

# Two Christological Languages: The Paradox of the Incarnation

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It is a paradox in the history of the Church that the time when the unity of the Person of Christ was affirmed was also the time when the Church began to be divided. At the Council of Ephesus in 431 A. D., the Church was divided into two parties. Twenty years later, the Council of Chalcedon brought about another major schism in the Church. Several attempts were made to find out a formula for union. But open rivalry between the two parties and gross misunderstanding of the opposite side perpetuated the division in the Body of Christ. Two different languages were spoken about one and the same person of Christ. If only, the Alexandrines and the Antiochenes had tried to understand each other a little, there would not have been any serious rift in the Church.

The Alexandrine theologians and the Antiochene theologians

were both contending for the same fundamental truths. But, in those days, they were arguing and fighting about 'kyono, knumo, parsopo' (nature, hypostasis, person) and all that kind of metaphysical gibberish which makes little sense to modern man. From the second half of the third century the spirit of warfare prevailed between the two schools of thought, and in consequence, it was not a common understanding that was sought, but the defeat of the enemy. A discussion whether Christ is in two natures or from two natures would not sound very relevant to many theologians today. The Incarnation is much more than a metaphysical problem. Fundamentally it is a condescension, a personal dispensation of the loving kindness of God. Patristic sayings like 'God became man, so that man might become God' are not understood correctly.<sup>1</sup> "But those who forget the past are condemned to repeat

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1. H. Kung asks in one of his recent books "But does a reasonable man today want to become God?" *On being a Christian*, (London, 1977), p. 442.



It".<sup>2</sup> Our present is still influenced by the past, the past is incorporated in us. Thus the problem of Christology is still relevant today.

The Incarnation is a 'mystery' of our faith, the contents of which can never be fully expressed in human words and concepts, because it constitutes the climax of the relationship between God and man. Perhaps, the defenders of the two schools of thought, in their emotional fury, forgot this aspect of mystery, and became very antagonistic towards each other. All ways of expressing the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ are mere attempts. If we are aware of this fact we will acknowledge that there are various attempts with all their merits and shortcomings, and we will acknowledge in joyful gratitude that we simply try to express the same faith in the same Lord.

To the Syrians, everything is mystery (Rozo) in the world of faith.<sup>3</sup> The word 'Roso' (Mystery) has strong salvific connotations. In the early Syrian traditions, the word was used with different shades of meaning. Aphraat and Ephrem used it sometimes to mean a type or symbol and sometimes to describe the sacraments.<sup>4</sup> In the singular form it was used to signify the universal economy of salvation, of which the Incarnation of the Son is the climax and the central point.<sup>5</sup> Gregory Bar Hebraeus also uses the term in the same sense. He says in his *Tractatus on Priesthood* that the reading of the Holy Scriptures explains the mystery of our salvation.<sup>6</sup> Philoxenus of Mabbog employed the singular form of the word to mean the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>7</sup>

There is a sense in which the 'mysterium Christi' must always

2. Quoted by Leslie Dewart, *The Foundations of Belief*, (New York, 1969), p. 18. In his essay "Chalcedon, End or Beginning" Karl Rahner argues that the council of Chalcedon raises many questions and can only be understood correctly against the background of the entire tradition and, in particular, of the Holy Scriptures. in *Theol. Anv. I*, pp. 149-200. Aloys Grillmeier shares this view, especially in the epilogue of his book *Christ in Christian Tradition* (London, 1975) pp. 555-557.

3. Cfr. W. De Vries, *Sakramententheologie bei den syrischen Monophysiten*, (Rome, 1940), p. 32.

4. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom, A Study in early Syriac Tradition*, (London, 1975), p. 21.

