

What Makes a Christology into a Christian Theology?

David Braine

What makes a “Christology” count as a “Christian” Christology? Evidently, there is some distinction to be made. Presumably the reverent accounts of Jesus’ person and role offered by Islam, by notable non-Christian Jews of modern times, by Jewish writers such as Vermes, or by Gandhi and others in the Hindu tradition, do not count as “Christian” Christologies — and clearly a respectful account of his person and role offered by an agnostic or atheist could not count as a “Christian” Christology. Whether we situate the sentimental nineteenth century Renan, or modern theologians such as Maurice Wiles¹ and John Hick, on the “Christian” or “non-Christian” side of the divide in respect of their Christologies, waits upon some clarification of what it is that makes a Christology a “Christian” one.

The term “Christology” does not mean a “Messianology” which would have to do with the role of a Messiah the question of whose identity lies open. Rather it means what would have better been called a “Jesuology”, that is an account of the person and role in human existence and the universe of the historically identified person, Jesus of Nazareth.

I

The view I offer for consideration is, that in order to judge whether a Christology be a Christian one, we cannot proceed by using just one kind of criterion, e.g. a criterion according to content (such as is provided by a list of doctrines), or, e.g., seemingly very different, a criterion according to authority (such as ‘Scripture’ or ‘the Church’, each identified in some way). Rather, we need to employ, not just one, but two kinds of criterion, not independently of each other, but interdependently, each of the two criteria providing a control on the other. I shall refer to these as material and formal criteria respectively.

By material criteria, I have in view criteria that pick out certain doctrines as essential or integral to the content or ‘matter’ of Christian

doctrine. For instance, it might be suggested that belief in the Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was the key, judging by content, to the decision as to whether or not a Christology is a "Christian" one. However, it is clear that no such material criterion, by content, can be adequate by itself. For instance, the meaning given to the words "Incarnation" and "Resurrection" will be different according to one's doctrines of God and of man, and also different according to one's conceptions of time and history, so that the words by themselves do not secure enough to allow any clear division between Christian and non-Christian Christologies. E.g. does belief in the Incarnation mean that the very person, Jesus, who died on a cross is the one through whom all things have been upheld in existence from the beginning of time?

Does it also mean that he who has been inner to each thing, upholding it in existence through the whole length of its survival, has become historically personal in a manner appropriate to a creature in such a way that he could only become thus historical once in the whole history of the earth and the universe in all their spread, once on behalf of all? And has he become so really historical and bodily as to exclude the Resurrection from being merely a matter of presence or appearance in personality only, and instead to require it to be fully bodily as implied in the Apostles' Creed?

Clearly, historically there has never been agreement on any minimum list of doctrines. And, logically, there could not be any such agreement, since all the key terms "God", "man", "Saviour" are such as to carry or provoke an open set of connotations, each of which is liable to be subject to dispute. It might be imagined that one could remedy the situation by multiplying words, making explicit what one conceived the key features of the doctrines of the Incarnation and Resurrection to be, making explicit those things about God and man, time and history, which needed to be insisted upon. But, in this way of proceeding, taken by itself, one would appear to have reduced each point in dispute to the status, not of Revelation, but only of opinion — as if in every dispute one were only pitting one's own private opinion in respect of the point in question against the private opinion of somebody else.

Therefore, one needs in addition some other quite different kind of criterion, not a criterion in terms of the content of Christian doctrine or of what is to be believed, i.e. not 'material' in character, but rather a criterion having to do with the special kind of reason why the thing proposed is to be believed, i.e. what makes it a matter of faith and not merely of opinion, i.e. what makes it something to be believed on God's word. That is, in the case of Christianity what makes it a matter

of faith is the fact that Christianity presents itself as a public historical revelation by God, and it is this which provides what one can call a 'formal' criterion of belief. This notion of 'revelation' includes that God not only publicly 'in time' ('historically') acted in certain ways, but also that these historical actions included the action of giving an interpretation what he has done.

Let me explain this further.

It is conceivable that someone should hold that Jesus, along with the Buddha, the Sikh gurus, Confucius and other masters, was a man worthy to be followed.

But a person could not reasonably hold that Jesus stands unique amongst these figures because of some unique identity with, or relationship to, the Creator and of the universe, the Governor whose Providence limits and secures the goal of the progress of history, without believing that Christianity (along with Judaism as integral to the content and context of Christianity) has a special and unique status as Revelation. That is, one cannot reasonably attribute this sort of unique status to Christ without also attributing some unique status to the Tradition or witness handed over (*traditum*) in respect of him and his status, whatever the way this Tradition or transmitted witness is embodied or passed on.

