

INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY

Talking about Jesus: Incarnation and what follows

1. The Problem

- How to talk about the relationship between “God” and “Son/Word of God” without ending up with “two gods”, e.g.
 - cannot use term like “part” (Jesus was part of God) because this implies divisibility but God is indivisible
 - cannot speak of God literally “sharing” divinity with Son of God because it takes two (or more) “to share” (I cannot share a cake with myself)
 - use of term like “share” (or sometimes “partake”) must be figurative not literal, e.g. a mother loves her daughter totally, 100% but this does not mean that she has no love left for her son, she also loves him totally, 100%; they both “share” or “partake” in her love.
- How to talk about the relationship between God and Son of God without losing the distinction, e.g. Jesus dies so “God is dead”; the problem with “Jesus Unitarians”.
- How to talk about Jesus without robbing him of his humanity thus making him only “appear” to be human (e.g. Docetists); thus to speak of incarnation, “the Word took flesh and was born of Mary”, “God revealed in human form” rather than “Word of God inhabited, possessed, was camouflaged in, appeared as a human being”.
- How to talk about Jesus without making him less than divine, e.g. a “sub-god”, a demiurge, an instrumental tool of God (e.g. Arians).
- **N.B.** What we are trying to do is to develop a “code of speaking” about these matters that lie outside our capacity to grasp; this is not “describing things as they are in the transcendent dimension” (e.g. Philipp Melancthon’s question to God: “explain it to me?”).

2. The pre-philosophical era: the use of titles

The first generations of Christians took on biblical/Jewish titles and applied them to Jesus with some carry over of meaning but often with new emphases or particularities:

- **Christ** becomes the most commonly used title of Jesus, almost like a second name “Jesus Christ”.
 - Comes from the Gk translation of the Bible (the Septuagint) where it is used for “the anointed one”
 - Kings were anointed with oil in the biblical tradition as a sign of God bestowing blessing and authority
 - Priests were anointed: “sacred ministry”
 - Prophets were anointed: called to office
 - **N.B.** Role of prophets summarised in Isaiah 61:1-2 “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has

anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn..."

- In the biblical tradition, prophets are not infallible ("incapable or protected from erring"), only Jesus. (Note: Church is protected from error. Papal infallibility defined as doctrine by Roman Catholic Church in 1870 and only used twice to declare that something is "part of the deposit of faith". All Bishops in Council (RC) also infallible.)
- In the biblical tradition, prophets are not impeccable ("sinless, not liable to sin") only Jesus. (Note: Mary the mother of Jesus was conceived through sexual intercourse in the normal way but in early centuries the view emerged that she was not affected by Original Sin, therefore term "Immaculate Conception". Grows in acceptance esp. from 15th cent. Defined as RC doctrine in 1854. She is neither infallible nor impeccable.)
- Not unknown for biblical prophets to meet with violent deaths, therefore the linking of "prophet-martyr" (see Mark 12: 1-9: the Vinegrowers sent prophets, who they kill, then finally sent the son and they kill him too).
 - Jesus Christ = priest, prophet and king in developed senses.
- **Lord** is a title reserved for God in the biblical tradition, therefore to add it to the titles of Jesus, makes the definitive link with divinity: Lord Jesus Christ.
- **Messiah** was used in the biblical tradition for "the awaited one" who would be a great liberating warrior.
 - Jesus called the Messiah but in a new unwarriorlike fashion. He is expected to call for the Jewish uprising to overthrow the Roman occupation but does not.
- **Servant of the Lord** was a theme and title developed in the writings of Isaiah (Isaiah chs. 40-55). Becomes identified with the Suffering Servant. Applied to Jesus (see Isaiah 53, esp. v 3-7) "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. ⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

- **Second Adam** is a new title generated for Jesus. The idea is that by perfect obedience and sinlessness the sin of Adam is overturned and the way is open for human beings to live in harmony with God, which is salvation.
 - This theme is linked to the teaching of Jesus about the Rule (Kingdom) of God, which he comes to bring. The coming of the Kingdom is human salvation. He links his death with the coming of the Kingdom (Mark 14:25), therefore his death is salvific.
- **Son of Man** is a title applied to Jesus stressing his representative nature as being quintessentially human. It is paralleled to Son of God in the biblical tradition, thus stressing both divinity and humanity.
- **Revealer** is a title used in the Fourth Gospel; the argument goes that Jesus needed to be divine to reveal God and needed to be human to be known by human beings.

3. Philosophical vocabulary

- *Ousia* Gk: substance
- *Hypostasis* Gk: mode of being, self-subsistent reality (used for the term “person” and interchangeably with *prosopon* Gk: person)
- *Physis* Gk: nature or principle of activity
- *Homoousios* Gk: “of the same substance”
- *Homoiousios* Gk: “of like substance”
- Hypostatic union: union in the *hypostasis* or person of Christ (becomes used to speak on there being only one person in Christ but two natures, human and divine, therefore Christ spoken of as possessing a fully human nature and a fully divine nature, not some kind of human-divine hybrid in which the natures are confused or blended together)
- Double generation of Christ: as to his divinity, generated from the Father before all time and as to his humanity, generated/born of Mary in time.

4. Major mainstream schools

- The Antiochene School (e.g. Lucian of Antioch d. 312), stressed the humanity of Jesus and develops a low-ascending Christology.
- The Alexandrian School (e.g. Clement of Alexandria c150-c215), stressed the pre-existent Son/Word nature, thus developing a high-descending Christology based around the Gk concept of *logos*.

