789 was the year of the beginning of the real protest within Western Christianity, not 1517. When the French monarchy collapsed, bringing down with it the landed aristocracy and the established Church, then began not only the questioning of Theodore van Leeuwen's ontocratic principle,<sup>1</sup> but also the dethronement of theology itself from the intellectual tradition of the West.

It is significant indeed that no Christian theologian figures prominently in the intellectual tradition of the West since the time of Luther and Calvin. Such German giants like Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Harnack do not occupy a position of prominence in the average Western intellectual's heritage - not to speak of recent German and Swiss giants like Barth, Brunner and Bultmann. Kierkegaard might very well have been an exception, but then was he a theologian?

In a very brilliant recent article, Harvey Cox affirms that the Death of God movement signals the dead end for a certain type of theologizing characteristic of the West. He now wants "to move away from any spatial symbolization of God and from all forms of metaphysical dualism." He is "trying to edge cautiously toward a secular theology, a mode of thinking whose horizon is human history and whose idiom is political in the widest Aristotelian sense of that term, i.e. the context in which man becomes fully man."<sup>2</sup>

Cox wants to avoid, in the course of this cautious advance, certain traps. He regards as deadly both "the mystical atheistic monism of Thomas Altizer", "the uncritical empiricism of Paul Van Buren" and the "inverse pietism of William Hamilton."

As two possible lights to illumine the forward path, Cox proposes Teilhard de Chardin and Ernst Bloch. They both affirm the responsibility of man for shaping creation which previously used to be all God's work. We human beings were, in that kind of theology, just the creation and He, God, was the Creator. This won't do for the future. We now cannot evade responsibilities as men by projecting everything on to the transcendent. Human beings have more than a passive role in the shaping of creation.

Both Teilhard and Bloch contend that the pressure of the transcendent is the pressure of the future which breaks into the present. Reality is an open-ended process, in which man lives in hope. Teilhard lives towards the point Omega. For Bloch, a messianic Marxist, man is "man-as-promise," and his concern is with "the ontology of the not-yet" which in more complex terms denotes Futurology or *Zukunftswissenschaft*.

Bloch, of course, is not a Christian theologian. He is a Jew and a Marxist philosopher. His Christian counterpart, Jurgen Moltmann, owes his "Theology of Hope"<sup>3</sup> to Bloch's "The Principle of Hope."<sup>4</sup>

Cox's final conclusion is that the God of the future is to be sought



neither "up there" nor "out there" but "ahead". God is not in the past, but it is "he who comes" out of the future.

#### **An eastern qualification**

The death of the God of Western theology, if it does lead to the resurrection of a "God who comes", would not be such a bad thing - for the God who comes is the God of the Old Testament, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ - "the God who came," who was and is and is yet to come.

The new attempt to limit God, however, to a God of the future alone cannot find whole-hearted approval from the Eastern tradition. He is. He was. He will come. Nothing less than that will do for the authentic tradition.

Living toward the future was all right for the children of Israel. Even they had constantly to look back to the past when He had done great things. It is on the basis of the past that we look forward to the future. But for Christians who believe that the "coming one" was already in history and is now, a theology of hope can only be a corrective to a static theology, but not an adequate substitute for it.

Here perhaps an Eastern theologian has no option but that of Christian forthrightness. The Eastern theologian has to say that the Augustinian tradition of mapping the God-man-world relationship was fundamentally wrong and that, without radically questioning that tradition, there is no way forward for the West to find an adequate theology.

The five-fold distortion of Christian thought, for which Augustine and not merely the Augustinian tradition must accept major responsibility, can only be summarized here.

(a) The distortion stems primarily from a failure to take the incarnation sufficiently seriously - failure which characterizes Western theology throughout its history, even in the new theology of hope which is not squarely founded on the fact of the Incarnation, but only on a promise.

Augustine could say with impunity about our seeing Christ:  
 "It is better that you do not see this flash, but picture to yourselves the divinity"<sup>5</sup>

Or again:

"There is one thing that is transitory in the Lord, another

which is enduring. What is transitory is the Virgin birth, the Incarnation of the Word, the gradation of ages, the exhibition of miracles, the endurance of sufferings, death, resurrection, the ascent into heaven - all this is transitory..... whoever desires to understand God the Word, let it not suffice them, because for their sakes the Word was made flesh, that they might be nourished with milk."<sup>6</sup>

(b) As a consequence of this low doctrine of the Incarnation, Augustine has a low doctrine of man. Man can do nothing of himself. This view comes up again and again in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. Whatever he does on his own is *eo ipso* wrong and sinful :

"Man is not anything of such kind that, having come into being, he can as of himself do anything rightly, if he who made him withdraws himself from him, but his whole good action is to turn to him by whom he was made, and to be made just by him, and pious and wise and happy."<sup>7</sup>

It is precisely this childhood dependence on God that modern "secular theology" derides in the name of a world come of age. Man has to accept responsibility for the world and live as if God did not exist. That idea would be completely contrary to Augustine's view, which holds that only by conscious dependence on God can man become something. This Augustinian notion which seems to undervalue man in the name of God had provoked the protest from the "enlightened" reason of Western culture. The Augustinian ideal of man as God wants him is a beggar:

"A beggar is he who ascribes nothing to himself, who hopes all from God's mercy. Before the Lord's gate he cries every day, knocking that it may be opened unto him, naked and trembling, that he may be clothed, casting down his eyes to the ground, beating his breast. This beggar, this poor man, this humble man, God has greatly helped....."<sup>8</sup>

(c) Thirdly, Augustine places too much of a polarity between Jerusalem, the city of God, and Babylon, the city of the earth, Babylon is the creation of man in his love of the world. Babylon is a flowing river where nothing is permanent. "It flows..... it glides on; beware, for it carries things away with it."

"But Jerusalem - O holy Zion, where all stands firm and

nothing flows, who has thrown us headlong into this (Babylon)? Why have we left thy Founder and thy society? Behold, set where all things are flowing and gliding away, scarce one, if he can grasp a tree, shall be snatched from the river and escape. Humbling ourselves, therefore in our captivity, let us "sit upon the rivers of Babylon"; let us not dare to plunge into those rivers or to be proved and lifted up in the evil and sadness of our captivity, but let us sit, and so weep.<sup>9</sup>

And that attitude is precisely what modern theology reacts from - the refusal to plunge into the flowing waters of time, there to be involved in the torrent of politics and economics. We have been brought into Babylon in order that we may plunge, not in order to sit and weep or to grasp a tree and escape into a heavenly Jerusalem and reject flowing Babylon. Augustine's idea of the two cities comes up in Western theology in so many different forms - nature and supernature, or nature and grace, world and church, or state and church, law and gospel, the two kingdoms of Lutheranism, and so on. This basic dualism of Western theology lies at the root of the secular reaction today. Modern man cannot accept a flight from the world of time into the unchanging heaven as the basic framework for life.

(d) Fourthly, Augustine's soteriology was focussed too strongly on the individual man and his salvation from sin as concupiscence. True, Augustine had a great deal to say about the body of Christ and the corporate character of Jerusalem and the Church.

His diagnosis of the problem of man, however, was primarily in terms of personal sin - sin being understood as the desires of the flesh, the love of Babylon, the city of the earth.

The secular theology of our times is primarily concerned with man in his corporate existence, as city man, as national man, as world man. The sins that we are more preoccupied with are those of society - war in Vietnam, race, sex, economic injustice and so on. Individual sins, especially "sins of the flesh" are viewed rather lightly by the secular culture which currently shapes our theology. The Eastern theologian here does welcome the corporate emphasis of secularist theology, but wonders if we are not overdoing the demythologization of personal sin, in order to affirm the corporate. We should hold the tension.

(e) A fifth weakness of Augustine, which in a way pervades his whole system of reasoning lies in the Manichean tendency to regard matter and therefore the body itself as somehow evil in themselves, or at least as not having any good in them.

"Leave then abroad, both thy clothing and thy flesh, descend into thyself; go to thy secret chamber, thy mind. If thou be far from thine own self, how canst thou draw near unto God? For not in the body but in the mind was man made in the image of God"<sup>10</sup>

● On account of the same Manichean tendency, he tends to evaluate even the sacraments as somehow inferior to the pure word which he regarded as invisible and, therefore, higher than the *verbum visibile*.

Contemporary theology demands a higher evaluation of the body, of matter and, therefore of technology and culture. But Augustine has laid the foundations for regarding culture as something "spiritual" as opposed to material.

### **Toward applying an eastern corrective**

It is not possible to discuss a so-called Eastern doctrine of God except in relation to the vexing questions of God-world and God-man relationships.

We shall here do something - for the sake of convenience - which is contrary to authentic Eastern Orthodox practice, i.e. to isolate certain particular Fathers of the Church as authority for teaching.

● A more balanced Eastern Orthodox doctrine would require an historical treatment of the Cappadocian Fathers, through Maximus the Confessor, John Damascene, Gregory Palamas, Vladimir Soloviev and contemporary theologians like Evdokimov, Schmemmann, and Nissiotis. Here we have to attempt something less ambitious, limiting ourselves largely to the fourth-century Fathers of Cappadocia.

These fourth-century fathers are as modern as the twentieth century in the breadth of their imagination and in the scope of their "secular" knowledge. To cite just one illustration, here is a passage from St. Gregory Nazianzen:

"Now since we have established that God is incorporeal, let us proceed a little further with our examination. Is he

nowhere or somewhere? For if he is nowhere, then some person of a very enquiring turn of mind might ask, "How is it then that he can even exist?" For if the non-existent is nowhere then that which is nowhere is also perhaps non-existent. But if he is somewhere, he must be either in the universe or above the universe. And if he is in the universe, then he must be either in some part or in the whole. If in some part, he will be circumscribed by that part which is less than himself, but if everywhere (in one universe), then by something which is further and greater - I mean the universal which contains the particular, if a universe is to be contained by the universe, and no place is to be free from circumscription. This follows if he is contained in the universe. And besides, where was he before the universe was created, for this is a point of no little difficulty. But if he is above the universe, is there nothing to distinguish this "above" from the universe, and where is this "above" situated? And how could this Transcendent and that which is transcended be distinguished in thought if there is not a limit to divide and define them? Is it not necessary that there shall be some mean - to mark off the universe from that which is above the universe? And what could this be but space, which we have already rejected? For I have not yet brought forward the point that God would be altogether circumscribed, if he were even comprehensible in thought; for comprehension is one form of circumscription."<sup>11</sup>

Now, after having read that, if anyone accuses our ancient fathers of believing naively in a three-story universe or a spatially located God, it shows only how ignorant, naive, and misinformed we moderns are. It was clear to the fathers not only that God was not intellectually comprehensible. He was not to be comprehended in any way whatsoever.

If one abandons these two fundamental poles of patristic thought, namely, that there is no way to conceive God intellectually or to locate God spatially, our theology is bound to become shallow.

Any kind of qualification or predication that we dare to apply to God is in the form of symbols - ways by which we can chart our own relationship to the ultimate reality that we call God.

Once this basic incomprehensibility of God is grasped, we can seek to conceptualize his relation to us and the world in symbolic ideas, which are actually the creations of our mind but which help us to become related to God and to His universe. The theology offered here, therefore, is already pre-demythologized. It should be taken symbolically, evocatively, rather than conceptually, descriptively.

Gregory of Nyssa<sup>12</sup> suggests three possible ways of knowing God, by concept (*jnanamarga*), by obedient devotion (*bhaktimarga*), and by ecstasy or mystic vision. But none of these can penetrate to the Divine Essence which remains in light unapproachable, beyond the reach of created intelligence. Only the energies of God are accessible to the created order, and any attempt to go beyond leads to "vertigo" (*hulligia*), to dizziness, and to destruction. The only real knowledge of the essence of God possible to us is that it is unknowable.

But beyond our intelligence we can only conceive of "nothing". This "nothing" or non-being is not the absence of being, but the "unlimited", undetermined, pure potentiality of all being. "One does not really know God except in the awareness of the very incapacity to apprehend him".<sup>13</sup> Thus the knowledge of God is a "taught ignorance," a knowledge of our own limits. It is the knowledge of God's non-being (where being means determined existence).

### The freedom of God

Augustine was basically sceptical about human freedom. Freedom was necessary for him to explain the origin of evil without attributing it to God; but that freedom was not a great value in itself for Augustine.

For this Father of the Universal Church,<sup>14</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, however, there is no value higher than freedom, because it belongs to the very heart of God's (*neontic*) being. God's absolute transcendence is His freedom; His existence is unlimited, undetermined, pure potentiality of all being. But not just His transcendence. His immanence is also an aspect of His freedom; because it is a free immanence, He is not dependent on that in which He is immanent. To quote Gregory himself: "God, being the unique good in a simple non-composite nature, has His vision fixed on Himself, never subjects Himself to change by the impulses of His will, but eternally wills to be what He is, and He is always what He wills to be."

This should not be interpreted as mere immobility; there is no change

necessary in His being, but He can initiate change. He is the perfection of all good, and there is nothing to be added to Him; He needs no change. His will and actuality are always co-terminous. He is what He wills to be and He wills what He is. That will, however, is a dynamic will.

But in His becoming immanent, He initiates change. Matter itself comes from God and is "in God". It comes from Spirit and is "spiritual" in its essence, according to Gregory. This is an insight which accords well with modern physics which regards all matter as charges of energy, rather than as simply composed of particles. Matter is not opposed to the spirit, but identified with it by St. Gregory.

The creation, from the human perspective, is an act in which God becomes immanent so to speak, but without change. God's *ousia* or nature remains veiled, but it is his energy that becomes immanent in creation. The creation is neither a part of the divine *ousia* or nature nor is it an extension of or an emanation from him. It comes from his will, not from his being. In fact Gregory says that the creation is God's will and energy. It has no other being of its own.

The creation was set in motion by God's dynamic will. He established in the "moment" of creation "the principles, the causes and the dynamics" of all created existence, by an act of His will. The creation is thus God's will in concrete actuality- it is the "substantification" of God's will. In his life of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Nyssa says: "The divine will is so to speak the matter, form, and energy of the world, and of all things in the world or above it."<sup>15</sup>

If the universe is thus the will of God in concrete, God is immanent in it, not by *ousia* but by will. The will, with its dynamic energy, is the motor of the universe. Therefore the universe itself is dynamic - stretching forward to its own salvation, which is the completion and perfection of creation.

### God and man

In the God-Man relationship, Nyssa's conceptualization is very close to Plato and Plotinus, and therefore to Indian thought. He posits boldly a con-naturality (*sungeneia*) between God and the human (*Paramâtma* and *jivâtma*). "God has made us not merely spectators of divine power, but participants in His nature."<sup>16</sup>

But there is no identity here between *paramâtma* and —*jivâtma*. The

latter is not even an emanation from the former. It is a mysterious communication of God's own being to man, which is best expressed in the formula: "God created man in his own image." But image, *eikôn*, means more than mere resemblance. The *eikôn* is the visible manifestation of an invisible reality. Jesus Christ the new man is the *eikôn* of the invisible God. That is what man really is - the visible manifestation of God. Man is therefore free - like God; potentially capable of all good, all wisdom, all power, all love. This is quite contrary to the Augustinian evaluation of the world and man. For Augustine, sin is the central category for understanding man. For Gregory, it is man's freedom and his vocation to be in the image of God. The only differences between God and man in terms of potentiality are the two following:

- (1) God is Himself the source of His being; man has no being in himself. His *ousia* is derived from God. God is creator. Man is creature.
- (2) God is what He wills to be, and since He wills what He is, He is changeless. Man is placed in the historical world of space and time and therefore of change. Man is not what he wills to be. He is not even what he ought to be. He has to become what he is in a world of change. He lives toward the future. Man is in the throes of an alien power called sin and has to be liberated in order to be truly what he is - i.e. a participant in the divine nature.

That which distinguishes man from the rest of creation is his parentage - that he is born of God. His creation was not simply an act of God's will; it is the consequence of a deliberative decision - "let us make man in our image." Man is constituted by the divine breath which was breathed into him. In this sense God indwells man in a manner different from his immanence in creation which latter is entirely a matter of will. In man the divine breath is his constitutive reality, though he participates also in the creation by will, since he is made of the dust of the earth.

This man with the divine breath in him is the image of the creator, the eikonic presence of the invisible God. God made man in order to manifest himself through man. The incarnation is only the fulfilment of the creation of man. In Jesus Christ, the true man, the purpose of God to manifest himself through man is realized.



God thus indwells man. Gregory comes fairly close to the traditional Hindu understanding of the relationship between the *Paramātmā* and *jivātmā*. Not that they are identical, but rather that the *jivātmā* is a mode in which the absolutely transcendent *Paramātmā* becomes immanent in freedom in the created order and manifests himself through his operations. It is also significant that for Gregory it is not just the soul (*jivātmā*) which is in the image of God. The body itself is part of the image and not something to be escaped from. So also we should note that the orientation of the *jivātmā* is not simply to recover its relation to the *Paramātmā*. The historical manifestation of the *jivātmā* has its own purpose, namely, to reveal God in His creation, and to rule over the whole creation by His reasoning power and tool-making capacity.