Thus, the Incarnation, the idea that a certain man was God, is not something which we could reasonably hold for certain as the 'most probable' hypothesis for explaining various historical 'marvels'. I mean historical marvels such as the excellence of his teaching, his miracles or the existence of forceful testimony as to miracles, the extraordinary character of his Jewish background (presenting such a singular sequence of high religious teachers or prophets, set in the context of such a *singular history*, the *history of the Jews from their first beginnings up to the present time*) and the extraordinary spread of Christianity. In regard to this Kierkegaard in *Training in Christianity* (pp. 26–31, etc., Princeton, 1941) was right in rejecting reasoning from the finite to the infinite. Such immeasurable paradox (not contradiction) as is presented by the idea that a particular person might be at the same time God and man cannot present itself as an hypothesis whose probability might be balanced against other hypotheses for explaining historical events, and in a 'scientific' way judged 'more probable'. And it is not this kind of theoretical, 'scientific', academic or dispassionate certainty — a hypothetical or (as we nowadays use the word) 'speculative' opinion — which is involved in religious faith in the Incarnation. Thus, no view which attributes unique status to Jesus only speculatively as a probable opinion, not as Revelation, can be credible.

The attribution of unique status to Jesus is indissolubly linked with attributing to Christianity the status of a confession to be held with firmness and certainty as a datum from God, not just a speculative probable opinion, however high its supposed probability. It was Jesus' 'Father who is in heaven', not 'flesh and blood' which revealed to Simon Peter that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt.16:17).

To particularise, when I say that Christianity presents itself as a religion of Revelation, I have in view that it presents itself as a religion in which things to be believed by man are represented as having been given a message ('word') or teaching from God, shown by him, shown by signs in such a way as to be decisively known. *On the formal side*, two things are involved. Firstly, what is believed must be held, not as a matter of human speculation, but as having been taught, or given by God to be believed, to be believed with certainty as having been thus taught or given, i.e. with the kind of firmness and certainty indicated when (I quote the Tridentine Profession of faith) a person 'vows and swears, God helping him, most constantly to keep and confess [this faith] entire and undefiled to his life's last breath', i.e. it is vital that such an absolute determination should involve no violation of intellect. Secondly, the believing of what is thus believed as given in this manner and context must involve no violation of man's intellect (by the word "intellect", I mean the aspect of man whereby he is orientated towards truth). The second condition involves (a) that the content of belief is reasonable, i.e. that there is no violation of intellect in respect of the content of what is believed, and (b) that it is reasonable to envisage this content as having been intended by God to be held with this kind of firmness and certainty as having been taught by him.

I note that the ways of speaking here: of "showing" and of "teaching", "speaking" and "being heard", are metaphorical — God does not literally point or speak. Each idiom embodies one or other of two traditional models of what faith is and how it arises. Accordingly the formal criteria to be satisfied include this: that these two models be appropriate — it must not be that these models cannot be applied without absurdity. Anything which renders the application of these models absurd violates the formal criterion which requires that the doctrine given be given as Revelation. We are on a tightrope.

On the one hand, God the Father does not have a body and mouth whereby he may speak, nor a finger whereby he may point within a social and linguistic community within which he is understood as pointing, showing or demonstrating. No dictation model can be taken literally. If a man claims that God dictated or spoke to him, then either

this man speaks falsely, or else the words “dictation” and “speak” are being used in an extended sense. It is also necessary, if a claim that God has spoken privately to some individual is to be so supported as to justify belief on the part of others, that the context be in certain ways evidently honest and virtuous in respect of the character and situation of the person alleging such revelation, and that the whole transaction be set in a context of non-verbal public divine action in history.

Yet, on the other hand, if God cannot be known to have spoken or known to have shown something, in such a way as to justify certainty, i.e. as to allow certainty in respect of hearing (the hearing correlative with the speaking), or in respect of the understanding or perception correlative with the showing, there will be no application for either model. When God’s voice was still and small, it remained such as to leave Elijah in no doubt that it was God who spoke and that what he humanly understood to have been spoken, and to have been intended to be understood, was indeed what God had in fact spoken and so intended.