5. E. Beck, *Symbolum-Mysterium bei Aphraat und Ephram*, in *Oriens Christianus*, 42 (1968), pp. 19-40, esp. p. 22.

6. P. R. Kohlhaas, *Jakobitische Sakramenten-theologie im 13. Jahrhundert*, (Munster, 1959), pp 41-42.

7. *Philoxeni Mabbugensis tractatus tres de Trinitate et incarnatione*, ed. Vaschalde A. in *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 9/10, pp. 39, 45.



remain a mystery. The Incarnation presents us indeed with the supreme paradox, and it is not possible that we can ever eliminate from it the element of paradox without losing the Incarnation itself. This element of paradox comes into all religious thought and statement because God cannot be comprehended in any human words or in any of the categories of our finite thought.

God can be known only in a direct personal relationship, an 'I-and-Thou' dialogue, in which He addresses us and we respond to him. As it has sometimes been put, God cannot legitimately be 'objectified'.<sup>8</sup> We cannot know God by studying Him as an object, of which we can speak in the third person, in an 'I-It' relationship, from a spectator attitude. He eludes all our words and categories. We cannot objectify and conceptualize Him. When we try, we fall immediately into contradiction. Our thought gets diffracted, broken up into statements which it seems impossible to reconcile with each other. If then we are to have any theology at

all, we shall have to pay the price — it will always be a theology of paradox. Indeed the very act of worship, particularly corporate worship, involves the use of words and thoughts about God, and to think or speak of God at all is to run into antinomy, dialectical contradiction, paradox.<sup>9</sup>

The attempt to put our experience of God into theological statements is something like the attempt to draw a map of the world on a flat surface, the page of an atlas. It is impossible to do this without a certain degree of falsification, because the surface of the earth is spherical surface whose pattern cannot be reproduced accurately upon a plane. And yet the map must be drawn for convenience. Therefore an atlas meets the problem by giving us two different maps of the world which can be compared with each other. The one is contained in two circles representing two hemispheres. The other is contained in an oblong (Mercator's projection). Each is a map of the whole world, and they contradict each other to some

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8. This does not mean that religion is thrown back upon the 'subjective'. In that sense, in contrast with religious subjectivism, it is wholesome to be reminded that God is an objective reality.

9. Father Sergius Bulgakov writes as follows: "An antinomy simultaneously admits the truth of two contradictory, logically incompatible, but ontologically equally necessary assertions. An antinomy testifies the existence of a mystery beyond which the human reason cannot penetrate. This mystery, nevertheless, is actualized and lived in religious experience. All fundamental dogmatic definitions are of this nature." *The Wisdom of God*, p. 116 note.



extent at every point. Yet they are both needed and, taken together, they correct each other. They would be either misleading or mystifying to anyone who did not know that they represent the surface of a sphere. But they can serve their useful purpose for anyone who understands that they are intended simply to represent, in handy portable form, the pattern covering the surface of this round earth which he knows in his experience. So is it with the paradoxes of faith. They are inevitable, not because the divine reality is self-contradictory; but, because when we 'objectify' it, all our judgments are in some measure falsified, and the higher truth which reconciles them cannot be fully expressed in words, though it is experienced and lived in the 'I-and-Thou' relationship of faith towards God.<sup>10</sup>

This truth becomes clearer when we examine the paradox of Grace which lies at the very heart of the Christian life and vitally affects every part of it. It lies in the conviction which a Christian possesses, that every good thing in him, every good thing he does, is somehow not wrought by himself but by God. This is a highly paradoxical conviction, for in ascribing all to God it does not abrogate human personality nor disclaim personal responsibility.

Never is human action more truly and fully personal. Never does the agent feel more perfectly free, than in those moments of which he can say as a Christian that whatever good was in him was not his but God's. This is the deepest paradox of our whole Christian experience and it runs right through it, woven into its very texture. It is, moreover, virtually peculiar to Christianity. More than all the other paradoxes, it is a distinctive product of the religion of the Incarnation. This paradox of grace points the way more clearly and makes a better approach than anything else in our experience to the mystery of the Incarnation itself.