But man/woman becomes able to reveal God only when he/she is liberated and becomes free - i.e. one who by his/her own wisdom, love, and power chooses and creates new forms of good.

The liberty itself can be obtained by faith, by selfdiscipline, by worship, and working with one's own hands in order to serve others. Thus, in time, humanity manifests God in the process of the very struggle for liberation, in faith, worship, discipline, and spirituality. But time itself is something from which we have to be liberated in the end. Death thus becomes the door to the resurrection, where a new kind of freedom is experienced. The body, which has been such a drag on our liberty, now becomes reconstituted and participates in human freedom. The body of humanity was originally made by the hand of God. It is now to be restored to its original purity as it came from the hand of God.

Man thus truly becomes man in the resurrection, participating still in the created order, integrating in oneself truly the intelligible and the material worlds. That is the image of God as can be made present in the creation.

It is not then God's death that is the truth, but the death and resurrection of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, in which we are all called to share.

Gregory also insists that man's reasoning and tool-making powers constitute a major aspect of the image. Thus Gregorian theology has already anticipated the contemporary notion that science and technology are God-given instruments for man to gain control of his environment.

Gregory also knew that humanity has a double existence- in memory and hope. But memory and hope are never evenly balanced. This is man's asymmetry. The past is constantly receding, leaving only traces in the memory. Hope pulls man on; but he is afraid to move, because of his fears accumulated from past errors, from his fear of judgment and condemnation. Liberation from guilt and despair is what set him at liberty to move on toward his future.<sup>17</sup> Christ alone is both free and freeing by forgiving our sins and removing the fear of condemnation.

### Conclusion

Classical theology is by no means inadequate to deal with the problems of contemporary humanity. Our mistake is to have been dazzled by the intellectual and spiritual brilliance of Augustine and thus led to a dead end. The universal tradition of the church, which Augustine by no means represents, poses no conflict between the interests of God and the interests of man. Man can become mature without patricide. It is that God of the authentic Christian tradition who needs to be made manifest in the life of the church today.

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1. The ontocratic principle implies the identification of God with the cosmos and finding the manifestation of this God in the league between throne and altar or state and religion. Martin Luther himself basically followed this principle in his "as Ruler, so Religion" policy.
  2. Harvey Cox, "Death of God and future of Theology" in William Robert Miller, ed. *The New Christianity*, New York, 1967 Delta Edition, pp. 382-383.
  3. *Theologie der Hoeffnung*, Munich, second edition, 1974.
  4. *Das Prinzip der Hoeffnung*, published 1954.
  5. Sermon CCL, XIV: 4 Eng. Tr. Erich Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis* (Harper Torchbook, 1958) p. 294.
  6. *In Ps. CIX:5, In Ps. CXVII:22, Op. Cit.* pp 292-293.
  7. *De Genesi ad litteram VIII Xii: 25,27, Op.cit.* pp 306-307.
  8. *In Ps. CVI: 14, 15.*
  9. *In Ps. CXXXVI:3,4, Op.cit.* p.260.
  10. *In Joan, Evang, XXIII, Op.cit.* p.18.

11. Gregory Nazianzen, *Second Theological Oration*, X, Eng.Tr. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. VII, p. 292.
12. I am grateful to Jerome Gaith, *La conception de la Liberte chez Gregoire de Nysse*, Paris, 1953, for many of the insights in this paper into St. Gregory's thought.
13. *See Contra Eunomium* I. 373.
14. Augustine is not a father or doctor of the universal Church.  
He was never accepted by the whole Eastern tradition.
15. PG. XLVI: 920 A
16. PG. XLIV: 1137 B
17. Gaith, *Op. cit.* p. 141.

# 4

## Christology - Its Relevance Today

In a perceptive article published in September 1970, in the *Christian Century*, Dr. Robert Kysar raised some questions about the contemporary Protestant Christological debate. Referring to the attempt of thinkers like William Hamilton (*Radical Theology and the Death of God*), John Vincent (*Secular Christ, A Contemporary Interpretation*) and Paul Van Buren (*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*) to make Christology independent of any transcendent theology, Kysar posed the question whether these writers were seeking to find a God substitute in the Jesus of History, and thereby engaging in a special form of idolatry called Jesusolatry.

Dr. Kysar himself would propose a radical secular Christology which would not be guilty of Jesusolatry. Such a Christology would recognise and readily admit that the Christ figure is an ideal, a sort of ethical model which functions to incite Christian values in people. It is not simply historical in origin, nor is it docetic. It is the result of Christian Thought about a historical figure which provoked the nurturing of human "existence as valuable and lovable."<sup>1</sup>

I found the Kysar approach refreshingly direct and uncomplicated.

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● A paper read at the Oriental Orthodox Roman Catholic Symposium in Vienna, Austria.

He had seen clearly the problem of the "historical Jesus", and rightly concluded that the "new quest" was not much more successful than the old one of the last century and the earlier part of our century. He accused the secular approach of not being radically secular, and of still trying to find some transcendent reference in the secular; van Buren's "experience of freedom", Vincent's "redemptive act of service" and Hamilton's "struggle for one's values" could be seen as just aspects of human experience without any dragged-in theological reference to "the hidden God" or to "unmasking the secular" to find Jesus. Accept the secular as secular, acknowledge the fact that one's allegiance to Christ is simply another "way of saying that he belongs to this culture, that the Judaeo-Christian heritage is his."

I was struck by the fact that Robert Kysar, working towards an honest radicalism, had finally arrived at the traditional notion of tradition.

After having read Kysar's article I went back to my notes on that amazing store-house of historical Christological erudition - Fr. Aloysius Grillmeier's *Christ in Christian Tradition* (Eng. Tr. London, Mowbray 1965). Again I was struck by the total dissimilarity of ethos, issues and interests in the Christological debate then and now. They were in those days arguing and fighting about *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *prosopon*, *physis*, union, distinction, logos, sarx, *sarkophoros*, *anthropos theophoros* and all that kind of metaphysical gibberish which makes no sense to many modern men. A discussion on whether Christ is *en duo physisin* (in two natures) or *ek duo physeon* (from two natures) would not sound most relevant to many theologians today, not to speak of most laymen.

This raises the question - what is this Judaeo-Christian tradition in which you and I stand? How come there is such a hiatus between one of the most earth-shaking discussions in Christian history and the mind of Judaeo-Christian man today, especially in the West?

I could not answer this question without dealing with three related questions:

1. What was the crux of the Christological debate then? Was it a purely metaphysical point unrelated to our existence on earth as human beings? What was really at stake? And what is at stake today in the Christological debate in the West? Is it important?
2. What were the things taken for granted by the fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries? What philosophical and theological assumptions underlie

that debate as well as that of the 20th century?

3. Is the dispute about the two natures or one nature of Christ still relevant today? If so, how?

In answering these questions, I may have helped to clarify to myself the difference between the two debates, and perhaps to psychoanalyse myself as regards my passionate interest in the 4th and 5th century Christological debate, whether it is anything more than mere archaism on my part, a sign of advanced decadence and degeneration.

#### **I. The Crux of the Christological Debate then**

If one separates the Trinitarian and Christological debates, one loses perspective. They are of one piece. The one implies the other. If you have no Trinitarian pre-suppositions, if you are strictly unitarian, then Christology is no problem; you can settle to reading the story, whether fictitious or historical, of an inspiring personality, and that is it.

But if you make that dreadful assumption which the early Christians dared to make, that the identity of Jesus is not exhausted by his humanity, that his humanity is a manifestation of Deity, then you are in all forms of trouble. It was the scandalous statement of the Gospel that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself that is at the root of the trouble. If we can dismiss the cosmic Christology of Colossians and Ephesians as myth, if we can throw out the claims of Jesus as reported by the Fourth Evangelist (no matter whether it is original source or redactors), if we can ignore the repeated emphasis of the New Testament, the liturgy and the Fathers, that the relationship between God and Jesus is one of identity of being, then we have no need to bother about the 4th and 5th century Christological debate, and can settle down to deal with the functional Christology of a secular radicalism. But then on what presumptuous grounds do we still make that astounding claim to be standing in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, when we reject the central affirmation of the tradition that Jesus is both God and Man, and not just human?

We must learn afresh to grapple with this fact - that the Christian church, the Christian Gospel, and the Christian Tradition are all squarely based on the affirmation that Jesus Christ is both God and Man, and when one of these realities is denied what we have is no longer Christianity. Secular Christologies do not appear to have any legitimate ground for claiming that they are Christian Christologies.

It was because they recognised Jesus as God that the whole Trinitarian and Christological debates were generated. The literature of the Christian church leaves us in no doubt that the two great mysteries, the Mystery of the Holy Trinity and the Mystery of the Incarnation are of the foundation of Christianity. There is no satisfactory logical way of explaining either of these mysteries - that is why they are called mysteries. They relate to the very ultimate ground of our own human existence. The whole Christian tradition has grown up on these two roots. The tradition that denied the two mysteries can no longer properly be called Christian, though it may have obvious affinities with the Jewish tradition.

I wish therefore to submit that these two mysteries and our adherence to them in faith is the distinctive feature of a Christian tradition, and where these two are implicitly or explicitly denied or ignored, the discussion is no longer taking place in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Much of modern Christology should prove acceptable to many Jews, and they can adhere to it without ceasing to belong to the old Covenant.

Christology and Trinitarian doctrine are thus tests of the Christian Gospel, which help to distinguish it from Jewish or pagan religions. The Gospel is "concerning His Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared Son of God in power according to the spirit of Holiness, through resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1,3-4). Philippians 2 does not say merely that Jesus lived in the form of a servant on earth. He was one who "became" man and thereby assumed the form of a servant, without losing his identity as "Lord", as equal to God, "isothéos". It is this transcendent identity of the servant-master that early Christian Christology was trying to grapple with, not just "the values of our culture, "the form of a servant", or mere "personal freedom." The Gospel is about the "One Lord Jesus Christ, through whom is the whole universe as well as our own selves existing through him," as St. Paul affirms in I Cor. 8,6. If this is mythology or metaphysics, then such mythology and metaphysics belong to the heart of the Christian tradition as history knows it, and we have to grapple with them if we are to remain Christian.

The issue in the Christological debate of the fourth and fifth centuries is precipitated by the conviction that Jesus is God. If this conviction is absent, if the person of Jesus were understood through the ordinary processes of human generation, existence and death alone, then there would have been no Christological debate of the kind there was. If that

debate appears irrelevant to some of us today, it is not so much because our philosophical outlooks have changed since then as because our convictions about the Person of Jesus have been fundamentally eroded.

The new quest of the historical Jesus and the current Christological debate belong to a different world, a different ethos, a way of thinking fundamentally alienated from the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, which tradition centres around Jesus Christ the unique Son of God become Son of Man without ceasing to be what he was, who was born, who taught, suffered, died, rose again and is to come again. If we are to engage in Christological debate with those who deny these basic realities, we shall do so only as in a dialogue with non-Christians.

What was at stake in the 4th and 5th century debate about Christ was the question of the origin and the destiny of humanity, the two transcendent poles of human existence in time (secular?) upon this earth. They saw in Jesus both their origin and their destiny, and in that vision were rescued from the restless drift towards non-being that characterizes human existence in time upon the earth. It was as momentous as that.

In the new secular Christologies, the two transcendent poles of origin and destiny are sought to be ignored, in order to find meaning and significance within the time-span of our terrestrial existence. Some images and phrases from the old transcendent metaphysics are imported into a secular Christology by Hamilton, van Buren, Vincent et. al, and Dr. Kysar: "Why do you still need to drag in the historical mythological Jesus Christ as an ideal or as a model? Why not Socrates, Gandhi or Schweitzer? What is the difference?" I would like sometimes to hear the answer to that question.

Dr. Kysar describes the dilemma of the modern Christian as "posed by developments within the theistic debate on the one hand and Jesusolatry on the other." Why is this a dilemma? What is at stake? The theistic debate has led to the clarification of the human situation that any kind of God caught within its rational web would not be God and is therefore bound to die. This was always the human situation. Our fathers in Christ in the 4th century knew that it is impossible to conceive or articulate the existence of God. They did not, unlike many of us lesser men who came later, believe in a "God of the gaps" or a *deus ex machina*. There is no new impasse in theology for those who are acquainted with what the Christian tradition has held about God.



The question of Jesusolatry is not a new one. It was exactly the charge made by Emperor Julian the Apostate, in replying to which Diodore of Tarsus his classmate fell into the most dangerous Christological errors. When Julian the neo-pagan accused the "Galilaeans" of Jesusolatry, i.e. of worshipping a common Jewish criminal who was hanged by the power of Imperial Rome, of adoring a "new Galilean God" whose death and burial refutes his claims to God-head, Diodore, whom Julian called "the Sorcerer of the Nazaraian," had to defend himself by saying that they did not worship the man Jesus, but only the Logos who could not be crucified or die. So there was no Jesusolatry, but only Logolatry, Diodore claimed in Christianity. It is this issue which is still important today. The secular charge of Jesusolatry needs to be taken seriously.

Let me put it more bluntly - a secular Christology is not Christian Christology. The adjective Christian relates to a community with a gospel and a tradition which affirm that Jesus Christ is Son of God and Son of Man. There is no way to secularize that gospel without denying it.

In fact the total secular approach is itself not Christian. It is an attempt to make the mind of man in his finitude normative for truth. It is a denial of the basic questions about the origin and destiny of man, neither of which can be answered for a Christian in a purely secular or temporal framework. Both at the beginning and at the end of human existence and of time and space existence there are antinomies that invalidate the absolute claims of the secular to find meaning within finitude and by finite reason. Finitude-infinity, and time-eternity involve logical difficulties which reveal the limits of logic and of the time-space existence of man. To reduce humanity to time-existence without attention to questions of origin and destiny is a repudiation of humanity itself which is gifted with a reason capable of detecting the limits of finite existence and of finite reason.

My submission therefore is this. If the debate of the 4th and 5th centuries appears irrelevant to us, it is for two reasons. First, we have not paid enough attention to what it was all about. Secondly, for the Christians of that time the debate arose out of their conviction that Jesus is God. Today it is irrelevant to us, not because our philosophy cannot cope with terms like ousia, hypostasis or physis, but because we do not believe what the Christian Gospel affirms - namely that Jesus is God and Man. We have today become Monophysites in reverse, believing that Christ has only one nature - the human.

But we misunderstand the early Christological debate if we evaluate it only as an intellectual or academic debate. It was a debate in which they were passionately concerned - a debate about their salvation, about their ultimate destiny, and about the destiny of the world. To them, it was an existential problem which arose from their very awareness of finitude.

The intellectual discussion, however, had a context - the context of a transcendent community, a community of the Holy Spirit, a community which spanned heaven and earth, in which they experienced the mystery of existence at three interpenetrating levels. We cannot go into detail but the most proximate level of experiencing the mystery of existence was the Eucharist where the Word was proclaimed and union with Christ by the Holy Spirit was experienced. The word "sacrament" is open to dangerous misunderstandings, but for the sake of convenient shorthand, we will say that the early Christological debate should be seen in the context of the Church's experience of the "Sacramental mystery of the church."

The experience of the Eucharist was a way of experiencing the second level of mystery - i.e. the incarnation of Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God inside the limits of finite human existence. It is in the community's being united to the crucified and risen Lord that its members are able to transcend the limits of finitude and to become established in the source and destiny (alpha and omega) of their existence. The Incarnation is not just a historical event, to be analysed and understood by the finite categories of the historical method. It is a mystery in which the Church participates now, not simply an event that happened then. By mystery I mean an event enabling participation in ultimate reality transcending the categories of finite existence.

The Mystery of the Church and the Mystery of the Incarnation are ways of participation in a third level of mystery - the Holy Trinity. This is ultimate reality in its ultimately transcendent aspect conceived of course in the language of finitude but enabling participation at a level far above the temporal and the historical. To speak more about the mystery of the Holy Trinity can be dangerous and I desist.

These three levels of reality and the Christian's participation in them alone can make him see the vitally important nature of the Christological debate then and its relevance today.

The crux of the Christological debate then is the affirmation that Jesus

is God. If that affirmation is denied, then the whole discussion becomes flatly irrelevant. But my contention is that it can be denied only by non-Christians, for it seems to me that in the very process of that denial one ceases to be a Christian.

## II. The Contemporary Christological Debate

That statement may make the rest of my paper irrelevant to some people. I need however to mention at least the contemporary Christological debate in its two aspects - the Biblical-theological debate about the relation between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ, and the attempt to find a secular Christology acceptable to "modern man."

The Biblical debate began with the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, the Deist Biblical critic of Wittenberg, whose *Wolfenbuttel Fragments* were published by Lessing in 1774-1778. The first stage of the process ended in the famous synopsis of Albert Schweitzer *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*. The historical Jesus was now acknowledged to be totally lost to us, but known to be different from the picture provided by the New Testament sources.