It is vital that the same things were spoken as capable of being heard — spoken in such a way as to be capable of being known to have been spoken, signified in such a way as to be capable of being known to be intended to be believed as revealed or taught by God, i.e. appropriate to be held with such extreme certainty and firmness. And since by Revelation we are meaning something public, i.e. given in such a way at one time and place as to be accessible through historical mediation to later times and other places, it is also necessary that what was spoken was spoken so as to be capable of being heard in later centuries, so that the same certainty and firmness are appropriate in these later centuries and today as they were at the first (cf. John 20:29). If there is no appropriateness in such certainty and firmness or perseverance in assent, then there is no appropriateness in these models of speaking and hearing, showing and seeing. And since we are speaking of a speaking and revealing *to man*, it must be possible for God to speak to man in a way appropriate to man’s nature, i.e. in a way which includes assent to some linguistically articulated propositions as true, in a context within which some likeness of creatures to God is such as to allow some use of models in theology.

And we are on a tightrope in another respect.

For sure, the manner in which this datum is thus ‘revealed’, i.e. given and received as to be held with firmness and certainty as a datum from God, involves ‘signs’ — including such things as the historical marvels I have instanced. And such signs are essential to the reasonableness of the act of faith, the reasonableness without which the

certainty of faith would be a violation of the intellect. For sure also, it is reflection upon such signs in the whole context of man's situation in the universe which enables a discrimination between possibly true and certainly false claims to the status of Revelation. But the reason which thus renders faith reasonable and permissible to the honest intellect does not operate in the manner of a mathematical proof, or even of the types of proof recognised in history and in the law courts. Rather this reason makes the certainty of faith legitimate, but must not cause such certainty in such a way as to force it on the intellect, since this faith is voluntary in a way analogous to the way believing what a friend or one's wife tells one is voluntary and, more than this, this faith also depends on grace, since it is not only a matter of believing something on the word of a human being but also somehow, according to this metaphor, believing it on the word of God. Faith, like the loving non-conceptual knowledge of God spoken of by John of the Cross, involves some attachment of the heart to God (here, in Pascal's words, the heart has its reasons which the reason does not know).

Faith must be reasonable but not in such a way that its certainty is or could be sufficiently grounded in inference. It must be possible to apprehend God's action as fitting, but not in such a way that one could have seen beforehand that he could not have acted otherwise, nor in such a way that in fact he could not have acted otherwise: God's freedom is here involved, and not just the weakness of man's intellect. (In this, St Paul, Kierkegaard and Karl Barth were right, contrary to Hegel and those influenced by him: the end of human history is a secret, a *mysterion*, a secret not known by the observers of history, whether the believers in progress from the Enlightenment onwards, Marx, Hitler or any other.)

Fittingness and coherence are not enough. True, it is vital to the reasonableness of Christian faith that it can be seen by reflection or retrospectively as the fulfilment of all that presaged it such as one can see in the diverse aspirations of man and in other religions. (Conversely, because in God's providence mankind is a unity, these things may also point to and illuminate aspects within the Christian faith which imperfect man apart from these presagings might not have come to realise.) But it is a mistake to imagine that the rightness of the act of Christian faith depends on an *adequate* prior perception of the way in which Christianity fulfils all else. Each individual can have only a lowly appreciation of this, such as to permit faith. The sort of all-embracing coherence of understanding is never so actual or so complete in any one mind as to compel the certainty of faith.

This appears in three ways. Firstly, no one mind embraces this

coherence with adequate firmness and fullness of survey. Secondly, such perception as we have of this coherence is until the end of time only partially, not fully actual. Thirdly, if Christian faith is reasonable, then Jewish faith before Jesus' conception must also have been so; but clearly the reasonableness and certainty of the faith of the ancient Jews did not rest upon a prior perception of how all things would be fulfilled in its promises.

II

So far I have spoken in entirely general terms — specifying the conditions of Revelation: that it be centered on a certain content and that it be given in a such way as allow it to be received as revealed, not just a matter for speculative opinion.

Now I wish to turn to the particular implications of what I have said for Christianity.

The Christian faith involves a three-tiered structure. Firstly, it appears (this will become yet more plain below) that Jesus must have known who he was before the Apostles and known it in a different way from them. Secondly, the Apostles knew who he was, not by speculation but as something revealed to them by God in the context of their knowing Jesus in the flesh. Then, thirdly, we receive faith as taught by God, but know it as such only in the same act as we know it as mediated by testimony through the knowledge of the Apostles and the knowledge of the Church through the Apostles.