It seems plain that it is the presence of this paradox that has always made it so difficult to express the doctrine of the Incarnation without running into error on the one side or on the other, so as to lose either the divinity or the humanity. The Alexandrine theology and the Antiochene theology, apart from their extremes, are neither completely good nor completely bad. Both want to profess our Lord Jesus Christ, both are partly successful in doing so, but both fail too. The Alexandrine language stresses Christ's unity, but at the expense of his perfect humanity. The Antiochene language stresses the latter, but at the

10. Cfr. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (tr. by Walter Kaufmann, Edinburgh, 1970).



expense of the unity. Both these ancient Christologies are necessary today in any attempt to answer the problem of the Lord's Person, for the one is the complement of the other. They are two sides of the paradox of the Incarnation. We need both of them to correct each other. A plural Christology must be considered a normal fact in Christianity.

The New Testament testifies to the fact that this has actually happened. Modern exegetes try to show how the Christian message and particularly the Christology developed in the various layers of the Jewish Christianity and the Hellenistic Christianity, and in the Gentile mission in different ways. Even for readers not experienced in exegesis it becomes evident that the Christology implied in the Acts of the Apostles, starting from the parousia or glorification, is different from the Christology of incarnation in the prologue of St. John. If the Christology of the Synoptists is different from the Christology of St. John's Gospel despite its fundamental unity, the Alexandrine Christology may also differ from the Antiochene one. In accepting both Cyril and Leo as orthodox, the Fathers of Chalcedon approved of the possibility of a dual Christological language, as Cyril himself and John of Antioch had done so before. The

Council's own dogmatic definition and its similarity to the Formula of Union of 433 reveal the attempt to accept both Christologies. It seems certain that, whatever restatement of Christology may be necessary in the modern world, it will be in the direction of fuller and ever fuller recognition of both these Christologies.

In this perspective, it is imperative to study anew these ancient Christologies and evaluate them. Both of them will offer new insights for the better understanding of the Person of Christ. For, it is an illusion to assume that the differences of doctrinal formulations should be reduced to one formula as soon as possible. There is room for plurality in the field of the expression of faith. We can achieve common profession in this plurality and despite it. The anathemas of the Church should be considered as only the rejection of the false doctrines. "Rome never condoned anything that it believed to be heresy. Having few positive theological gifts of its own it maintained a faithful guardianship over other people's."<sup>11</sup> At present, it is the task of the Church to preach the Gospel in a positive way.

What happened in the past should not happen in the future. Then, two parties, both standing

11. G. Prestige, *Fathers and heretics*, (London, 1975), p. 126.



for the same theological principles, met and denounced each other as heretics and departed refusing to hold communion with each other. Had the one side come to Ephesus prepared to see in the teaching of the other a contribution to Christological thought, the result, it is reasonable to suppose, might have been to the lasting good of the Church. For the Antiochenes, as a result of the friendly criticism of the upholders of a different doctrinal tradition, might have come to speak more guardedly where they were maintaining the necessity of 'separating the natures' and expressing the union as a 'conjunction' and 'indwelling'. On the other hand, the Alexandrines, appreciating the judgment of the Antiochenes might have sought to express with greater care, what they were meant when speaking of 'one incarnate nature of the divine logos', of 'a natural union' and of 'one nature after the union'. If, instead of discord, harmony had prevailed at Ephesus, there might have been put forth as a gift to the Church, coming from the representatives of the two different doctrinal traditions a 'definitio fidei' representing the best which each tradition had to offer. But such a happy outcome was impossible for, "where envying and strife is, there is confusion

and every evil way" (James 3, 16).

Thus, I think that, in attempting any future Christology, the following principles should be kept in mind. First of all, it is important to recognize that the acknowledging of the humanity and divinity of Christ, both in the full, unqualified sense, involves no necessary logical contradiction. The main difficulty with the Apollinarian heresy was that it conceived the human being as a self-contained reality. Hence, Apollinarius concluded that a union of God with the complete substance of man could not take place. Thus he argued that Christ's humanity was incomplete and the Logos took the place of the human soul. But to think that God and man are mutually exclusive is a wrong conception.<sup>12</sup> Gregory Naziansen showed that it would be wrong to think in physical terms, as in the case of two physical objects which cannot be accommodated in the same space. But it is otherwise with the nature of intellectual existents which can combine with one another differently, and where two wholes can unite without excluding one another. As for the Incarnation, the presence of complete God does not mean absence of man, or the presence of only