The second stage of the modern Christological debate centres around two personalities again in Germany - Martin Kahler and Rudolf Bultmann. Kahler's untranslatable distinction between the *historische* Jesus (the bare uninterpreted facts about the man from Nazareth) and the *geschichtliche, biblische* Christ (the notion of Messiah as it became influential and decisive in subsequent history) became the basis for Bultman's thought. For Kahler, the inaccessible *historische* Jesus was not significant but the *geschichtliche* Christ who as the kerygmatic Christ is the object of faith. By this distinction the existential Christology of our time received a subjective orientation.

The Kerygmatic Christ according to Kahler and Bultmann, is what we need and what we have. The only problem is that the church's Kerygma clothes this Christ in archaic, mythological form and language. The eschatological act of God in Christ should be demythologized and translated into contemporary form, and then it becomes relevant and powerful to evoke an existential faith. We are not interested in either the historical Jesus or his message, his *ipsissima verba*, for all that belongs within Judaism. Christianity begins with the Kerygmatic Christ as proclaimed by the church after Easter. Our faith is not in the Jewish teacher but in the Lord proclaimed by the church. Revelation takes place, not in the dim past of

2000 years ago, but in the here and now when the Kerygma is proclaimed and men respond in faith. It is not the teaching of Jesus but the teaching about Jesus that matters. And to that we have full access in the scriptures. The third stage began with Ernst Kasemann's 1953 address at Marburg to Dr. Bultmann's former students. Kasemann reopened the historical Jesus problem, and suggested that the Kerygmatic Christ totally unrelated to the Jesus of history would be a hoax. The gnawing suspicion in the minds of many that Bultmann's Christology was a kind of Kerygmatic docetism now found open utterance when Fuchs, Bornkamm, Conzelmann and others joined the fray. The historical Jesus was now necessary to interpret the Kerygma, and many set out in quest of him. What the quest has so far found is stuff that reveals more of the prejudices of the scholars than of the mind of Jesus. When Gerhard Ebeling says for example that the link between "Jesus as witness to faith" and "Jesus as object of faith" is the Easter events, I am not sure that I understand. If we know so little about the Historical Jesus, how do we become so sure that the historical Jesus did not present himself both as witness to faith in God and as object of faith?

My mind fails to follow when he claims that the Kerygma gives us access to the historical Jesus and his message, through the event of the Resurrection. My friend Kasemann has now come around to say that the existential Christ is not sufficient and that we have to go back to some historically rooted saying events in which the Jesus of history is central. We must burrow our way back to the pre-Hellenic Christ of Palestinian Jewish Christianity, through the special material in Mathew's Gospel.

What is the Peeled Person who emerges after the form critics have done their paring of the Biblical materials? Conzelmann arrives at a Jesus who proclaimed the Reign of God as something coming, demanding decision, an answering response to the challenge of proclamation. Jesus' historical life is an advance proclamation of the coming kingdom, which is primarily ethical. His eating with sinners, publicans and other social outcasts is already a Kerygmatic act, demanding confrontation with the will of God and obedience to it, Fuchs would say. His demand for faith is a demand to overcome *Angst* by being at the receiving end of God's action. Jesus' own style of life was a declaration that he who is in complete submission to the will of God achieves perfect power and poise, gaining mastery of every situation. To be the servant is to fulfil the will of God, and the historical Jesus, by his actions declares this revealing truth.

I hope I have not badly caricatured the new Christology of my protestant friends - Jesus as the man-for-others, as the servant who reveals the will of God for all men, the one who submits perfectly to the will of God and thereby manifests and declares what it is to be truly human (i.e. without selfrighteousness, justified by the grace of God, but decisively committed to obey the will of God and to serve one's fellow-men).

Two things strike me in this picture. One is the refreshing moral earnestness, this desire to obey - a characteristic which not all nationalities enjoy equally. It is neither in my personal ethos nor in my national character. So I can appreciate that kind of obedience only from a distance.

The other is the utter monophysitism in reverse of this Christology. There is no suggestion here that the historical Jesus could have been anything more than a mere man. And there the issue is squarely joined - in the most elementary, but most fundamental terms.

Is a Christology which seeks to make no use at all of the transcendent aspects of Jesus' person and life and teaching, Christian? It may, after some more pruning a la Robert Kysar, become faithful to the modern superstitions of secularism, which seeks to find security in ignorance, release from its intellectual restlessness by cutting out a manageable chunk of reality and by dealing with it in categories which are supposed to be in the control of man. But some of my secularist friends secretly retain a transcendent reference within the "secular" world through vague expressions like "the beyond in our midst", "experience of freedom," "unmasking of the face of Jesus" and so on. Straight-forward humanism without all this Christological garb will be more honest and therefore more understandable to Christian and non-Christian alike.

It is also noteworthy that while the fourth and fifth century debate was an attempt to deal with the person of Jesus in terms of his metaphysical identity, the 20th century debate is more concerned with his intellectual and ethical positions. The concern then was about the being of Jesus. Today it is about his actual saying and doing.

There were certain assumptions about the acts and words of Jesus in the 4th century - the chief one being that no basic controversy was necessary on the subject, since the tradition of the church as attested to by the scriptures, the liturgical prayers, the writings of the fathers, and the memory of the original teachers, was essentially reliable, and that there was no particular problem to debate.

Today we cannot make that assumption, according to many of my friends. In our time many scholars feel that the canons of literary criticism and *Formgeschichte* should be strictly applied to sift the truth from poetry and legend in the materials. This literary orientation to history is a special phenomenon of our time. "Only that which is documented can be regarded as having happened" - that seems to be the first assumption; "whatever has happened, we can know it by scientific analysis of the evidence left to history," that seems to be a second assumption; "only that which is ascertained as scientifically true can be proclaimed as truth by the Church" - is this a third assumption?

The problem behind these assumptions is the conclusion that they lead to - namely that the scientific method is the way to truth in all cases. But if something is proved as indubitable by scientific investigation, what then is the nature of the faith demanded in accepting these conclusions? Nothing more seems to be needed than faith in the method and faith in the integrity and inerrancy of the investigators. Would that still be the Christian faith? What is faith? Is it a decision about ourselves or a relation to a person? Any why that person, if he is only a man? Until I hear some satisfactory answer to these questions, my interest in this new quest of the historical Jesus can be little more than marginal. You will forgive me if I thus regard the 20th century Christological debate as being less relevant to me than that of the 4th and 5th centuries.

### III. The Relevance of the Classical Debate

But in what sense is the classical debate still relevant? It is relevant to those Christians who still believe that "the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us" and that the Apostles "beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father" (St. John 1, 14).

If the Divine Logos became a member of humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, and our own ultimate destiny is dependent on that event, then I have a passionate interest in knowing who the Divine Logos is and how he became a human being.

I affirm that the Logos is God, and then if I take into account the fact that he constantly spoke of God his Father, then I have a passionate interest in knowing how God the Son is related to God the Father, when there is only one God.

I have no confidence that I will be able to penetrate either of these

mysteries - mystery of the Godhead and the mystery of the Incarnation at any time. My passion for knowledge is only to make sure that I do not go wrong in whatever I claim to know. It is a negative knowledge that I am after, a knowledge which can protect the mystery but never hope to be able to reveal it in its full depth.

In such a context, I have a third question - how does the event of the Incarnation become effective in our time for the salvation of the world? It is at this third level that the preaching of the word, the sacramental mysteries, and the life and work of the church become effective. My Christological interest is integrally related to this third level, which has also its own elements of mystery.

But in what sense would a two-nature Christology or a one-nature Christology make any difference at the soteriological level? This is our question.

Here I must begin first by making the statement that I am able to understand the Christological definition of Chalcedon itself in a non-heretical sense. By that I do not mean that I find the Chalcedonian formula an admirable statement of Christology. If it claims to "solve" the Christological issue, then I must protest. I believe that the nature of Christ cannot be reduced to concepts comprehensible to a finite mind, precisely because as God and as man, his being transcends the categories of finite reason or of time-space existence.

There are two dangers in affirming two natures. The first is most clearly exemplified by the Tome of Leo itself. This interesting document soberly sets forth the doctrine of Christ with great clarity, especially in contrast with the muddleheadedness of a Eutyches. "Each nature in union with the other performs the actions which are proper to it, the Word those which are proper to the Word, the flesh those which are proper to the flesh. The one is resplendent with miracles, the other succumbs to injuries" (Ch.IV).

But this amazing clarity is deceptive. For Leo would normally affirm that it is the same one who is the subject of both actions, but he falls into error when he says that the Word does certain actions and the flesh certain others. This could imply two subjects - the essence of the Nestorian heresy. Leo's personal faith may have been Orthodox, but the way he stated it is subject to misinterpretation. To certify such a teaching as accurate is for us

one of the major mistakes of Chalcedon. We do not really believe that the two nature Christology as interpreted by Leo is completely faithful to the authentic tradition.

Chalcedon also falls into the error of too symmetric a Christology when it puts the two natures side by side as if they were parallel to and equal to each other. Our tradition insists on basic asymmetry between the two natures - the centre is the hypostasis of the Logos, the divine nature. The human nature is not uneasily linked to the Logos and his divine nature. It is the nature of the Logos incarnate to be human. Christ who now sits at the right hand of the Father is a human being - the Son of Man. The two natures are not linked in such a way that the divine nature is the subject and the human nature the instrument. Nor are the two natures placed side by side in such a way that human beings can have contact only with the human nature of Christ. Our union is with God in Christ, and not merely with the human nature of Christ.

It is the element that is at stake in the ancient Christological debate being brought up to date. There is the primary question - Are we saved by an encounter of faith in Christ, or by union with him? Do we stand simply face to face with him at a distance, or do we become united with him in such a way that from one perspective we are Christ, and from another perspective, Christ can be distinguished from us and prayed to? I think the later view which emphasises both union and distinction, is more faithful to the original tradition.

It might at first appear that the two-nature Christology is better suited to uphold the ideas of both union and distinction. But it is obvious that the insistence on keeping the emphasis on the distinction at the level of the natures and unity at the level of the persons or acting subject, leads to more emphasis on the distinction between the divine and the human. For at the level of the person, where unity is affirmed, it is the Divine Hypostasis that stands alone. The human in the two-nature Christology exists only at the level of the natures, and at that level it is distinction that is emphasized by the two-nature formula. The four adverbs without confusion, without conversion, without division, without separation (*asunchutos, atreptos, adiáiretos, achoristos*) could be more accurately, though much more awkwardly translated as uncommixedly, unalteredly, undividedly, unseparately, belong to our common tradition, and are also used in the one united nature Christology.



It is the union of the divine and the human, without loss of the distinction between them, without one changing into the other in such a way that it loses its original identity, that is at the heart of our salvation. It is the union of the divine and human that the one-nature Christology emphasizes without losing sight of the distinction. In Christ there is unity both at the level of hypostasis and at the level of nature.

Of course if the divine is denied in Christ, then the question is not relevant. It is even less relevant if our union with Christ itself is underemphasized, with over-emphasis on the personal encounter; then too the two-nature vs one-united-nature controversy can hardly be relevant.

If we affirm, as I have seen some theologians (eg. Emile Mersch in *The Total Christ*) do, that our union is only with the human nature, which since it is the human nature of the Divine Logos, has divine properties transmitted to it, then we are still emphasizing the distinction of the natures, and there may be implied here a fear to affirm that our human nature can be really united to the Divine nature. But then is that not the point of the incarnation? If Christ's human nature was united to his divine nature, our human nature can also be united with Christ's divine-human nature- not just with his human nature. This is fundamentally what the one united nature Christology seeks to affirm. Our commitment to a theosis soteriology is at the base of our one-nature Christology, which does not deny the distinction between the divine and the human, but places the emphasis on their union rather than on their distinction.

#### IV. Terminology

The categories used in the Christological formula are extremely problematic for Christians today. Archbishop William Temple of Canterbury was one of the first to question the very usefulness of these categories, quite apart from the opposition to dogma itself which was characteristic of German and American liberalism.

The main terms *hypostasis*, *physis* and *ousia* have been ably analyzed by Father Grillmeier in his magnificent study on the history of Christology and I need not repeat the material here. The problem was, however, recognised as early as the 4th century by the Cappadocian Fathers. Whoever may be author of Epistle 38<sup>2</sup> attributed to St. Basil, the problem gets clearly stated there. I want only to draw out some conclusions here :

(a) first of all nature is not a thing, it is the name of a class - it belongs to a

group of words which do not correspond to any particular thing but have a more general sense (*katholikoteran tina ten semasian echei*) e.g. *anthropos* or man. Human nature or humanity does not mean something which a man possesses as one owns a thing. It is rather a word to denote the fact that certain realities have certain common characteristics - which are the *koinotes tes physeos*. Every reality has some characteristics which are *idion* or *idia* or particular and others that are *koinon* or *koina* - (common). The *koina* belong to *physis* or nature and the *idia* to the hypostasis or person. Or to put it differently, nature is what all members of a class have in common. But it is not a particular thing to be counted as one or two.

(b) Hypostasis or Person. This is perhaps the most ambiguous term. The Stoics used it in a much wider sense. It is any particular visible object, animal or person with its own *idiomata* or set of characteristics. All existing realities are hypostases with their own *physei* or natures. A hypostasis in the Stoics is thus similar to a *Dasein* in Heidegger.

Theodore of Mopsuestia on the other hand would insist that only man has hypostasis. He rejects even the more restricted view of hypostasis as any *autokineton* i.e. any living being which is moved by its own *anima*. Theodore almost identifies the hypostasis (in Syriac *qnoma*) with the soul, which is capable of existence independent of the body.

Basil's epistle 38 follows a different line. If nature or *physis* refers to the common characteristics of a class, hypostasis refers to those identifying particulars which separate each particular member from other members of his class. Paul is a man, but when we speak about Paul we are referring to the individual person as he can be identified by certain specific characteristics. The common in a class refers to nature; the particular refers to hypostasis - this is the Cappadocian view, which is not so terribly metaphysical. "It (hypostasis) is the conception which, by means of the specific notes that it indicates, restricts and circumscribes in a particular thing what is general and uncircumscribed."<sup>3</sup>

Thus the Man Jesus is the *Hypostasis* of Jesus with the *physis* of man.<sup>4</sup>

(c) *Ousia* (Being). In the Cappadocian fathers *ousia* is the term normally used for the *physis* of the Godhead, i.e. of that which is common to the three hypostases in the Trinity. The three hypostases in the Trinity

are distinguished by their specific characteristics: *agennesia* or unbegottenness in the case of the Father, begottenness in the case of the Son and procession from the Father in the case of the Holy Spirit.

Now the central affirmation of the Christian tradition with which Chalcedon also agrees is that the *hypostasis* of Jesus who is a particular member of the class or *physis* of man, is none other than the *hypostasis* of the Second Person of the Trinity. These are not two hypostases united into one; but the one hypostasis of the Eternal Son, without losing the *ousia* or *physis* of the Godhead, assumed or took on the *physis* of man. He is thus simultaneously a hypostasis in the Godhead and in humanity. On this point Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians agree.

In calling it hypostatic union, the Chalcedonians are not saying two hypostases were united to form one. But since it is the same hypostasis who has the nature of God and the nature of Man, the nature of the hypostasis of the Son is now after the Incarnation one single *physis* which is formed by a union of the divine nature and the human nature in the one hypostasis. We insist on saying that that which is united is one after the union. This is why we reject the "in-two-natures" formula of Chalcedon and acknowledge the one hypostasis with the one united divine- human nature.

We do not claim that this settles the issue. We agree with St. Gregory of Nyssa, when he says :

"As in the case of the union of soul and body, while we have reason to believe that the soul is something other than the body, because the flesh when isolated from the soul becomes dead and inactive, we have yet no exact knowledge of the method of the union, so in that other enquiry of the union of the Deity with manhood, while we are quite aware that there is a distinction as regards degree of majesty between the Divine and the mortal perishable nature, we are not capable of detecting how the Divine and the human elements are mixed together. The preponderance of the miracles leave us in no doubt that God was born in the nature of Man. But, how - this, as being a subject unapproachable by the processes of reasoning, we decline to investigate."<sup>5</sup>

## V. One Nature vs. two Natures

The controversy between one united nature and two natures which

has raged for 15 centuries does not thus really cover a matter of great substance. What has caused the separation between the two sides appears now to have been primarily cultural, political and terminological. The division has been sustained through the centuries by force of mutual suspicion, mutual caricaturing and ecclesiastical inertia.