Now, in the context of many disputes certain key elements of this faith, rooted in this background, were given definitive formulation by the first six Ecumenical Councils, formulations capable of being enlarged upon, but true and not to be gone back on. Either the relevant statements of these Councils have the status of merely speculative opinion, in which case our faith has this same status of merely speculative opinion, or not. It is to these councils that we owe the unwaveringness of the Church's hold on the knowledge that 'Jesus, ... very God of very God, ... through whom all things were made, ... was enfleshed ... and made man, ... died', truly God and truly man, complete in human nature, soul and body, with a human kind of knowledge and will.

These statements rest on the word of the Apostles and the Church in Apostolic times in union with them, chiefly mediated by the New Testament Scriptures. The Church which preached the 'word' or message of God preexisted the New Testament scriptures and constitutes their root and source of validation or recognition as giving a

standing authentic and God-provided witness to God's Revelation in such a way as to be put together with the writings of the Old Testament. The Apostles and their companions stand as witnesses and authoritative authenticators of the faith thus given, originating a certain kind of understanding of key expressions of faith (e.g. early creeds and expressions of faith in the Gospels and rest of the New Testament) — this understanding being preserved by the communion of the Church and witnessed to by those succeeding to the mantle of the Apostles, the bishops in union with sees recognized as apostolic in origin and authority, especially when joined in council and above all in Ecumenical Council. And the Apostles and the Apostolic Church stand also as witnesses and authenticators of the belief (part of the faith thus given) that the Lord intended that his Church should continue as one communion in faith, his faithfulness to it through all history guaranteed. And it is thus that the understanding which I referred to as preserved by the communion of the Church is also guaranteed, along with its expressions in the Ecumenical Councils whether of the 4th and the 5th centuries or later.

Such is the chain which history suggests to us. If any link in this chain rests on mere speculation, extrapolative reasoning, induction or such like, then our faith is not in what God revealed, as revealed by God, once in time and for all men, but either has the status of private revelation today (a supposition which I believe is self-refuting if Christianity is supposed to have any special historicity or uniqueness) or else has the merely speculative status of belief as opinion, not the status of belief in things as to be held for certain as revealed by God, to be held with religious firmness and certainty simply in virtue of their being taught and revealed by him. This chain involves a more exactly historical character for the Gospels than one needs to associate, for instance, with the 'historical' works of the Old Testament.

Many Christians, most agnostics and atheists, are aware of the existence of some absurdity in certain presentations supposed to represent Christian faith. These presentations are ones which involve gaps to be bridged merely speculatively, e.g. a gap between Jesus' experience and Jesus' teaching, a gap between this teaching and that of the Apostles, or a gap between that and the tradition most explicitly encapsulated in St. John's Gospel and the 4th and 5th century Councils, or a gap between what was understood as to be held to be of faith from the 5th century until into this century and what is to be held now (this latter being supposedly altered by modern criticism and 'new' moral and scientific perceptions). Here I am trying to identify and give articulate description to some of those absurdities which are, I think,

more commonly sensed or felt than made explicit.

If the explanation of the historical unfolding of Christian understanding and confessions involves at certain strategic points reliance upon the sureness of human speculative judgement, judgement going beyond what was earlier taught, as if to go from the finite to the infinite, then such explanation removes the possibility of regarding that understanding or confession or judgement from having the status of Revelation. If Jesus' divinity was not there in his knowledge and in the understanding of the Apostles, then to introduce belief in it later would be essentially to have introduced a new Revelation — just as the Book of Mormon, if valid, would constitute new Revelation, although at a less fundamental level.

III

It may be alleged that the reliance is not upon the human as such but upon the Holy Spirit's having secured the process of unfolding. But then it can be asked: what is the warrant for supposing this or that particular development of thought to be secured by the Spirit? If it is a general presumption of the Spirit's abiding with the Church, then either the presumption is so general as to be useless for firm and certain assent, useless for justifying the applicability of the models of God showing or speaking so as to be heard knowingly, or else it depends upon our being able to identify God's Church with an adequate degree of reliability and know the mode and extent of the Spirit's governance of the Church. And in the latter case the warrant for the relevant kinds of belief about the Church and about the Spirit are liable themselves to depend upon some prior belief about Christ as having had the authority and power to guarantee the Church or other recognizable witness of the Spirit — i.e. still depend upon some Christology.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, if the faith of the early Councils is portrayed as a speculative extrapolation or *Gestalt* going logically beyond the logical implications of earlier belief, or if the faith presented in Paul, Hebrews or John is portrayed as going logically beyond what was known to the Apostles before the Ascension, then this undermines the supposition that the certainty of faith should reside in what the Councils, Paul or John, attest.