5. Bringing it all together: Chalcedon 451

- The decisive General Ecumenical Council of the Church (East and West) was at Chalcedon in 451. It combined the Alexandrian emphasis on the unity of the divine person (*hypostasis/prosopon*) in Christ with the Antiochene emphasis on the duality of natures.
- The subject who acts is one (divine) person; in what he does he reveals the two natures through which he acts. (O’Collins)

- The decree of Chalcedon runs as follows:
“Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and also in human-ness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same substance as God as far as his divinity is concerned and of the same substance as we are ourselves as far as his human-ness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these “last days”, for us and on behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the Virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his human-ness.

[We also teach] that we apprehend this one and only Christ – Son, Lord, only-begotten – in two natures; [and we do this] without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to areas or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one person (*prosopon*), and in one *hypostasis*. They are not divided or cut into two *prosopa*, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified, thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, thus the Symbol of the fathers has handed down to us.” (Outler)

6. Classical Christology

- God had been preparing the Hebrew People for many generations for the unique event of the incarnation.
- The Word/Son of God literally “became flesh” and thus took on fully the human condition.
- In becoming human, the Word/Son of God restrained his divine powers, which occasionally break out in miracles, healing and ultimately the resurrection.
- Jesus is God incarnate, having a divine mind that is all knowing and all-powerful, and a human mind that is finite in power and knowledge. The divine mind has full access to the human so that it is correctly guided. The human mind has limited access to the divine but this is clearer and stronger than that possessed by other humans. Thus the divine mind is the ultimate causal agent in the life of Jesus. Both minds are united in a single person (one person, two natures).
- The life of Jesus does not just show what God is like but the life of Jesus is the life of God: “Jesus is of one substance with the Father”.
- In the incarnation, God unites the pre-existent divine nature to the human nature, therefore the death and resurrection liberates human nature from death and separation from God; therefore Jesus is “saviour of humanity”.
- Therefore humanity assumed into ultimate relation with divinity.

- Therefore the human life of Jesus is the perfect pattern of human living open to all people universally.
- Thus Jesus brings in the Rule of God, which is lived by faith in the inner turning to God in the heart of the human being. Thus the human being is saved by, in and through sharing in the divine life through belief in and a life lived in the Resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ.
- Jesus must be fully and totally human so that he can save, elevate and liberate “all flesh” (i.e. all humankind and all that it is to be human). Thus Christ brings in a “new creation”: through the Word, God created Adam; through the Word incarnate, God brings about a new creation in Christ.
- Two sayings of Leo the Great (d. 461): “It was God who became human so that we humans might become divine” and “the Son of God, invisible in his own nature became visible in ours”. Jesus is thus “the visibility of the invisible God”.
- The self-emptying of divine power in the Son of God (*kenosis*) is a “condescension of compassion” for humankind. So Jesus shows the vulnerability of God in that the divine assumes human nature and thus suffers. This gives the key to the Christian life of self-sacrifice, “dying to oneself”, living for the other etc.
- The self-consciousness of Jesus is raised; does he know of his divine nature when he walks the streets of Palestine?

7. Two 20th century Christologies

a. God was in Christ (assoc. D.M. Baillie)

- Stresses and begins from the image of Jesus as a human being uniquely filled with the Spirit of God.
- The humanity of Jesus naturally limits the knowledge and power that he can possess during human life.
- Jesus is thus not the omniscient, omnipotent God walking the earth but the perfected, Spirit-filled man who was designated Messiah by God and is the image and act of God in human form.
- The life of Jesus was Spirit-filled in a uniquely full and intensive way, which affects every aspect of his life. He freely allows every aspect of his life to be Spirit-directed.
- Jesus is rendered sinless because he is so fully Spirit-filled that he is never estranged from God.
- The Spirit works through Jesus to heal and perform miracles.
- Jesus is empowered by the Spirit to be a morally and spiritually perfect human being.
- Jesus is the newly defined “Messianic King”, thus extending the Abrahamic covenant to all humankind. He shifts the emphasis from an external law to an inner law of the spirit, thus opening up a new path to union with God and becoming the head of a new communion, the Church, to bring justice and peace to all the earth.

- Jesus is more than human in that he is the image of God's nature on earth. His earthly life is the temporal expression of the character of God. God acts in and through Jesus to liberate human beings to a life of companionship and hope.
- Thus Jesus has a unique place in human history being uniquely shaped by God to be the image and act of God on earth.
- Jesus has a unique form of unity with God – a unity of being – possessed by divine grace from all time, being indissolubly united with God, thus God is in Jesus made manifest in human form.
- Jesus is the normative “human being” for all time and the vehicle for God's saving acts.

b. Incarnation as metaphor or myth (assoc. John Hick)

- Based on a “minimalist approach” to what we can know of the earthly Jesus. He existed, gained a reputation as a healer and teacher, and ultimately died by crucifixion. As such he was a good man who could be accepted to fit the bill as a “new Messiah”.
- His followers had a vivid set of experiences of the Risen Jesus based on post-resurrection appearances.
- These mysterious post-resurrection appearances shape a set of magical, wonder-worker legends that were projected backwards onto the life of the earthly Jesus.
- Out of the earthly life a number of stylised icons of Jesus have been projected into Christian belief, e.g. his divine nature, his perfect life of obedience to God and the Torah.
- The death of Jesus is seen as the perfect expression of divine love for humankind.