There are reasons for which my tradition still prefers the one-united-nature terminology today. We have a fear that the two nature formula is sometimes misunderstood by some people as meaning two different persons i.e. the pre-existent logos and the man Jesus somehow uneasily yoked together. We know that theologians on the Chalcedonian side do not teach this. But the distinction between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ in contemporary Christology worries us. We do not recognize a historical Jesus who is distinct from the Incarnate Christ known and proclaimed by the Church. The proclamation of the Church is about the Man Jesus whose hypostasis or identity is that of the second Person of the Trinity. The Son of Man is the Son of God. It is this total identity which we call *henosis physike*, though the two expressions are not parallel (Hypostasis was always one, the nature have come together in the one hypostasis to become one).

### Conclusions

1. The reason why the Chalcedonian controversy appears irrelevant to some today is that they deny the reality of the Christian faith which affirms that the Son of Man is the Son of God, and thereby created the discussion about the relation between the two identities.
2. The contemporary Christological debate in Reformation circles is irrelevant to us, since it does not take the central affirmation of the Gospel sufficiently seriously.
3. The terminology of Chalcedon is not so obsolete as some people suggest. We have as yet no alternate philosophical terminology into which to translate the basic Christological affirmations in current languages. This is primarily a defect of our philosophical language today and not of the affirmations of the faith.
4. The terminological differences need not separate us, if we really agree on the substance of the Church's faith and tradition.

1. *Christian Century*, September 2, 1970, 1038.
2. Which was actually read at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 as an epistle of St. Basil; it seems to have been composed ca 370 A.D. by either St. Basil or by his brother St. Gregory of Nyssa.
3. Ep. 38 Tr. Roy J. Defarrari, in *St. Basil, The Letters* (Harvard, 1950), Vol. I. 201.
4. The affirmations sometimes made by Byzantine theologians to the effect that St. Cyril of Alexandria used *hypostasis* and *physis* interchangeably has not yet been sufficiently documented. There is near-identity between *physis* and *ousia* especially in relation to the Trinity. This is in the Cappodocians as well as in Cyril. But it is not yet clear that Professor Karimiris of Athens and Professor Tsonievsky of Sofia and others are justified in stating that when Cyril says one *nature* he means one *hypostasis*. The only evidence they bring is that he uses both expressions but that does not mean that *hypostasis* and *physis* are one. The meaning is rather that the one *hypostasis* has one united *physis*.
5. *The Great Catechism*: XI. Eng. Tr. in Schaff and Wace, (Ed), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series Vol. v. 486.

# 5

## Christ

### **As the Eastern Fathers saw Him**

The Eastern Fathers were mostly Asians or Africans. There were very few Greeks among them. It is a misconception spread by bad scholarship in the West that all the Eastern Fathers were Greek. They were as much Greek as C.S. Song, the Korean who writes in English, is English. The Asian and African Fathers wrote in Greek or Syriac, the two international languages of the Mediterranean, like our English and French these days. Occasionally one finds a real Greek like Methodius of Olympus; but most of them were Asian (Ignatius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Irenaeus, etc). The best Christian theology always came from Asia or Africa, not from Europe - Latin or Greek. Even most of the Latin theologians (Augustine, Tertullian, Cyprian) came from Latin-speaking North Africa.

But these Asian-African theologians who wrote in Greek were writing in particular contexts. They did not write their theologies, however, to tackle the economic and political problems of the day. The Roman and Byzantine empires were tyrannical and oppressive. St. John Chrysostom, for example, preached against the social evils of the day like the indolence and callousness of the rich, the vanity of empresses, or the arrogance of rulers. But they did not create a Christology to meet these problems.

Their Christology was directed mainly against Church people who

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mis-interpreted Christ. There were many such mis-interpretations which deviated from the Apostolic testimony about Christ. Two among these stood out, as capable of undermining the very foundations of Christianity. Both were products of intellectuals, who wanted to make Christianity acceptable and palatable to the non-Christians, and relevant to contemporary non-Christian thought.

The two serious misunderstandings of Christ came from what we today call Gnosticism and Arianism in their various forms. The fact of the matter is that these are still the two most important errors prevailing in the Church today, especially among intellectuals in the West. And to clarify our own Asian understanding of Christ over against these false teachings would be our main purpose in looking at samples of the Asian-African theologians of an earlier, more classical, period in the history of Christian thought.

### The Gnostic Danger - Today and Then

Elaine Pagels has written a very enthusiastic account of *The Gnostic Gospels*<sup>1</sup> picturing the way of thinking of Gnostics in the early centuries. She herself gives the impression of an ardent Gnostic, (though she expressly denies this) who takes up the cudgels on behalf of the poor Gnostics who had been persecuted and suppressed by the early Church.

Elaine Pagels is a Harvard graduate who teaches at Barnard College (Columbia University). She studied Gnosticism in order to see "the relation between politics and religion in the origins of Christianity". She examined Gnosticism for what it was - "a powerful alternative to what we know as Orthodox Christian tradition".<sup>2</sup> She identifies the issue between Gnostics and Christian Orthodox as :

"What is the source of religious authority? For the Christian, the question takes more specific form: What is the relation between the authority of one's own experience and that claimed for the Scriptures, the ritual, and the clergy?"

For Christians today, who are revolting against the authority of "the Scriptures, the ritual, and the clergy", the classical debate between Gnostics and Orthodox Christians becomes a central issue. The Gnostic vision of Christ seemed attractive to many intellectual Christians of that time, while the official Church kept on condemning it and branding it as heresy. For Elaine Pagels, Irenaeus the Asian theologian who later became Bishop of Lyons in France is the primary villain. Over against the Gnostic Christian's

vision of a Christ of solitude, a Christ without the paraphernalia of Church or ritual, sacraments or dogma, clergy or creed, Ireneus insisted on a Christ *with the Church*, with, "the canonically approved Scriptures, the creed, Church ritual, and the clerical hierarchy".

The Gnostic Christian saw himself as "one of a thousand, two out of ten thousand", a real disciple, an unusual person, one specially chosen out of many to receive the great mystery of the universe, which ordinary people can never know. The solitary path of Gnosticism has historical relations with the Asian tradition, particularly with the Hindu tradition of finding God as the true being of one's own self. As the Gospel of Thomas puts it:

"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you"<sup>4</sup>

The allusion here is to Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God is "within you" (LK 17:21). Whatever Aramaic expression Jesus used (the Syriac translation uses *legav menkoon* which means - in your [plural] midst), the Greek expression *entos humon* does not expressly refer to the individual's inner being, but to the common existence of the community. But the Gnostics found the expression very convenient. They had this unusual capacity :

- (a) to individualize the Gospel and the Kingdom;
- (b) to interiorize it;
- (c) to make salvation simply a matter of bringing out what is already within oneself; and
- (d) to make oneself the constitutive norm for existence.

As opposed to this the early Christian Fathers like Ireneus affirmed :

- (a) The Gospel is addressed to human communities, and elicits a community response; the Kingdom comes not only within a person's consciousness, but also within the structures of human social existence in community.
  - (b) The Kingdom is not a matter of interiority alone, but a social reality within which the inner experience of personal salvation has to be located;
  - (c) Salvation comes from God, not from within oneself; but through faith God indwells human beings as persons, and the church as a community, and directs both by the Spirit that dwells in them;
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- (d) The constitutive centre of authority is Christ and the Holy Spirit, dwelling in the Body of Christ, the community of faith, with its scriptures, its sacramental mysteries, its apostolic tradition and testimony, its own mind and thought.

The Gnostics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries considered the organised church as unfaithful, as teaching something else than what Christ taught, just as many Christians do today. All Christian Gnostic writings show this tendency of criticising the official Church as heretical, while setting themselves up as the true Christians. They laughed at baptism, and about people who "go down into the water and come up without having received anything".

For the Gnostic, a Christian was to be known by his personal quality; for the Orthodox a Christian was identified as one who was initiated into the community of faith, and participated in the life of that community. And this meant, adherence to the authority structure of the community. As Ignatius of Antioch, the disciple of the Apostles, put it at the beginning of the second century :

"Flee from Schism as the source of mischief. You should all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Follow, too, the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would God's law. No one should do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval. You should regard the Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by some one he authorizes. Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Church Catholic..... He who honours the bishop is honoured of God. He who acts without the bishop's knowledge is in the devil's service."<sup>5</sup>

The Gnostics could not accept this. Of course it was embarrassing to them that Ignatius was a direct disciple of the Apostles, was the most sincere devoted Christian known at that time, a hero of holiness, who thought it a joy to lay down his life for the sake of Christ. The strong language the Gnostics usually applied to church leaders as being corrupt, power hungry, avaricious, etc. could in no way be applied to Ignatius. And if history chose to honour Ignatius rather than the Gnostics, there must be a point there.

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The reason why Ignatius insisted on the bishop, the presbytery, the deacons and baptism and Eucharist as the focal points of life in Christ is not difficult to understand. The Gnostic Christians wanted to be on their own, arbiters of their own faith, without church, ministry or sacraments. This would have been all right, if they could also be faithful to the Apostolic teaching. The apostolic teaching was not, however, available in the Gnostic schools. The Jesus they taught was one who was only in the heart or head of the believer, and not in the life of the community of faith. The Apostolic teaching put all emphasis on the community and on the Eucharist, and the ministry which was responsible for guarding the teaching of Christ. The Gnostics preferred individualist, interioristic, intellectualistic interpretations of Christianity and did not want to associate with ordinary Christians or with their community, with the ministry and the sacramental mysteries which constituted the life of that community. The Gnostics were anti-church, anti-clerical, anti-sacramentarian, as many Asian Christians are today.

Ignatius, the first great Asian theologian, testified to the Apostolic teaching that to be a Christian is neither to have a special experience in one's heart nor to have lofty ideas about Christ; to be a Christian, one's whole life has to be drawn into unity with Christ and with His body the Church; and one has to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism and Eucharist: through specific acts, through being incorporated into a specific community with its own structure as prescribed by the Apostles. Christ is flesh and Spirit, man and God - not just Spirit or pure God. Life in Christ must therefore have its fleshly and human elements - what Western rationalists uncomprehendingly mock as 'rituals and ceremonies'. The Gnostics, like many modern Christians, had no use for the Church or its life in community.

The Christianity of Ignatius was the Christology of the Apostles. In this way of understanding, Christ is of flesh (*sarkikos*), and of Spirit (*pneumatikos*), begotten (*gennētos*), yet unbegotten (*agennētos*), in a human being (*en anthropō*) God (*theos*), in and through death (*en thanatō*), life in truth (*Zoe alethinē*) both from Mary (*kai ek Marias*) and from God (*kai ek Theou*) first suffering (*proton pathētos*) then beyond suffering (*tote apathes*) Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>6</sup>

It is this Apostolic Christology, as distinct from a Gnostic Christology of personal salvation, that all the Eastern Fathers have taught. For the

latter, the Church is integrally one with Christ, as His body, and Christians could not accept Christ without the Church, His body, of which the Christian is a member. Our personal experience of Christ and our personal devotion to Him are important; but these are not what constitute a Christian. It is participation in Christ through His Body.

Another great 'Star of Asia', Melito of Sardis (+ca 190 AD), echoed the same faith. Christ is the turning point of humanity in its passage from the 'safety' (salvation, *sotéria*) of paradise down into the Fall of earthly existence, under the tyranny of sin and death, back to the bosom of God. He is the new Passover which delivers humanity from the captivity of Egypt. He became the turning point by taking a fleshly body and suffering on our behalf. It is God himself who has suffered and died. And we participate in this divine-human Christ, by partaking of his flesh and blood in the Eucharist. The flesh of Jesus is no phantasy; it is real; and participation in him is also real - material and spiritual. The corporeality of God is stressed by Melito over against the Gnostics. The very title of his homily is *peri ensōmatou Theou* (*Regarding the Embodied God*)

The same anti-Gnostic, embodied understanding of Christ is continued by Irenaeus of Smyrna who later became bishop of Lyons in France. This great Asian teacher of the West also saw Christ as embodied in the Church. He expressly attacks the three Christian Gnostics - Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion, all of whom sought to deny the material aspects of Christ and to spiritualize, interiorize and individualize Him. For the Gnostics, matter is evil, and God cannot be linked to it. For them the sacraments of the Church are also evil, and God cannot be linked to them. For them they are evil, because linked to material objects. It is the hidden spark of the divine in us that matters, according to the Gnostics. Salvation, for them, is only for the soul, not for the body. Marcion, for example, condemned marriage and sexual inter-course, as well as body and matter.

The most important Christological point in Irenaeus is the concept of the Economy of God, which includes Creation, Redemption and final recapitulation (*anakephalaiōsis*). The death and Resurrection of Christ are seen not merely as something for our personal salvation, but as the decisive movement in the history of the Creation itself, leading the whole cosmos from dissolution to eternal life. Christ is from the beginning the ground of the created order, for in Him, by Him and through Him all things were created (Johannine Prologue).

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## Christ

The Church is the new creation, and Christ is its head. And the salvation of the old creation is to be incorporation into the new. It is the final recapitulation that will reveal the glory of Christ the God-Man, for in Him all created things are to be reconciled to God. While the Gnostics denied all significance to the material world, Irenaeus affirmed its participation in the redemption. The Logos holds the universe together from its beginning. But after the Fall, Christ by inseparably uniting a body to himself, incorporates the creation in a new, more intimate, more integral, way into His own body.

This is the tradition of the Apostolic Church. Christ is God who has become a human being, and remains ever divine-human in an inseparable unity between the Creator and the Creation. He was manifested in the flesh, and after His resurrection continues to manifest himself, in the fleshy, corporate body of the community of faith, through the proclamation of the Word, through the sacramental mysteries, through the love that binds the community and pours itself out in love of the created order, which has now been united with Christ. It is in union with Him, through the mysteries of baptism, anointment, Eucharist and ministry, that we participate in the healing and life giving energies of the new world.

The struggle between the two different Christologies is still very active in Asia today. Too many Asian Christians have accepted a Gnostic form of Christianity, of Christ in the heart of the individual, but not in the life of the community or in the cosmos.

### The Arian Temptation

If the Gnostic-Docetic temptation was the biggest problem of the infancy of the Church, overcome by such stalwart Asians as Ignatius, Melito and Irenaeus, the childhood of the Church had to face the greatest of all heresies, that of Arius, Aetius and Eunomius.

Arius (ca 250 - ca 336) was an African, probably from Libya, who studied in Asia under Lucian of Antioch, and later became a Presbyter in the great African Church of Baucalis in Alexandria. Aetius who died around 370 A.D. was his chief disciple. A native of Asia (a craftsman of Antioch) who went to Alexandria for his philosophical studies in Aristotle, Aetius was the one who philosophically systematized Arianism. Eunomius, another Asian Rhetorician or philosopher (from Cappadocia) also went to Alexandria and became a disciple of Aetius around 356 A.D. His whole life was a campaign against the faith of the Council of Nicea which condemned the teaching of Arius.



- (b) Only God the Father is unoriginate. Therefore he alone is God. The Son is Begotten and therefore originate. He cannot be God.
- (c) The Son or Logos is a creature, the first of all creatures. He was the agent of creation and all things came to be through him.
- (d) The first of the created beings to come into being through the Son was the Holy Spirit.
- (e) The Logos became flesh, but not a human being. He had no human soul. The place of the soul was taken by the Logos or Word of God.
- (f) The Incarnate Christ is thus not of the same nature as God, being *gennētos*; He is less than God, subordinate to God, of a different nature; neither is he of the same nature as us, for he had no fallen human soul, but only human flesh.

This teaching undermines the two pillars of the faith of the Church, which are still difficult to accept for the non-believer: the Triune God and God's becoming a human person, or the Trinity and the Incarnation.

It was at that time intellectually fashionable to deny the Three-in-Oneness of God and the Man-becoming of God. Such denial fitted neatly with the prevailing philosophy in the Greek speaking world of the fourth century - Neoplatonism or Middle Platonism. For them the only self-existent being was the Transcendent One, from whom everything emanated. God the Father of Christian theology fitted into this niche. The second being, coming out of the One was the *nous* or the *logos*, which was the intermediary between the One and Many. This was the niche for Christ. The third order of being, underlying all multiplicity, coming from the *Logos* was the *psyche* or soul. And this was a neat, fitting, place for the Holy Spirit - three different beings, with natures totally different from each other. The Arian Christology fitted neatly with contemporary non-Christian philosophy.

It was in opposing this fashionable Christology that the classical Christian Christology was formulated, not so much by Athanasius, but by one of his successors as Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril (+444). This African theologian struggled with the fundamental questions :

- (a) If the Father is God and the Son is also God, are there two or more Gods?

- (b) How can a single person, i.e. Jesus Christ, be both God and Man ?
- (c) Did Mary give birth to a human person, or to one who is also God ?

Cyril was helped by the struggle of other Asian-African theologians before him - especially the Asians Eustathius of Antioch (+330 A.D.), Eusebius of Caesaria (ca 260 - ca 340), Diodore of Tarsus (+ca 394), Basil of Caesarea (ca 330-375 A.D.), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389 A.D.), Gregory of Nyssa (ca 330 - ca 395), Evagrius Ponticus (346-399), Nemesis of Emesa (fl 390 A.D.), John Chrysostom (ca 347-407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (+428 AD), and even his arch-enemy Nestorius (+ca 451 A.D.) as well as many others. Among the Africans we can mention Athanasius and Origen before him.