What I am saying is not written in the abstract. Confronted by successive species of New Testament criticism, Protestant and Anglican (especially High Anglican), and also Roman Catholic (both the Modernists nearly a century ago and many Biblical exegetes since the 1950's), have supposed that they need have no fear because their faith

remained secured, ultimately, not upon the Scriptures but upon the Spirit-guided community which recognises the Scriptures. It is here that in the recent past and the present, we are faced with the suppositions (i) that the divinity of Christ was not part of his self-understanding or of the earliest Church but that faith in this was a development in the period of New Testament formation (R.H. Fuller's *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* is a good example of this) and (ii) that the Scriptures do not imply the confessions of the 4th and 5th century Councils — in each case with the same fall-back upon the Church and the Spirit.

True, the Church has a role, firstly and originally as the root within which the Apostolic tradition was set, secondly as discriminating the New Testament scriptures and recognising their authority, and thirdly as settling early heresies and setting the pattern for the continued exercise of authority, but also fourthly as exercising this authority in each later age in discriminating true interpretation and authentic development from what is foreign to Revelation. (I say nothing here about how the Church is structured and nothing about the modes of the Spirit's action, nor of the modes of recognition of the Spirit's action). And, clearly, a statement is not just a set of words in a certain order, but requires to be taken according to its sense, that is, according to the meaning which would have been understood to have been intended by their writers by those to whom they were first addressed — it is not a mere sentence but has a content, a content determinative of its meaning, implications and truth or falsity, which will not be received or known by hearers independently of its context of utterance including cultural features of this context. These contextual features are not private but public, and do not render the content of the statement private to one person or to one age, but their importance makes it clear that there can always be an appeal to the sense intended and understood by the teaching and learning community against some interpretation of the sentence expressing the statement which violates or misses that sense. Hence, it is unavoidable that there should be a role for the Church, secured by the Spirit, in interpreting any given set of words, discerning its implications, and in particular discerning in new controversies how certain particular new statements fall contrary to the original so as to be implied to be false. Thus, interpretation and discernment in the midst of the development of theological understanding have been vital in each age of the Church, first in the Apostolic age, then in the pre-Conciliar age when the key heresies associated with the names Ebionite and Gnostic were repudiated, thirdly in the age of the first six Ecumenical Councils, and fourthly in each later age of the Church.

Rather such Church judgement has an indispensable negative role in excluding betrayals of that truth, and must have some Spirit-guaranteed certainty if the idea of God's speaking in the 1st century A.D. in such a way as to be heard, and heard as God, in later ages is not to become empty of application. It is especially important because it is essential to the way human beings appropriate the significance of truth, even a truth once decisively given, that they appropriate it in stages, thereby requiring discernment between true appropriations or developments and corruptions.²

However, in respect of doctrine we must not allow the Spirit and Church any role going beyond this (the role just described). If we do, we let in new Revelation implying some essential incompleteness in what was first given, and worse we also undermine the reasonableness of attaching faith, i.e. faith as not just belief, but as belief in something precisely as God-given, God-shown, God-taught, to such emanations in the Church. And the upshot of this is that such new emanations, products only allowed by a doctrine of development run wild, are regarded as having no more status than private fancies or subjective opinion.

I think we can see these points illustrated in the life of 20th century Christendom in two ways.

Firstly, sceptical scholars relying on quite questionable theories of the stages through which the Gospel narratives are supposed to have gone before attaining their present form and of the motivations underlying this successive 'redaction' have come to ascribe less and less understanding and content to the Apostles and their teaching immediately after Christ's Ascension and more and more to the Apostolic Church whether in the lifetime of Paul or whether later in the first century.

All this has in turn led inexorably to a tendency to downgrade the status of the understanding and confessions of the Apostolic Church, of which the New Testament scriptures and earliest creeds are reflections. It is as if because as human works they involved some culturally limited models, it followed that in developing our understanding we should feel free, not just to express different aspects of the truth in new ways, but to reject these earlier confessions even in the sense in which they were originally intended. As a result of this downgrading, we find the spectacle of ever less credible alternative theologies held onto by many people who have been brought up in older traditions and are held back by practices of prayer and worship from throwing their whole faith overboard. The outsider can see no reason to credit that Jesus was unique unless Christianity is in truth Revelation, and no reason to credit

this if God spoke in such an obscure way that nobody ever after could be certain what he had said. Such an outsider is not involved in an irrational desire for certainty where perhaps certainty is not open to human beings, but in a rational judgement that it is inconsistent to apply the model of God speaking if there can be no hearing.