Western scholars usually say there were two Christologies ; the Antiochean or Asian type and the Alexandrian or African type. This is too hasty and overly neat a bifurcation. Alexandrian Christology depended heavily on the Asian debate. It was in Asia that the great cleavage emerged - between the Apollinarian type and the Nestorian type of understanding Christ.

Both Apollinarius and Nestorius were struggling with the Middle Platonist philosophical approaches of their time. Apollinarius focussed on the *nous*, the second principle of the Neoplatonists as the fulcrum of unity in Christ. It was the *nous* which united the divine being with the human being, the divine *nous*, pre-existent, the creator of all things taking the centre of the soul-body humanity of Jesus - for Apollinarius. In opposing this tendency, Nestorius, anxious to affirm the full humanity of Jesus, stressed the joint nature of the full divinity and full humanity in Christ.

It was this debate that Cyril sought to settle, and despite Western reluctance to accept it, settled it brilliantly, but by no means finally. The West still has difficulty in appreciating the thought of Cyril, though it is clear that the very test of the new Christologies that today arise in the West would be their agreement with Cyril of Alexandria, as far as Orthodox Christians are concerned.

Cyril is much maligned in Western historiography. He had the perception to see that while Nestorius' heresy might appear harmless, it would have very significant consequences for the faith of the Church, as the

Western Church now experiences. Keeping the divinity and the humanity linked together only by a conjunction is to say simply that Christ was both divine *and* human, a mere *synapsis*. If as Nestorius said, Mary gave birth only to a human child and the divinity was somehow attached to this child afterwards, then the two can again come apart, as they have done in Western Christology today. The modern trends in the West take Christ's humanity apart, and see him primarily as a man who mediated new socio-religious and political values, a man who revealed God's will for the Jews of his time, and perhaps also for others of other times and places as well. As Fr. Schillebeeckx puts it :

"From this viewpoint the new Jesus images are purely mythical conceptions, the real, non-mythical content of which is nothing other than our own historically new religious experience (with Jesus still seen of course as exemplar and animator at the time)".<sup>8</sup>

The characteristic of most current Western Christologies is that 'upward from below' look at Christ, starting with his humanity, reserving consideration of his divinity and pre-existence until afterwards. Many of these works look for the transcendence of Jesus in history itself (e.g. H. Braun, Paul van Buren)<sup>9</sup>

A. Hulsbosch puts it sharply :

"The divine nature of Jesus is only of significance in the saving mystery in so far as it changes and uplifts the human nature. In so far as it does this, we have a new mode of 'being human'.... The divine nature is irrelevant except in so far as it uplifts the human nature; in so far as it does not do this, it has no significance for us; but in so far as it *does*, we have to do with something really human. If we say: besides being man Jesus is also God, then the 'also God' is no business of ours, because it is not trans-lated into the human reality of salvation."<sup>10</sup>

Nothing could be more unchristian. If what we want is only to use Christ for our salvation, then we can pick and choose within Christ, take what we want and reject what is of no use to us. This is the attitude which the West has used in its imperialist conquest of the world, and is a demonic and despicable attitude, which is the very antithesis of Christianity.

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"What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He"? That is the question. Not "How can I use Christ for my salvation?" Who is this marvellous person, born of the Virgin, whom the shepherds adore, and who is also the saviour of humanity? If that is the question, we should go back to Cyril of Alexandria, to discover the considered answer of the Church. We can then re-translate it into our language.

If on the contrary, one starts with the question, "what is the most economical form in which Christ can be appropriated for my purpose?", we can be satisfied with some part or aspect of Jesus Christ which we regard as significant for our salvation.

The Christian is not one who tries to use Christ for salvation, but one who has been incorporated into Jesus Christ and His body, and seeks to work out the implications of his God-given new life in Christ. It is as such a Christian that one seeks here to give a brief summary of Cyrillian Christology as the Church has come to accept it.

### Cyril's Christology

Cyril himself had to grow in his Christology. At first he was quite happy to summarize the Christology of Athanasius<sup>11</sup> The basic affirmations at this stage are:

- (a) "The Word was made man, but did not descend upon a man"<sup>11</sup>
- (b) It is the same person who was fully God and fully human.
- (c) The same person suffered and performed the miracles.
- (d) It is the Divine-human Christ whom we adore and worship - not a man or a creature.

Later on Cyril sets himself to a more precise formulation, of the relationship between the divine and the human natures of Christ. Cyril rejects the Nestorian terms *enokésis*, *sunapheia* and *henôsis schetike*. This means it would be wrong to say that

- (a) the divine nature *indwells* the human nature, (*enokésis*)
- (b) the two natures are inter-connected (*sunapheia*)
- (c) the two natures have a firm unity (*henôsis schetike*)

He uses rather the expressions :

- (a) *henôsis kata phusin* (union in nature)

(b) *mia phusis tou logou sesarkomene* (the one nature of the incarnate word)

The philosophical term for this kind of unity is *hypostatic union*, though Cyril himself did not use it. The Word of God did not cease to be the Word of God by becoming a human person. Neither did the humanity of Christ become a different kind of humanity from our own. Neither was there a mixing of the two natures, nor can there ever be a separation of the divine and human natures in Christ.

The consequence of this inseparable unmixed union are enormous. We better look at these consequences before we go on to the understanding of the expression 'hypostatic union.'

In Jesus Christ we have a new kind of humanity. It is a humanity that died and rose again, sinless. It is the humanity that is inseparably united with God. This is the great new thing that has come into being through the Incarnation. It is in this new humanity that Christians participate by virtue of their baptism, of their anointing with the Holy Spirit, and of their participation in the body and blood of Christ. This is what really matters - the participation in this new humanity that is indivisibly and inseparably united with God. This is how I am saved, by participation in the new humanity which has overcome sin and death - not by some experience, not by my faith, but by my being taken by the Grace of God into His Son's Body to be a member thereof. It is in that Body and in that new humanity that there is eternal life.

Once this fact is grasped, it is easy to understand the teaching of the Church about this union of the divine and human in one person.

"We say that the Word of God came together with His proper flesh, in union indissoluble and unalterable....."

Even though He became Man, He possesses the being of God without casting it away; nor do we say that any change took place of the flesh into the Nature of the Godhead, and we hold that neither did the reverse take place, for the nature of the Word has remained what it is even when united to flesh."

Cyril of Alexandria<sup>12</sup>

Cyril was prepared to leave the mode of union as beyond our understanding, but insisted on the unconfused and inseparable union:

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"Godhead is one thing and manhood is another, according to the mode of being in each; yet in Christ they have come together, in a unique manner beyond our understanding, into union, without confusion or change. But the mode of union is wholly incomprehensible"<sup>13</sup>

This united one divine-human nature is the one in which we participate - in the humanity of the Word of God.

Cyril's position is best summarized in the twelve positions condemned by his 12 anathemata against the teachings of Nestorius. Nestorius, we should remember, was fanatically anti-Arian, and got the government to enact a law against those who say that Christ is a mere man.<sup>14</sup> The main charge against Nestorius was that he refused to acknowledge that the baby Mary bore in her womb was God. This was the meaning of the expression *Theotokos*, God-bearer, applied to Christ's mother. If the baby was no God, then Godhead was somehow added to Jesus after he was born a man. Nestorius' argument is that God is without a mother who would be older than God. But the logical consequence of saying that what Mary bore in her womb was only a human infant is to deny that he was God from the beginning of His incarnation, and that the divinity simply came into conjunction with a human Jesus.

Cyril's 12 anathemata therefore insist :

- (a) Immanuel born of Mary is truly God from the beginning and therefore Mary is God-bearer or *Theotokos*;
- (b) God the Word, very God of very God, has been personally united to flesh, and it is the flesh of Christ, the Word Incarnate, the God-Man;
- (c) The person (*hypostasis*) of the One Christ cannot be divided into two, as if there were two Christs - one divine and one human;
- (d) One cannot assign the words and actions of Christ to two different persons; it is the same person who hungers and who raises Lazarus from the dead;
- (e) One cannot say that Christ the man was clothed with God; Christ is God by nature;
- (f) One cannot say that God the Word is the Lord of the Man

Christ; for Christ the God-Man is himself Lord;

- (g) One cannot say that the glory of God was imparted to Christ the Man. Christ's glory is the one he had before the creation of the world;
- (h) One cannot say that Jesus the Man is to be co-worshipped along with God the Word, that too would be wrong;
- (i) One cannot say that Jesus Christ was glorified by the Holy Spirit, as if he had to receive his glory from another; Christ shares Lordship and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit;
- (j) Christ was made our High Priest and Apostle of our confession; this does not mean that a mere man was made our High Priest; it means that God the Word Incarnate as human being was made the High Priest;
- (k) It is not only Christ's divinity that is life-giving; his flesh, which is the flesh of God the Word is life-giving;
- (l) It is not the case that the human being alone suffered; it is Christ the God-Man who actually suffered and died and rose again, to become the first-born from the dead, in whom others receive eternal life.

Some modern theologians are anxious to dismiss Cyrillian Christology as merely Greek or Hellenistic philosophizing. What he has said in the twelve anathemata has nothing to do with Greek philosophy. It is simply the Gospel truth, which the Apostles taught and the Church has always believed.

What is Greek philosophy is the doctrine of "hypostatic union". This may be difficult for modern man, and so he is at liberty, since he claims to be so smart, to produce a better and more contemporary interpretation of the union of the divine and the human in Christ's person and nature. But no modern doctrine should fall into the heresy of Arius, Aetius, and Eunomius who denied that Christ was God; nor should they follow the heresy of Nestorius which held that divinity was only in conjunction with the humanity of Christ, who was a mere man to whom divinity was later added. If a contemporary philosophical interpretation can be provided by the new theologians without falling into the above heresies, that would be interesting to hear. But if some careless Christian simply says that he has no need for

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the divinity or pre-existence of Christ, the Church can only say to him that what he is teaching is not the faith that the Apostolic community has held since the beginning.

### Hypostatic Union

The word *hypostasis*, as far as Christian theology is concerned, was first used in the Trinitarian context. In secular Greek thought the word has had a plethora of different meanings: *hupo* = under, and *stasis* = standing. The compound word means that which stands firm underneath - the foundation, the substance, the actual existence, the real nature. Hypostasis is a biblical word, in fact. In Hebrews 1:3 the word is used to mean person (*charakter tes hypostaseos autou* - express image of his person). The modern Greek version of the New Testament translates the word 'hypostasis' as 'ousia' or being. In Hebrews 3:14 the word *hypostasis* has a different meaning; translators have great difficulty here. One can translate verse 13 & 14 thus :

"But appeal to each other each day, so long as it is called 'today', so that none of you becomes insensitive (hardened) by the misleading ability of sin. For we have become participants in Christ, if we hold on firmly to that initial *hypostasis* until the end."

Many people translate 'hypostasis' here as confidence. It could also mean the Person in whom Christians believed in the beginning (*Arche*). Scholars are reluctant to accept this interpretation for they have a preconception that the discussion about *hypostasis* and our participation in the hypostasis of Christ starts only much later in Christian history. This is only a conjecture on the part of the scholarly community for which there is no scientific basis.

In Hebrews 11:1 we are told that faith is the "hypostasis of the hoped for" (*elpizomenôn hypostasis*), where it could mean substance, reality, assurance, basis, foundation. St. Paul used the word in 2 Cor. 9:4 and 11:17 to mean selfassurance, but the modern Greek version translates *en téi hypostasei taute tés kauchéséos* (9:4) as *anaphōrikos pros to zétéma touto tés kauchéséos mas* (in relation to the object of my boasting). In 11:17 where the RSV again translates *hypostasis* as 'confidence', the modern Greek uses *thema* or theme. That seems the real meaning of hypostasis i.e. 'the underlying substance or reality'.

What is the underlying substance or reality in Christ? That is one way of putting the Christological question. A philosophical answer to that question was provided only in the 5th and 6th centuries, mainly by Severus of Antioch (ca 465-538). The West has developed a peculiar kind of myth about Severus being a Monophysite, while it was he who laid the genuine foundations for the accepted Christology of the Christian Church.

The formula of Chalcedon only repeated some phrases from earlier formulations of Cyril, Leo of Rome and others. The philosophical problem was sorted out by Severus, whose writings though originally in Greek, are preserved mainly in Syriac. Chalcedon did not define *hypostasis* (person) or *physis* (nature). It was not the task of a council to do so in any case. Chalcedon did not solve any theological issue but served only to split the church in two, the Asian-African majority being against Chalcedon at the time.

Severus has been studied by an Asian theologian Dr. V.C. Samuel:<sup>15</sup> Severus writes :

"God the word is one hypostasis. He united to Himself hypostatically one particular flesh which was endowed with a rational and intelligent soul, and which was assumed by Mary Theotokos .... The (human) child, for instance, was not formed by itself, as heretics teach. But God the Word... from the very beginning, namely from the first moment when the flesh animated with soul and mind was formed in the womb, was united with it. Therefore, there was no time gap between the coming into being of the flesh and its union with God the Word.... Since the one Christ is one nature and hypostasis of God the Word incarnate from Godhead and manhood, it necessarily follows that the same is known at once as consubstantial with us as to manhood. The same is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is not, therefore, two sons, but is one and the same son:."<sup>16</sup>

The point is that the Word of God is the second hypostasis or Person in the Triune God. It is this hypostasis that personalised humanity in Christ. Christ's humanity does not exist independently of the hypostasis of the Son of God. The attempt to take that humanity apart, which characterises much Western christology is a repudiation of the faith of the church. Whether theologians want to acknowledge the deity and pre-existence of Christ,

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whether they find Christ's divinity useful or not, is irrelevant. What matters is that the faith of the Church is that the Word of God is the one hypostasis in whom the divine and the human have become inseparably united. If anyone seeks to separate that humanity from that deity, he acts contrary to the faith of the church.

For those who regard the church as a voluntary organisation which one joins, and then chooses whatever view one wants to hold about Christ, such christology may seem useful, relevant or attractive. But that is irrelevant for one who is incorporated into the one Body of Christ. There in that Body, there is one understanding of Christ: He is the Word of God who has become Man. It is the hypostasis of the Word, of the same nature as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, who has now made personal (hypostatic) the new humanity of Jesus Christ. This is what is meant by hypostatic union, the inseparable union of God and Man in the one hypostasis and physis of the Word of God Incarnate.

### Conclusion

There is always room in the church for fresh understanding and fresh appropriation of the meaning of the Christ into whom we have been incorporated. That faith can be expressed in new philosophical terms, if there is a philosophy adequate for that task. At the moment no such philosophy exists, as far as the present writer, who has delved extensively into philosophy both Western and Eastern, knows. What comes out as new versions of christology are largely rehashes of the old heresies of Gnosticism, Arianism and Nestorianism.

The Christology of the Eastern Fathers does have an enduring quality and can be made extremely relevant to current issues and questions. How that can be done will require full length treatment in another paper.

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1. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 1981 (original 1979) 214 pp
  2. *Ibid.* p. 181
  3. *Ibid.* p. 177
  4. *Gospel of Thomas* 45:30-33. - Nag Hammadi Library (New York, 1977) 126
  5. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Smyrnaeans* 8 and 9
  6. Ignatius, *Ep: ad. Ephes* 7:2
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7. Athanasius: *Contra Arianum* 2:2  
Eng.Tr. *Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, Vol.VIII, Oxford, 1842, pp 95-96
  8. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology*, Original Dutch, 1974, E.T. Crossroad, New York, 1981 p. 587
  9. H. Braun, *Jesus*, Berlin, 1969 P. Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, New York, 1963  
-do- *Theological Explorations*, New York, 1963
  10. A. Hulsbosch' Jezus Christus, gekend als mens, beleden als Zoon Gods' in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 6 (1966) Nijmegen - Bruges pp 255-256, cited by Schillebeeckx *op.cit* (see Note 8) p. 597
  11. Athanasius, III Discourse against the Arians, paras 31-32  

"The Person who was God from everlasting, the sanctifier of those to whom He came, and the great Agent of all His Father's Counsels, was made man for our sakes.... He, although He was God, had His proper human body, formed and organized exactly as ours, and made for our sakes and Salvation. And on account of this, the properties of human nature are said to be his, because He existed in that nature, and He hungered, thirsted, suffered, laboured, and was perfectly sensible of these infirmities of which our flesh is capable. On the other hand, these powers and operations, which were peculiar to Him as Divine, such as raising the dead to life, restoring sight to the blind, and giving health to the sick, are ascribed to Him, because He did them by the instrumentality of His own Body..... It was on this account, that when our Lord's flesh or human nature suffered, it was not separated from the Divine nature and therefore, the Word of God is rightly said to have suffered..... Thus the same person, who performed such mighty works, and effected our redemption and sanctification, is said to be judged and condemned, to be scourged, to thirst, to be nailed to a cross, to die, in short, to labour under as many bodily pains and infirmities, as if He was another man..... We do not pray to a mere man or a creature, but to the genuine Son of God, of the very substance of His Father, who is not at all the less our Lord and God and Saviour, by becoming our fellow creature and brother in the flesh."