Secondly, in respect of the age of the Councils, we find less and less clarity ascribed to the realisation and confession of Jesus' Divinity before Nicaea, extravagant suppositions about the importance of neo-Platonic and other ways of thinking on the unfolding of Trinitarian thought, the supposition that this thought brings in post-scriptural models and involves contradiction, so that the Councils setting the shape and limits of this Trinitarian thought likewise hold no irrevocable authority for us. Yet how anyone can believe that Jesus is divine as a mere opinion, not as Revelation, and how anyone can suppose it to be Revelation if first Scripture and then the Councils are supposed to present only what has the status of culture-limited, human constructions — constructions which themselves when pressed supposedly involve contradiction — is not clear. For the models of God teaching or God showing something have no application if he cannot be known to have shown or taught something; and, if what the Scriptures and the early Councils present has the status of human construction, there is no application either in 100 A.D. or in the age of the Councils, or today, for these models. (It is not as if there was anything sacrosanct or certain about the view of these scholars. The suggestion that early developments were dominated by alien influences, e.g. the influence of one or other of various Greek ways of thinking in such a way as to have been historically essentially determined by them, seems to be simply wrong. In fact, what we seem to see in Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril and Leo, the theologians of the early Councils, is not a Hellenization of Hebrew thought, but rather a Hebraization of Greek thought. A clear sense of the gulf of nature between God and creature and the very concept of a person as something having its existence or its complete realisation only in relation — a basic subject and yet not a mere individual — are ideas which Western thought derives from Jewish and Christian, not Greek sources.)

The scepticism of scholars bring us here into the area of a yet deeper difficulty. For, how, if the Apostles did not after the Crucifixion know Jesus' divinity, can it be reasonable to suppose that Jesus himself knew it? Yet these sceptical scholars have doubted even this, and as a result less and less is attributed to Jesus' own understanding of himself. Yet, we come here to the very heart of Christian faith.

Jesus' own mode of knowledge has always constituted a mystery.

The sceptics ask how could Jesus regard of himself as natural son of the Father, so as to pray "Abba, Father" and speak of himself as in a peculiar sense the Son? Jeremias and other scholars have seen this as bringing us to the oldest stratum of Gospel understanding, closest to Jesus himself, and its historicity explains why the Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy. And, the sceptics should ask, not just how could such a way of understanding himself fit with his human psychology, but also how could it fit with his Jewish monolatry, the worship of one God alone so that God alone is King, Redeemer, etc.— God and no other? This last question is one which, within the New Testament, St John alone addresses.³ And it brings us to the very root of the problem of how unity and trinity are to be combined within God, the problem so exactly addressed by Athanasius and Nicaea, keeping so true to St. John and so faithful to Jewish monolatry, avoiding tritheism. And it is this faith which was recognised by the whole later church as so foundational, so as even to be confessed in the Nicene creed at every Sunday Eucharist.

In sum, if Jesus did not know his divinity in a way compatible with Jewish monolatry, and if the Apostles did not know it and likewise know it in a way compatible with Jewish monolatry, there is no way in which such a paradox as the Incarnation could constitute Revelation to any later age. If any gulf is opened between Jewish monolatry and Jesus, or between either of these and the Apostles and the Apostolic church, or between these and the Church at key later times, then our whole faith has become nothing — either the Incarnation denied or the principle of Revelation given up.

IV

In Christianity, faith in Jesus is indissolubly linked to the reception in faith of Christianity as a historically given public Revelation by God to man. Such a Revelation requires that something be historically given at one time in such a way as to be public for all times, spoken once in such a way as to be forever after publicly knowable to have been so spoken. Such a notion has implications which limit what can count as a Christian Christology — limit the extent to which Christology and indeed Christian theology in general can be areas of argued opinion only. Rather it is of their essence that by means of them the intellect be brought to greater understanding of what it increasingly sees both as true and as beyond comprehension, its models being inadequate, so that it retains its hold on Revelation only in an assent which is of the whole mind, expressing his mind's worshipping of God.