(E.T. *The Orations of S.Athanasius Against the Arians*, *The Ancient & Modern Library of Theological Literature*, London, no date, pp. 216-218
  12. *Against Nestorius* BK 1:3, Eng.Tr. *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, Oxford, James Parker & Co., 1881, pp 16 & 17
  13. *That Christ is one*, *The dispute with Hermas* *op.cit.* p. 264
  14. *Nestorius' Letter to the Monks*, cited by *op.cit.* preface. pp xxi - xxii
  15. V.C. Samuel
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16. Severus, *Contra Grammaticum*, C.S.C.O. Vol. 111, 101, and 93 pp 148, 184 & 227  
Cited by V.C. Samuel "The understanding of the Christological Definitions" in *Wort  
und Wahrheit* (Report of the Second Ecumenical Consultation between theologians  
of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, Sept. 1973)  
- Vienna, 1974, pp 22-23
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# The Church As the Pleroma of Christ

## An Eastern Orthodox perspective on the Church

### A. God became flesh : The eternal in the historical (John I 1-18)

If there is one thing that distinguishes the Christian faith from other religions, it is this bold three-word sentence : 'God became Flesh'; *Ho Logos sarx egeneto* (Jn. 1:14). This is the major stumbling-block in our faith for Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Secularists alike.

But what difference does it make? Did our Lord become incarnate, only so that a new gimmick for salvation becomes available to man? As some of our Christian friends say—'Believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, and you will be a saved man from that point.' If this is what the Incarnation means, namely that God became Man in order that He may become a substitute for men and bear their punishment once for all, then in the first place the New Testament is more comprehensive than that.

Secondly the New Testament speaks of a judgement which begins at the household of God ( I Peter 4:17). If the punishment has already been borne by Him on the cross, why should we be punished again?

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- These two studies are part of a series of Bible Studies the author gave in 1964 at a Consultation in Nyborg Strand, Denmark. (Reprinted from *Religion and Society*, Vol. XVI, No.2, 1969)
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There are others who say that what the Incarnation makes possible is a new self-understanding. This is true so far as it goes, but the Christian understanding of oneself must include a conception of how much farther than that we have to go.

Those of us who stand between the Conservative-Evangelical and the Bultmannian-Moltmannian positions speak of the Incarnation as the 'decisive act of God in History' so that Christ becomes the Centre and the Lord of History. All that is wonderful, but the impression it gives to most non-Christians is that of a tribal war-god. 'Our God is the Lord of all Gods, so you better surrender to our God, and forsake your false gods' we say to the people of the world. Sensitive Asians and Africans detect in this a spiritual kind of colonialism, in which the tribal God of the West is asserting himself, assisted of course by the technological and scientific superiority of the West, over the gods of Asia and Africa. And their initial and continuing response is to resist such surrender and to consider anyone who surrenders as a betrayer of the Asian or African heritage.

'Jesus Christ is Lord' was a meaningful and quickening slogan in Nero's Rome or Hitler's Germany, but it is hardly so meaningful in Nehru's India or Nyerere's Tanganyika, since we are not asked to say the Nehru is Lord or that Julius is Lord. We are in full sympathy with the tremendous significance of that theology which arose in the *Bekennniskirche* and affirmed passionately that Jesus Christ is Lord of both the Church and the World. In the context also of a theology of a Church-and-State dualism this affirmation is meaningful and perhaps necessary. But in most of the world this message that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' does not speak to the needs of ordinary men, nor does it sound particularly relevant to many ordinary Christians in Asia and Africa. 'The Lordship of Christ over the Church and the World' is not an adequate framework in which the Gospel can be meaningfully presented to either Christians or non-Christians in Asia and Africa today.

We need a fresh understanding of the Gospel, and this understanding, if you will forgive my boldness, can hardly be provided by European or Western theology which is at present moulded by the recent history of the Protestant West.

On the other hand, traditional Eastern Christianity which at one time was very meaningful to people has been unable to comprehend its own tradition adequately to have the self-confidence even to attempt a new and

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dynamic re-interpretation of the traditional faith.

The Logos, who was God and was face to face with God, is the one in whom the creation subsists. He, the Logos, is also the Creator of life, and the one who made Man to emerge in the stream of life. But He also gave light to men, the ability to see, to create.

The light is today in darkness. The darkness, which has no ultimate being, has even become aggressive against the Light, especially when the True Light (v.9) which is the source of all human light, became incarnate in the midst of darkness. The darkness has expressly rejected the Light, but some amidst the darkness have been rekindled; these are the Tekna Theou, the children of God, they who received the Light, and believed in His name. They have now been given exousia, authority, to become the sons of God. They are newborn, *Ek Theoe*, from God.

The coming of the Light then has a two-fold purpose; at least in the passage we are studying :-

First: that by believing in His name, some may receive authority to become Children of God.

Second: that God's true glory, which is grace and truth, (v. 14, 17) has now been manifested to us (v.14) through this unique Son (v. 14, 18).

Believing in His name is a phrase which can be easily misconstrued because of the differences of nuance of the words 'believe' and 'name' in the Hebraic tradition out of which our Lord and the disciples spoke, and the modern functional languages in which we communicate today.

Most New Testament scholars make the distinction between 'believing in' and 'believing that'. The first is usually interpreted as 'surrender to an utter dependence on Christ', while the second is 'acceptance of the Christian message' (Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol.II, Eng.Tr.p.70). The one would appear to be centrally located in the will, while the second has the 'mind' as its location, though both involve the whole person. But faith involves infinitely more than this. The Hebrew verb '*aman*' (from which comes the word '*Amen*') means fundamentally a quality of 'unfettered abiding'. Freedom from fear, anxiety and restlessness can come only when life is no longer subject to fear of exposure or extinction. The world lies oriented towards disintegration and death. Nothing in the world abides. Time leads all things to non-being. And so long as the foundations of our being are in the world, we cannot escape being subject to the fear of non-

being. So also, so long as our life is in darkness, we cannot escape from the fear of light or exposal.

This is why Truth and Grace are the two things which came in Jesus Christ (v.17). Truth is abiding reality. The world is not truth. Jesus Christ is Truth. To be plucked out of the world (Jn. 17:14) is to be crucified to the world with Christ, a deeply painful expression which can be described only as death, for it involves the complete loss of the being that we have in the world, however false and unabiding that life may be. To believe in His name, is to abide in His person; *name* in Hebrew denotes *person*. Thus then to believe in Jesus Christ is ontological change experienced by a human being—namely that his foundation in the world is destroyed and he is given a new basis for his life—the name or person of Jesus Christ the Incarnate Logos.

But Grace is also necessary for a human being in order that one may be willing to give up the darkness and come into the light. The experience of Grace is also a painful one—for in coming out of the darkness of life, our fear of exposal comes to a climax. We are actually exposed, as we are, without the covering of the darkness of our commonly accepted norms of life. But we can have the boldness to come out into the light, only because that Light, though exposing, is also an accepting, forgiving grace.

To believe in His name thus is to live in His Grace and Truth, having experienced the painful denudation of our false being and the actual mortification of that false being. To believe in Christ is more than acceptance of the Christian message or surrender to Him. Both are necessary; but to believe is also a continuing experience of daily death to oneself, daily experience of the revealing Light, daily re-establishment in the Person of Christ, daily experience of the Father's accepting and forgiving Grace.

Those who live in this daily experience of death and Resurrection receive authority (*exousia*) to become children of God.

To be a child of God involves more than being an object of His love. What it means is seen clearly in the One who is acknowledged by the Father Himself in the words 'This is my beloved Son'. The Son follows the Father: 'My Father worketh hitherto and I work' (Jn. 5:17). The Father shows the Son all that He himself is doing (Jn.5:20). Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (Jn.5:19).

To be the Son of God is then to share in the work of the Father. He, Christ, is the true, the unique, the *monogenes* Son. We, by being

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incorporated into His person, also receive authority to fulfil the filial functions. The Son's words and works were with authority, such that men marvelled. Our words and works in this world must also have this authority. Our labour of service in the world must constantly be checked to see if it has this quality of 'authority'.

In our non-authoritarian democratic world, authority has often a pejorative sense. But the authority of the Son of God was not based on compulsive military or economic might as He himself told Pilate ("If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight." Jn. 18:36). It was a self-authenticating authority of grace and truth. This is the quality which we must bring to our work of service in the world - free, forgiving acceptance of all peoples, coupled with complete openness, without hidden motives or fears, or desire to manipulate. This was God's glory which the Son manifested, and which we have received authority to manifest.

To sum up then the purpose of the Incarnation, of God becoming flesh, is this :-

1. That, within a perishing, dying world, there might be a locus for human beings to stand, an abiding ground for being, i.e. that human beings may be drawn from the falsehood of this world to the Truth of God and abide in it.
  2. That human beings may, by experiencing the forgiving and accepting Grace of God, have the courage to come out into the Light, and thereby to face themselves and each other in truth (*aletheia* = unconcealedness).
  3. That by being grounded in truth, that is in the Body of Christ the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen Lord, and by living in the light of unconcealed and open loving acceptance of God's Grace, we may receive the authority to become Children of God.
  4. That as Children of God with authority we may face the world around us with love and openness and thus remove the darkness of the world by bringing God's Truth and Grace into it.
  5. The permanent presence of the Eternal in the Historical through the Incarnate Body of Christ sanctifies the whole creation, and makes earthly life significant for eternity.
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## **B. The Body of Christ - Eternal and historical (Eph.1:3-2:10)**

The discussion on the nature of the Church is bound to be controversial in our setting. But there is no short-cut from our thinking about the Incarnation to the World of today, except through the Church. The Church is the continuing embodiment of the Incarnation in history, and therefore an understanding of the nature and function of the Church is determinative of our attitudes towards World Service, Inter-Church Aid, and Unity.

The nature of the Church is dependent upon its calling :

This calling is a three-fold one : To be sons and daughters in agape (v. 4-5), to be holy and blameless before Him (v. 4) and for the praise of his glorious grace (vv. 6, 12, 14).

The Beloved is the Only-begotten Son (v. 6) but we are called to share this Sonship with the Unique Son, the Incarnate Son of God who is also Son of Man now. This is our being, our new nature, our anthropology, this sharing in the Sonship of god which the Eternal Logos has from eternity and which He has now fulfilled as Son of Man in the Incarnation, and in which we share.

Our destiny is to be Saints and Sinless ones and to be face to face with the Father (*einai hemas hagious kai amomous katenopion autou*). This eschatological destiny of ours is not merely something in the future. It is experienced as a present reality in our gathering at the eternal altar of Calvary to be sanctified and cleansed and to offer ourselves in Sacrifice to God the Father in the Eucharist.

Our present function as well as our future existence is to be seen as the praise of His grace, or the visible manifestation of the tremendous and adorable love of God in the life of the Christian community in the world as it embodies and continues the life of Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant who lays down His life through the members of His body, for the life of the world.

Here, then, are the three constitutive elements of the Church:

- (a) Our calling in the Gospel and in Baptism to share in Sonship.
- (b) Our Eucharistic offering of ourselves to God the Father, through the eternal offering of the Unique Son on Calvary and our life face to face with the Father.
- (c) Our life in the world when we bear upon ourselves the suffering of this world, and pour out our life for the life of the world.

Now all these three elements presuppose intimate union with the Unique Son, in His body. Obedience to Jesus Christ would not make us Children of God; we would then be only servants of the Son. And we have no Sonship apart from the Sonship of the Beloved, the *Bachir*, the Elect. It is in union with Him that we share in the Sonship.

Neither can we come face to face with the Father in worship by simply obeying the Son. It is in union with Him that we have 'access with confidence' into the presence of the Father in the Eucharist. (Eph.3; 12, Heb.4:16, Heb. 10:19, I Jb. 3:21).

And finally we cannot serve the world and manifest the glory of God's grace in mere obedience to the Lord. It is in Union with His continuing ministry of suffering service to the world that we serve. 'In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for His body, which is the Church' (Col. 1:24) says the Apostle Paul. It is Christ in us who serves in suffering and thereby glorifies the Father in the world.

Gospel and Baptism, self-offering in the Eucharist, service in suffering, all three in union with Christ, not merely in obedience to Him, are the constituent elements of the Church.

'And He (the Father) has put the Universe (*ta panta*) under His (Christ's) feet, and has given Him as head over all for the Church, which is His body, the *pleroma* of Him who fills the Universe in every respect'. (Eph.1:22,23).

What does *pleroma* mean here? Abundant fullness is its most literal translation. We are told in St. John 1:16. 'From His *pleroma*, we have all received, grace upon grace.' But it can also mean an enriched fulfilment as for example when the Apostle Paul says: "Agape (love) is the *pleroma* of the Torah (the Law)' (Romans 13:10) translated often 'Love is the fulfilling of the law', *Pleroma* can also mean the whole contents of something as for example 'The Lord's is the earth, and its *pleroma*' (I Cor. 10:26), or 'until the *pleroma* of the Gentiles come in, a hardening has come upon part of Israel' (Rom. 11:25). But in none of these senses can the Church be the *pleroma* of Christ.

Its meaning in Ephesians, when understood, illuminates our total concept of what the Church is. Let us take first a non-controversial fourth meaning of the word *pleroma* as it occurs in Matt. 9:16 (Mark 2:21). "And no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for otherwise, the

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*pleroma* tears away from it, the new from the old", the English word for *pleroma* here is 'patch': The meaning here is 'that which fills the gap or supplies what is lacking'. It can be applied, for example to a glass that is three-quarters full. The one quarter necessary to fill up the glass would be the *pleroma* of the three-quarters full glass. The word *pleroma* was used by the Gnostics to denote the whole realm of intermediary beings who filled the gap between God and the Universe (*ta panta*).

The Church is thus the *pleroma* of Christ, in the sense that the 'whole Christ' is the Incarnate Lord with His body, the ecclesia. The ecclesia fills out the Person of the Incarnate Lord. Christ referred to His own body as 'My Father's house' (see the context of Jn. 2:16 and 21) and this is 'my Father's house' in which 'there are many mansions' (Jn. 14:2). This Body of Christ is the body which is filled up quantitatively by the addition of believers and qualitatively by growth in agape (Eph. 4:16). The Church is the *oikos theou* (I Tim. 3:15).

The Church is the *pleroma* of Christ in a second way.

The purpose of the Incarnation was to plant within the realm of perishing history, the imperishable 'my Father's house', where God in His glorious grace is manifested. The physical body of Christ was the place where the Holy Spirit abode, and God manifested Himself in His house, the Incarnate flesh of Jesus Christ (especially at the Baptism and the Transfiguration).

After the Resurrection and Pentecost, the House of God is the abode of the Holy Trinity on earth, in History. It is Christ's body, the Church, in which Christians live. But as it is Christ's body, Christ lives in it. We know that it was constituted by the Holy Spirit as He came on the day of Pentecost and abode on the disciples. It is 'my Father's house' as we have already seen. Thus the Christ is the abiding and self-manifesting place of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Ephesians 3:14-19 makes this point clearly, that as the Spirit strengthens and empowers the ecclesia and Christ dwells in us through faith, all the Saints together, rooted and grounded in love, become filled with the whole *pleroma* of God, the abundant fullness of His rich and glorious grace. The Church, on heaven and on earth, is Christ's body, that which fills out and completes His person.

The Church is the *pleroma* of Christ in a third way, which is not clearly spelt out in the passage for our study today. The ecclesia fills the gap

between God and the World. Christ reconciled the World to God the Father, having overthrown all the authorities and powers and dominations that hold away over it in revolt against God.

Colossians 1 : 9 and 2:9 speak of Christ as the *Pleroma*, as He who fills the gap between God and the world, by filling the world with Himself ( see also Eph. 4:10). But so are the Christians with all believers, to 'comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth' and in that process become fully united with Christ and be filled with the pleroma of God. (Eph. 3: 17-19).

This may offend my anti-metaphysical Western brethren, but clearly the work of the Church is not to be limited to the historical world in our time. The whole historical world is included in the scope of the Church's ministry, but it extends much farther in all directions. Height and depth (*Hypos* and *Bythos*) were definitely astrological terms current in St. Paul's day, and length and breadth probably refers to the oikoumene, the whole inhabited earth. St. Paul labours the point further in Ephesians. He has already said, in 3:10 'that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenlies'. And later on, in 4:9, 10 'In saying, "He ascended", what does it mean but that had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill the total Universe.'

The third sense in which the Church is the *Pleroma* of Christ is that, in union with Christ, (rooted and grounded in Christ's love), we fill the whole universe, visible, as well as invisible. Thereby we become in Christ that which fills the gap between God and His creation, not by standing in the gap but by permeating the historical as well as the unseen world with our ecclesial presence.

It needs to be made clear that when I, as an Eastern Christian, speak of the Church, I am not thinking of any one particular Church, here in the historical world, but of the total reality of the Church, the one Body of Christ which comprehends all the Saints with Christ dwelling in them.

Let me summarise :

- (a) The nature of the Church is dependent on its vocation, (i) to be Sons of God through the Gospel and through baptism, (ii) to be sanctified and cleansed and to offer ourselves to the Father in the Eucharist and (iii) to manifest concretely in the

life of the Christian Community the tremendous Grace and Truth of God in Christ.

- (b) The Church fulfills her vocation not merely by obeying her Lord, but by being in union with Him. The Church is not a mere function of Mission, to be cast away when the Mission has been fulfilled. It is the 'House of God' where the Holy Trinity abides, the foundation being Jesus Christ the Incarnate Lord.
- (c) The Church is the *pleroma* of Christ in the sense that (i) the 'whole Christ is Christ with His body, the Church, (ii) it is filled by the fullness of God the Holy Trinity and (iii) it fills the universe, seen and unseen, with its presence.
- (d) Its ministry is not limited to the visible world of today, but extends to the 'heavenlies' where the defeated powers are yet to be completely thrown out (or redeemed?). And our work in the world should not therefore be evaluated merely in terms of its immediate results, as Christ's life can not be measured in terms of its immediate consequences.

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## Salvation

### The meanings of a biblical word

'Gentlemen, what should I do, in order that I may be saved?' (Acts 16:30)

That question was put two thousand years ago by the Philippian jailor to the Apostle Paul and his co-prisoner Silas. And the question is still important, though we may not be quite clear about the meaning of the word 'saved'.

What could the Philippian jailor have meant by his question? He had locked the prison and gone to sleep. Some of his prisoners, who were Christians, were having a great, joyous, almost boisterous hymn-sing in the hail. The rest of the prisoners were listening, not with a sense of annoyance, but perhaps with fascination at the cause of such joy in such dismal circumstances. Paul and Silas were not singing but praying.

And suddenly the earth quaked; the foundations of the jail-house shook; the prison doors were flung upon and the chains fell from the prisoners. It was a dark midnight. The jailor awoke and all he could see was that the prison doors were open. He thought his prisoners had escaped. Tomorrow he would have to pay for this with his life and perhaps the life of his family. He drew the sword to take his own life. Paul and Silas stopped

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● Bible study prepared for the International Missionary Council, Mexico.

him, saying that none of the prisoners had escaped, and that he need not worry.

So when he asked them : 'Gentlemen, what should I do to be saved?', he was not thinking about impending punishment from his Roman superiors. But then what was he thinking? Salvation in the after-life from hell and damnation? That meaning is at least open to question for that particular occasion. And so the reply of Paul and Silas: 'Put your trust upon the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, with your whole family as well', cannot be understood in any simplistic sense of 'eternal life' ; or of deliverance from the fires of hell in after-life. We need to do a small measure of linguistic investigation to set the word 'saved' in its historical and cultural context.

We shall examine this context in three stages — the Old Testament, the inter-testamental period, and the fuller spectrum of meaning in the New Testament.

### I. THE OLD TESTAMENT

In examining the Old Testament use of the word, we need to look at

- (a) its origin in the context of war;
- (b) its relation to social or corporate righteousness; and
- (c) its cultic-eschatological enrichment.

#### (a) The Notion of Salvation in the Context of War

In the Old Testament, the word *yash'a* (to save) and its derivatives *yeshu'ah* *yasha'* and *teshu'ah* (salvation, security, safety, ease) had the basic meaning of deliverance from the enemy. The etymology of the word bears out this meaning. The root means to bring into a wide open space. When the enemy encircles a fortified city and cuts off its supply lines, the city is in danger of death. When the enemy is driven away, the people of the city are able to go out and come in, free from restriction or encirclement. It can also mean deliverance from a pursuing enemy who is also the oppressor as in the case of Israel fleeing from Egypt. In Exodus 14:13, when fleeing Israel caught sight of the pursuing armies of the Pharaoh and began to lose nerve, Moses said to the people :

Fear not, stand firm  
You shall see the Salvation of Yahweh (*Yeshuath-yahweh*)  
Which he will do for you today

For the Egyptians whom you see now  
You shall never see again.

And when the waters of the Red Sea had drowned out the pursuing enemy, the narrator says :

Thus Yahweh saved Israel that day  
From the hand of the Egyptians<sup>1</sup>

It is because of this act of Yahweh that Moses and people could sing:

I will sing to yahweh  
For his triumph is great  
The horse and the chariot  
He has thrown into the sea  
My strength and song is Yahweh  
He has become to me Salvation<sup>2</sup>

In several passages of the Revised Standard Version of the English Bible, the word *yesu'ah* or *teshu'ah* is translated 'victory'.<sup>3</sup> It is always the victory of God. That is why in several other instances the RSV translates the same word as 'deliverance'.<sup>4</sup> Many of the difficult metaphors connected with salvation can also be understood in this context of war and deliverance in battle, eg. the tower of salvation (II Sam. 22:51), a helmet of salvation (Isa. 59:17), the horses and chariots of salvation (He.b. 3:8), the shield of salvation (II Sam. 22:36; Ps. 18:35), the horn or trumpet of salvation (II Sam. 22-3; Ps. 18:2) and so on.

Salvation means more than just victory in battle, however. It also provides continuing security against the enemy. This seems to be the meaning of the expressions 'walls of salvation' and 'rock of salvation'.

In that day will be sung  
This song in the land of Judah  
We have a strong city.  
He establishes salvation,  
As walls and bulwarks.  
Open wide the gates  
Let the righteous people enter  
who keep faithfulness<sup>5</sup>

or

Violence shall no more be heard in your land

Devastation or Destruction without your borders  
 You shall call your walls Salvation  
 And your gates praise<sup>6</sup>

'Rock of Salvation' can be understood only in the context of rock, fortress, or mountain fastnesses. In several of the psalms as well as elsewhere, rock and fortress are synonymous<sup>7</sup> This image conceives of salvation as security in an impregnable fortress. Our own contemporary prejudices against the Ghetto Church and our preferences for the open future should not blind us to the fact that in a war-torn Palestine, constantly battling against Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Media and many other great powers, the notion of a secure abiding place was a richly meaningful concept for the Hebrews.

Thus, in the context of war the word 'salvation' meant to the early Hebrew deliverance from the oppressor and the enemy, victory in battle over the enemy, and security from the attacks of the enemy.

#### **(b) Salvation and Corporate Righteousness**

Many poetic passages of the Old Testament can be understood only in the context of what is known as "Hebrew parallelism". Here the same idea is expressed in two slightly different ways in two lines. For example :

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent  
 For Jerusalem's sake I will not rest (Isa. 62: 1)

The words 'salvation' and 'righteousness' are connected by this phenomenon of Hebrew parallelism in several instances, such as :

He has clothed me with the garments of salvation  
 He has covered me with the robes of righteousness (Isa. 61:10);

or

For his own sake he has wrought salvation  
 By his right hand and his holy arm  
 Yahweh has made known his salvation  
 He has revealed among the nations his righteousness (Ps.98:2);

or

Mine eyes fail, watching for Thy Salvation  
 For the fulfilment of Thy promised righteousness (Ps. 119: 123).

In fact, the Psalms and the prophecies of Isaiah associate salvation and social righteousness in an unmistakable togetherness. The God who

brings salvation is a God who both creates and demands social righteousness and corporate justice:

Give heed to me, my people  
Listen to me, O my nation  
A teaching will go forth from me  
My justice for a light of the nations  
Fast approaches my righteousness  
Gone forth is my salvation  
Mine arm shall rule the peoples  
For me the lands by the sea wait  
For mine arm they wait in hope<sup>8</sup>

Or again:

Yahweh is my strength and my song  
For he has become my salvation  
Hark, glad songs of salvation  
In the tents of the righteous<sup>9</sup>

Salvation comes especially to the poor and the oppressed, bringing them deliverance from the rich and the powerful who oppress and exploit them. Psalm 37 puts it thus :

The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows  
To oppress the poor and the needy  
To slay those whose ways are straight...  
The salvation of the righteous is from Yahweh  
He is their refuge in the time of trouble  
The Lord helps them and delivers them  
He delivers them from the wicked and saves them  
Because they take refuge in him<sup>10</sup>

In other words God's salvation means deliverance not only from the enemy without the walls, but also from the enemy within, from the oppressor and the exploiter, from all those who become the enemy of the poor and the weak, of the needy and the powerless. This is why God's salvation has always to result in a just society — in social righteousness. Psalm 72 prays that God may grant his justice to the King :

May he rule the people in righteousness  
And Thy poor ones in justice



May the mountains bring forth welfare (*shalom*)

for Thy people

And the hills in righteousness  
 May he bring justice to the poor of the people  
 And save the sons of the needy  
 Crushing the oppressor....  
 For the King delivers and saves the poor  
 The needy and the destitute of help  
 He has compassion for the weak and the needy  
 He saves the souls of the poor  
 He redeems their life from violence and oppression  
 Precious is the blood of the poor in his sight<sup>11</sup>

The King, theoretically at least, personifies the saving act of God in the midst of the people, delivering them from external enemies as well as freeing the poor and the needy from violence and oppression of the rich within the people. The task of the Shepherd-King in Israel is always conceived to be that of defence of the sheep against the wolves (the external enemy as well as the internal — the wolves in sheep's clothing) and that of promoting welfare and justice within society. Salvation in this wider sense is today the task of governments much more than of the Church.

There is, however, a more universal dimension to this social righteousness, than can be conceived in terms of national defence and national welfare. This dimension occurs more clearly in the book of Isaiah, particularly in Chapter 25: 1-9):

O Yahweh, Thou art my God.  
 I exalt thee; I praise Thy name  
 Thine exploits are marvellous  
 Thy plans deep, faithful and true.  
 The city Thou hast made a heap of rubble  
 The fortified city a mere ruin  
 The foreigner's palace is wiped out  
 Never ever will it be rebuilt.  
 Therefore shall the strong people glorify Thee  
 The cities of warlike nations shall fear Thee  
 For Thou hast been a fortress for the poor  
 A protecting stronghold for the needy in his distress

A shelter from the storm, a shade in the desert heat  
 For the blast of the ruthless is like a moving wall of storm  
 Like a hot wind in the dry desert  
 Thou dost silence the roar of the foreigners  
 By the shade of a cloud Thou stoppest the heat  
 The triumph song of the ruthless is now silenced  
 And on this mountain, Yahweh Tsebaoth  
 Prepares for all nations a great feast  
 A feast of fat meat and marrow,  
 of wine on the lees well refined  
 And on this mountain he draws away the shroud  
 from the face of the peoples  
 The veil of mourning spread over all nations  
 Death he swallows up for ever  
 And tears from all faces Adonai Yahweh wipes away.  
 The reproach of his people he removes from all the earth  
 That is the Word of the Lord Yahweh.  
 On that day they will say  
 Behold, this is our God  
 For him we have been waiting  
 That he may save us.  
 This is the Lord Yahweh  
 for him we have been waiting  
 Let us exult, let us rejoice  
 In his salvation.

Salvation thus comes to mean both the end of the enemy and the oppressor, both external and internal, and the establishment of *shalom*—a society of peace and joy, without oppression and exploitation, with plenty of food and drink for all—nourishment for the body as for the mind and spirit.

This universal, corporate notion of salvation, which includes political peace and the people's welfare, is the framework within which we can see the notion of personal salvation, especially in Job and in the Psalms. When the psalmist speaks of his personal salvation from his enemy and oppressor, he is often speaking as the King of Israel, and the enemies are the enemies of the State, though they are internal enemies within the people of Israel. In other non-Davidic psalms, as well as in some of those that are

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possibly from David, one finds a definitely personal notion of salvation as deliverance from the enemy, from death and destruction. But these passages are best understood in their context as the hymns of Israel.

### (c) The Cultic-eschatological Context

The longing for salvation came to occupy a central place in the worship of Israel. It is useful to note that the largest number of occurrences of the words 'saved' and 'salvation' are in the Psalms and in the other messianic prophetic passages which were conceivably recited and transmitted in a cultic context — e.g., the prophecies grouped under the names of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Several expressions involving the use of the word 'save' came to be cultic commonplaces like our own 'Lord, have mercy'. Three of these are :

- (a) *Hoshi'eni* ('Save me', Ps. 3:7; 54: 1;7: 1;6:4 etc.)  
or *Hoshi'ah-na* ('Save, please', Ps. 118:25);
- (b) *Hoshi'ah-eth-amekah* ('Save thy people', Ps. 28:9)  
or *Hoshi'enu-Yahweh-elohenu* ('Save us, Yahweh our God', Ps. 106:47, See also Jer. 2:27);
- (c) *Yahweh Hoshi'ah ha-melek*  
(Yahweh, save the King', Ps. 20:9).

The King's prayer for his own being saved, the prayer for the salvation of the people, and the peoples prayer for the salvation of the king are all of one piece.

These cultic cries of salvation soon came to have a messianic-expectant connotation. We see this in the ending of several of the psalms :

Salvation belongs to Yahweh  
Blessings upon thy people (Ps.3);  
O, that the Salvation of Israel would come out of Zion  
In God's restoring the fortunes of his people.  
Then Jacob shall rejoice, Israel shall be glad (Ps. 14);  
Mighty Salvation to his King  
Showing steadfast love to His Messiah  
To David and his descendants for ever (Ps. 18);  
Yahweh save the King  
Heed us when we call (Ps. 20);

Save Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance  
Be thou their shepherd, bear them up for ever (Ps. 28)

The endings of many of the other psalms, whether they use the word save or not, clearly reflect the expectation of the messianic age. The long passage from Isaiah 25 quoted above seems plainly messianic. In the second part of the book of Isaiah, especially in Chapter 51 and ff., the notion of salvation takes on a definitely messianic sense.

In Chapter 56 the prophecy enjoins upon the faithful the need to watch for the salvation to come, with expectant hope and the practice of righteousness. This is addressed not only to the people of Israel but also to the foreigners and slaves associated with them. But the very preparation for the coming of the age of salvation involves righteousness - preparatory righteousness it may best be called. It is actually a discipline or righteousness by which we prepare ourselves for participating in God's salvation :

Is not this the fast that I choose  
To loose the bonds of wickedness  
To undo the thongs of the yoke  
To let the oppressed go free  
And to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
And bring the homeless poor into your house  
When you see the naked, to clothe him  
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?  
Then shall light break forth like the dawn for you  
And healing shall fast spring up for you (Isa. 58:6-8).

The social righteousness in the Old Testament is expectant messianic, preparatory for the coming salvation. Social injustice prevents us from participation in the coming salvation.<sup>12</sup>

## II. THE INTER-TESTAMENTAL PERIOD

The three basic elements of the Old Testament notion of salvation are carried over into the inter-testament period. They pervade the apocalyptic literature and the Qumran documents. The Qumran communities are best understood as committed groups who practised corporate preparatory righteousness, in a cultic-messianic context, preparing for a war in which the forces of evil would triumph first, but then God would give victory to the

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faithful at the end, after a long period of testing and tribulation.

The documents of the Qumran Community bear clear witness to the fact that a war with evil was inevitable before the final denouement, when evil would be vanquished and good would triumph.

The basic notion is of a corporate preparation of the community, and the corporate salvation of a righteous remnant. But the hymns bear ample testimony to the personal feeling of gratitude that each individual is privileged to be a member of the holy community which has communion with the community of the 'holy ones' in heaven.

The War Scroll of the Qumran community puts it thus :

The sons of light shall have luck three times in discomfiting the force of wickedness, but three times the hosts of Belial shall brace themselves to turn back the tide. At this the squadrons of the infantry shall become faint-hearted, but the power of God shall strengthen their hearts, and on the seventh occasion the great hand of God shall finally subdue (the army of Belial).<sup>13</sup>

The same War scroll also gives the titles for the standards to be borne by the armies of Israel. The first is the great standard which walks before the whole army. When going out to battle, the signs are:

1. Community of God
2. Camps of God
3. Tribes of God
4. Families of God
5. Squadrons of God
6. Assembly of God
7. Recruits of God
8. Armies of God

When they draw near to the battle the front standards change thus:

1. War of God
2. Vengeance of God
3. Feud of God
4. Requital of God
5. Strength of God
6. Recompense of God
7. Might of God

When they return in triumph from the final battle, the front banner will be

1. Salvation of God
- to be followed by
2. Triumph of God
3. Help of God
4. Support of God
5. Praise of God
6. Thanksgiving of God
7. Acclaim of God
- and the final banner
8. Shalom of God.<sup>14</sup>

A less militant and more mystical version of the last day appears in that brief document from the Dead Sea which speaks about the Coming Doom:

What is going to happen is, as it were, that all iniquity is  
going to be shut  
up in the womb and prevented from coming to birth.  
Wrong is going to depart  
before right, as darkness departs before light.  
As smoke disappears and is no more,  
so will wrong disappear for ever.  
But right will be revealed like the sun.  
The world will rest on a sound foundation.....  
The world will be filled with knowledge,  
and ignorance exist no more.  
The thing is certain to come.