Love of truth and love of God elicit an adventurous spirit in the use of the mind, which fear can kill or imprison. But this adventurous spirit

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is seeking ever more fully to appropriate, in theology, something which has the nature of Revelation. Therefore, this adventurous spirit, seeing all indications in Revelation, whether expressed in the Scriptures or identified in later teaching, as given as helps from God, is quite different from the approach represented in much modern treatment of the Incarnation, in this country raised to new prominence by Wiles and quickly followed by Hick and others. These recent approaches have three fundamental defects.

First, they give no special weight to anything claiming to carry authority from God as such, even in matters where, evidently, apart from divine revelation, there would be no knowledge at all.

Secondly, they make no distinction between the contradiction which constitutes nonsense and the paradox which arises when, without there being any contradiction or impossibility between the two poles of the truth concerned, there is no way in which the imagination can bring them into a single view — a situation readily fitting with the presumptions of older theology that we cannot imagine God or the mode of his action and relation to creatures and, further, that no model or analogy we use to assist our understanding can ever bring the matters concerned within our grasp (to make a true statement about something is not to imply that it is in our comprehension).

Thirdly, they treat statements and doctrines as if they are to be accepted or rejected each individually — as matters of opinion, or even (the essence of heresy) of choice whereas the idea of Revelation precisely involves that what belongs to this Revelation will come as a single whole, a teaching whose expressions, although not all coming at one time but as the significance of the teaching is more fully understood, form a single body. The importance of this last is often missed. Sometimes, a tradition involving many facets gives greater coherence or intelligibility to a group of doctrines taken as a united whole, whereas shorn of one or other key doctrine or facet the whole may seem narrow or bare or to be incredible, often in a way we feel without identifying the reason; commonly this neglected doctrine or facet lies within the tradition as part of the context of the rest of belief without us having realised its significance. Later the doctrine which is more difficult for the understanding sometimes may become a point of growth so that when we do come to appreciate it we see better the inner coherence of the whole ensemble, an ensemble which we might not have entertained at all, taken as a whole, unless it had been given as a whole.

These points are illustrated in the way that the Incarnation and the Resurrection — parts of the very core of the Christian faith — cannot

coherently be held as historically revealed by God, publicly in such a way as to be known as revealed at all later times, without being joined with subsidiary beliefs about both New and Old Testament and both the Church and the Israel from which it came. The Jewish and Old Testament context of Jesus determines our insistence on God's being personal (he knows and loves) and on his unity. Accepting any authority in the Church's witness to Jesus as the Son of God depends on some acceptance of the historicity of the New Testament in respect of Jesus' own self-understanding given this context. Conversely, the Church's continued understanding and authority stands as the condition of there being any determinacy in the sense in which any of the statements attributed to revelation are understood. In this way, belief in Church, New Testament, revelation to the Jews and Christ turn out on reflection to form one inseparable whole so that the faith we hold must in the end embrace all or none — albeit in a structured way, Christ and his authority only known through Church and Scripture, but authority being attributed to Church and New Testament only on the authority of Christ to whom with his Father our hearts and minds are drawn.

Thus, without joining a certain core content with what is required by the condition that this core content be held as something revealed, it turns out that the core content dissolves and there is no revelation.

- 1 The first version of this paper was first given informal delivery in 1981 as one part of a response to *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* by Maurice Wiles (S.C.M. 1974), which was later followed by the collection *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (S.C.M. 1977) to which Wiles contributed the opening essay. In the other part, a paper entitled 'The Incarnation and Man's Salvation', I explain how the Incarnation is indeed necessary to man's atonement in refutation of Wiles' argument that it is not necessary.
- 2 St. Thomas gives three reasons why Christ did not adopt the method of teaching by writing, firstly because it was aimed at reaching the hearts and not just the minds of his hearers, secondly because if he had committed it to writing then men would have had no deeper understanding of his doctrine than what appeared on the surface of the writing, and thirdly because such teaching needed to reach people in an orderly way, through ministers properly connected with Christ, rather than by magic authority being attributed to this or that book (S. Th. IIIa, Q. 42, Art. 4). The first two reasons give two of the germs of a theory of development as something necessary to the full development of understanding, and the third the context of such development.
- 3 I argue this strongly in 'The Inner Jewishness of St. John's Gospel as a clue to the Inner Jewishness of Jesus', *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt*, vol. 13, 1988, note especially pp. 142–151, 154–155.