The idea of rewards for faithfulness and righteousness to be given to individuals runs through the Qumran literature. Though the corporate notion of salvation dominates the vision of the last judgement, there is an individual reckoning as well:

Moreover because I know that Thou dost keep a record of  
every righteous spirit therefore have I chosen to keep my  
hands unstained according to Thy will:

And the soul of Thy servant has abhorred  
all unrighteous deeds,

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Nevertheless I know  
 that no man can be righteous  
 without Thy help  
 wherefore I entreat Thee  
 through the spirit which Thou hast put (within me)  
 to bring into completion  
 the mercies Thou hast shown unto Thy servant,  
 cleansing him with Thy holy spirit,  
 drawing him to Thee in Thy good pleasure,  
 Restore him in Thine abundant loving kindness  
 granting to him that place of favour  
 which Thou has chosen for them that love Thee<sup>15</sup>

The Day of the Lord, which is also the Day of Salvation, cannot come except through a titanic struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of God. The notion of personal salvation is not yet in the foreground, but is already implied in the distinction between the Sons of light and the sons of darkness.

The Qumran documents regard man himself as neither good nor evil, but as a neutral field for either good or evil. In proportion as foreign domination became more oppressive in Israel, there grew up a class of collaborators with the oppressive foreign power. These were the Sadducees, the tax and toll collectors, and the quisling Jews who exercised oppressive Graeco-Roman authority over the Jewish people. When the Day of Salvation comes, it must result in the condemnation and destruction of the oppressive foreigner and of the collaborating Jew. It so happened that the collaborating Jew was also associated with the unrighteous, dishonest and criminally inclined among ordinary Jews who were neither collaborators nor resisters. Israel itself was thus in the Apocalyptic literature as well as in the Qumran documents divided into a majority of sons of darkness and a select minority of the sons of light who alone were to be saved, though through fire. Daniel and the three youths in the fiery furnace are symbols of this testing and final salvation.

The personal questions that became important during this period are: (1) Will I be among the sons of light or the sons of darkness? (2) Will I be able to endure tribulation to the very end, even unto death? and (3) What should I do in order to be able to enter the Coming Kingdom of the Messiah?

It is clear that if endurance unto death is to be rewarded, there has to

be an after-life. Otherwise the most faithful sons of light cannot enter into the kingdom. The sons of light have therefore to overcome death itself and live eternally in the presence of God. The words of Isaiah that death itself would be swallowed up by God, now come to the forefront of Apocalyptic, expectant, messianic thinking.

### **The Day of the Lord and the Wrath of God**

During the period between the two testaments, the expectation of the Lord's coming becomes focused on the Day of the Lord, when He comes to judge the earth. This had already been foreseen by Isaiah:

For Yahweh Tsebaoth has a day  
Against all the proud and lofty  
Against all the high and mighty....<sup>16</sup>

Behold the Day of Yahweh comes  
Cruel, with wrath and fierce anger  
To make the earth a devastation  
And to destroy its sinners from it<sup>17</sup>

The Day of the Lord, which is the Day of Salvation, is thus also the day of God's wrath. Amos had put the Day of the Lord starkly as the day of darkness rather than of light<sup>18</sup> as had Joel<sup>19</sup> though both had also conceived that day as the Day of Salvation for the remnant.<sup>20</sup> The prophecies of Zechariah were more precise:

In the whole land, says Yahweh  
Two thirds shall be cut off and perish  
And one third shall be left alive  
And I will put this third into the fire  
And refine them as one refines silver  
And test them as gold is tested.  
They will call on my name  
And I will answer them  
I will say: They are my people  
And they will say: Yahweh is my God.<sup>21</sup>

Salvation thus came to mean in the time of our Lord deliverance from the wrath of God, and belonging to the remnant that will enter the Kingdom, but only through the fire of persecution and tribulation. The remnant to be saved is the community that practises preparatory righteousness and awaits for the Day of the Lord, in expectant worship of Yahweh, with hope



and compassion for the poor. These elements characterized the communities of the Dead Sea Coast, as well as many other communities in the time of our Lord's appearance.

### III. THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF SALVATION

Several of the New Testament personalities can only be understood in this context. Zechariah the priest, his wife Elizabeth and their son John the Baptist belonged to such expectant communities. So did Mary, the betrothed of Joseph, of the house of David.<sup>22</sup> Simeon the aged, 'righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel'<sup>23</sup> and the Prophetess Hannah, who 'did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer, by night and by day.'<sup>24</sup>

The words in which John the Baptist excoriated the crowds that flocked to him reflected the expectation of the Day of the Lord.

You brood of vipers,  
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?  
Bear fruits that befit repentance.....  
Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees  
Every tree that does not bear fruit  
Is cut down and thrown into the fire<sup>25</sup>

The question of the crowds : 'What then shall we do?' means, 'What shall we do to be delivered from the wrath of God and to enter into the kingdom?' John's answer is in terms of preparatory righteousness — compassion, generosity, justice, cessation of oppression and exploitation.<sup>26</sup> True repentance is to be expressed, not in terms of sorrow for one's personal sins, but rather in compassion and mercy towards one's neighbour and in a battle against oppression and injustice.

The words 'save' and 'salvation' are rather frequent in Luke-Acts. The infancy narrative of St. Luke's Gospel definitely identifies the birth of Jesus as the fulfilment of God's promise of Salvation.<sup>27</sup>

Sabbath, the Day of the Lord, is a day for saving men's lives, for healing, for seeking and saving the lost.<sup>28</sup> The emphasis on the Day of the Lord primarily as a day of judgement is transformed by our Lord. It is a day of compassion. Jesus rebuked James and John, His disciples, who suggested that He should call down fire from heaven to punish the unbelieving Samaritans, for the Son of Man's primary task is to save and not to destroy.<sup>29</sup>

There is, however, in all the three Synoptic Gospels one new emphasis-expressed in the form of an apparent paradox:

Whoever wills to save his soul, will forfeit it.

He, however, who forfeits his soul for me, will save it.<sup>30</sup>

This was a fundamental principle in Christ's own life, where His concern was not to save His own life, but to forfeit it for the sake of God and man. Hence the poignancy of the taunt of the Jewish religious leaders; 'He saved others, himself he cannot save'.<sup>31</sup>

This is important for us today. Our preoccupation cannot be with saving our own life, but with pouring it out (forfeiting it) in order that others may have life. It is in that process of forfeiting ourselves that we can find the true and triumphant life.

In the Book of Acts Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, is declared from the beginning to be the Arch-leader and Saviour.<sup>32</sup> This declaration of Peter to the rulers of Israel assembled in the Sanhedrin sets the tone for the understanding of the New Testament meaning of salvation. It is by submitting to Jesus Christ the Arch-leader, or the Great Shepherd of the sheep, that the process of healing and salvation begins in mankind. The early Christian community understood themselves as the community that was under the healing rule of the Good Shepherd. And the salvation of the individual meant being incorporated into this community where the healing powers of the new age were at work. The Lord added to the same community day by day those who were being saved.<sup>33</sup> The word of the Gospel was the invitation to enter the community of the Holy Spirit where Jesus Christ would reign as the Great King and the Supreme Healer. Outside that community the wrath of God was operating. The 'world' was in the process of disintegration subject to the wrath of God. The community of the Holy Spirit was where the healing and saving grace of God was operative. That community was the community of worship and prayer, and of joy in sharing the things of this life.

### **St. Paul's understanding of Salvation**

The dialectical framework of (a) the wrath of God where death and sin reign and (b) the saving love of God where the healing power of God's grace is at work, is also the best help to understand St. Paul's thoughts on salvation. Romans 1:17-18 expressly formulates the framework. There are two operative forces in the world. But they do not constitute a dualism, for

both proceed from the same God. Verse 17 speaks of the righteousness of God, and verse 18 of the wrath of God. The wrath of God has always been operating, and cannot be limited to the day of judgement. It is the force of God which destroys that which is evil. Death is part of this process of destruction of evil and therefore an effect of the wrath of God. But we die because we are evil. The cause of death is sin. Death is the wages of sin.<sup>34</sup> Sin is the sting of death.<sup>35</sup>

The sinful life is inevitably a 'being towards-death'. Life that is sinful and therefore evil, has to be destroyed by death. That is the law of the wrath of God. That law has been operative from Adam to Moses<sup>36</sup> and even to our day. The 'world' conceived in a negative sense, is the realm where the wrath of God is operative in all men — Jew and Gentile alike. In the proclamation of the Gospel, as in the acts of God which are proclaimed by the Gospel, a new process has begun to operate. The saving righteousness of God which rescues men from the domain of the wrath of God and places them in the realm of the Holy Spirit, saves them from the disintegrative powers of death and sin operative in the realm of wrath.

Thus St. Paul transforms the eschatology of the Day of the Lord, by making the element of wrath operative from the very beginning of fallen human existence, while the element of salvation by God's free grace is proclaimed as the good news — the new situation of the end time. In Romans 5: 10-21, he conceives God Himself as the enemy from whom we are to be saved. We are enemies so long as we are sinful. And His destroying wrath operated through three factors — sin itself which became an oppressive power, death, which became a tyrant, and the law which made our consciences guilty and introduced the new destructive force of guilt.

God's salvation begins when He ceases to be our enemy, by reconciling us to Himself.<sup>37</sup> This results in (a) freedom from sin, which means, positively, freedom for practising righteousness (Rom. 6); (b) freedom from the fear of condemnation and therefore from the law, which means, positively, the ability to be creative rather than externally determined in discerning and shaping the good (Rom. 7); and (c) freedom from death itself, in that we are no longer dependent on our biological existence (*sarx*) for our life, but on the Spirit of God which is the very life of God indwelling us. These three freedoms are the results of the Gospel, and they are the saving power of God in the world.

But this salvation is to be lived out in this world, which continues to

be dominated by the Prince of evil. So the last day in which we live is a continuous period of struggle and persecution. We are in the battle of the last day between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, or, in Pauline parlance, between the sons of faith and the sons of unbelief. Our righteousness is no longer preparatory for the messianic age, nor is it purely expectant-messianic. There are now the signs of the Kingdom — indications that the new saving power of God has come and is operative in the world. The battle goes on — but the victory is assured, for we are still saved by hope that Jesus has already triumphed and that His triumph will be openly manifest on the last day.

Within the limits of this short essay, no attempt has been made at a comprehensive examination of the biblical evidence. Some significant features of the New Testament notion of salvation can, however, be briefly pointed out.

1. Salvation in the New Testament is primarily from the wrath of God. This is a force destructive of evil now operating in the world, but to be fully revealed in a future beyond history.
  2. Salvation in a positive sense means being placed in the realm of God's grace and righteousness — which is most clearly manifest in the community of the Holy Spirit which lives from God and manifests His saving grace and mercy.
  3. This community is the worshipping community, standing before God, in Christ, by the Spirit, living in the hidden triumph of the Risen Lord, in the expectant hope of the full manifestation of God's righteousness beyond history.
  4. While the wrath of God operates in the world by destroying those in bondage to sin, law and death, the Holy Spirit of God creates the true community of righteousness, building up the Body of Christ, and making man bear fruit in love, joy, peace and the other fruit of the Spirit.
  5. Personal salvation means trusting in God, believing His promise, and being incorporated by baptism into community of the Spirit, practising personal and social righteousness and battling against the powers of this age. This community, while living and acting in history, lives out of the encounter with God in the Eucharistic gathering which
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brings eternity and time into relation with each other.

6. The ultimate judgement, however, is not in terms of conscious acceptance of the Lordship of Christ and membership in the believing community. It is rather in terms of one's active compassion for the poor and the needy (see the parable of the judgement of the nations in Matt. 25: 31-40).
7. Saved existence is not the comfortable life of peace and plenty. *Shalom*, or welfare, is the central content of salvation, but in history *shalom* will always be persecuted *shalom*. Saved existence should in effect be crucified existence, but fearless of the death and destruction that face the saved people (II Cor. 4: 16-5:10).
8. Saved existence includes the task not only of reshaping the human community by creative effort and battling against the forces of evil, injustice and oppression, but also the task of drawing all men into the community of worship where the Spirit is building up the community of eternity.
9. Saved existence is existence towards life — i.e. the hope of the redeemed future, as distinguished from the ordinary human life which is 'being-towards-death', and which breeds cynicism and despair.
10. This expectant existence knows that the redeemed future, when realized, will be an unending surprise, for it will not be a future created by man alone. It is God who is at work, drawing us into an infinite, creative future, which shall never cease to amaze us. We expect the unexpected. We do not predict the future, but are engaged in constant creation of a future full of truth, beauty, goodness, freedom and love.

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1. Exod 4: 30

2. Exod 15: 1-2

3. See II Sam. 19:2; 23:10; 12; I Sam 19:5; Isa 63:5; Ps. 118-15

4. See I Sam. 10:19; 11:13; Also Deut. 22:27; 28,29; Judges 6:14,15 etc.

5. Isa: 26: 1-2
6. Isa: 60:18
7. II Sam. 22:2; Ps. 18:2; 31:3; 62:2; 71: 3; 94: 22 etc.
8. Isa. 51: 4-5
9. Ps. 118:14-15
10. Ps. 37: 14, 40
11. Ps. 12: 2-4, 12-14
12. Isa. 59: 1 ff.
13. The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, 1:12-17, Eng.trans. in Theodor H.Gaster: The Dead Sea
14. Op.cit. p. 313
15. Ibid
16. Isa. 2:12
17. Isa. 13:9
18. Amos 5:18-20
19. Joel 1:15, 2:1-31
20. Joel 3:18 ff; Amos 9:11 ff
21. Zech 13: 8-9
22. Luke 1: 27
23. Luke 2: 25
24. Luke 2: 37
25. Luke 3:7 ff
26. Luke 3:10-14
27. Luke 1:47, 69, 77; 2:1 ff etc.
28. Luke 6:9
29. Luke 9:54 ff; cf. Matt. 18:11. The key verse here only in some of the ancient manuscripts. See. however, John 12:47
30. Luke 9:24; Matt. 16:25; Mark 8:35
31. Matt. 27:42; Mark 15:30-1; Luke 23: 35-9
32. Acts 5:31
33. Acts 2:47b
34. Rom. 6:23
35. I Cor. 15:56
36. Rom. 5:14
37. Rom. 5: 10-11

## CONCLUDING POSTSCRIPT

The praise of God is best expressed in the worship of God and in service to the created order. Good theology should be devout and well articulated doxology. The Eucharist, when fully participated in, is good theology. It is an act of the community rather than the discourse of a scholar.

"Doing theology" became a fashionable slogan in ecumenical circles in the 1970's. But that "doing" was little more than "activism". It meant mainly bringing justice and peace to society, liberating the oppressed and cleaning up the environment.

That is not the sense in which we speak of theology as an "act of the community". Both "activism" and "verbalism" get their proper orientation only within the framework of "Leitourgeia", the public service of God, in the *diakonia* of Eucharistic worship and the *diakonia* of self sacrificing service to the created order.

The "liturgical act" is not a mere trivial act of ritualism and formalized language. It is what the Lord commanded, besides the command to love, and of equal importance. The mystery of God is best apprehended in the liturgical act rather than in tome or discourse. The Eucharistic act of the community is the Christ-ordained form in which the mystery of God's saving love is best grasped by the community of the Spirit and its members.

There one comes to know God as loving and life-giving Father, Son and Holy Spirit - not in theological discourse.

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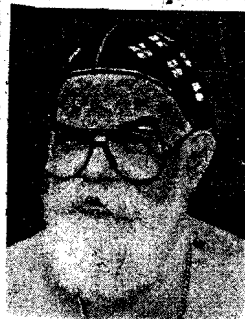


## DR. PAULOS MAR GREGORIOS

(Formerly Fr. T. Paul Varghese) of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India served as the Associate General Secretary of W.C.C. for five years (1962-67). Since 1967 he is the Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, consecrated Bishop in 1975, he became the chief shepherd of Delhi Diocese as Metropolitan Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios.

He has earned a name of his own as an outstanding theologian, sensible philosopher, inspiring preacher, profound educationist, effective teacher, dynamic social activist, stimulating thinker, constructive analyst, powerful author, philanthropic humanist, compassionate friend of the poor, spiritual father, loving shepherd, ardent ascetic, good diplomat, sincere politician, intelligent organiser and untiring champion of peace and justice at national and international levels.

Gifted with a penetrating intelligence and remarkable clarity of mind Metropolitan Gregorios has attracted disciples in many parts of the world and in varied disciplines.



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## A HUMAN GOD

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