12. This misconception underlies the modern criticism of religion and modern atheistic humanism.



incomplete man, but rather the presence of man in his completeness as man in God.<sup>13</sup> And Athanasius says that because the presence of God is creative, instead of excluding or overwhelming what is human, it posits, upholds and renews it.<sup>14</sup> Cyril also says that we were granted likeness to God, and made images of God, since the nature of man is capable of goodness, righteousness and sanctification, and possesses the God-given desire for these qualities. With the Fall, he goes on, the marks of the divine likeness no longer remained radiant among us. But through the coming of the incarnate Logos a renewal and re-moulding has taken place, so that, as St. Paul says, "we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3, 18).<sup>15</sup> Speaking on the ascension of our Lord, Severus of Antioch explains how the Incarnation is possible. Of the three reasons he gives, the second is the following. Man is created in the image of God. The eternal

and uncreated image of God the Father is indeed God the Son, and he is the effulgence of the Father's glory. Man is God's created image, so that in his essential being man can reflect God on the one hand and be the Creator's viceregent on earth on the other. Therefore it is possible for God the Son to become incarnate and be made man.<sup>16</sup>

Hence we can conclude that the relationship between God and man does not grow in inverse but in like proportion. And this is because man has a basic openness and potentiality to realize something above everything finite, and because God is love whose prodigal freedom is the undefinable itself.<sup>17</sup> "It means that the finite itself has been given an infinite depth and is no longer a contrast to the infinite, but that which the infinite himself has become, to open a passage into the infinite for all the finite, within which he himself has become a part to make himself the passage and the

13. *Orationes Theologicae*, 2. 10ff, in PG 36, 37ff.

14. *Contra Arianos*, 2, 47f., 3, 32f. in PG 26, 245ff, 389ff.

15. *Adversus Anthropomorphitas*, in PG 76, 1085-88. cfr. also in *Jo. Ev.* 1. 14. "In omnibus itaque Verbum habitavit per unum, ut, uno constituto Dei Filio in virtute, secundum Spiritum sanctitatis in universam humanitatem dignitas illa redundaret, adeoque per unum ex nobis in nos quoque perveniret illud. 'Ergo dixi, dñi estis, et filii ecclesiae omnes' (Ps 82, 6. Jn 10, 34)" PG 73, 161.

16. *Patrologia Orientalis* xxxv, 315 (Homilie XLVII. Sur l'Ascension du grand Dieu et notre Sauveur Jesus Christ).

17. W. Kasper, *Jesus, the Christ*, (London, 1976), pp. 210, 212. K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, p. 117.



door, through whose existence God himself became the reality of nothingness."<sup>18</sup> Man is not only capable of union with God, but is the sole possible presupposition for the Incarnation of God. If God wills to be corporeally present in the world, he cannot achieve this except by becoming a complete man.

Jesus Christ is the place where God and man meet, where God stoops down to man and man draws near to God. In the history of salvation he is definitive. This is perhaps the reason why Rahner says: "Christology is the end and beginning of anthropology. And this anthropology, when most thoroughly realized in Christology, is eternally theology."<sup>19</sup> Man cannot be fully defined without reference to Christology. The key, the centre and purpose of the whole of man's history is to be found in its Lord and Master.<sup>20</sup>

Unity can be regarded as perfect only when the elements to be unified do not disappear, but retain their natural character and

yet become one. This is important for Christological anthropology. Because the humanity of Christ involves the existence of the Word in the world, this is the culmination of humanity as such. On the other hand, God's being 'man with us' is made perfect only if He is truly man, that is by the fact that the humanity of Christ is given the widest possible scope to develop. The more I recognize Christ as the Son of God, the more I love Him as the man consubstantial with us. The more Christ is God, the more He is also man.

Secondly, the unity of Jesus Christ is a fact selfunderstood in the New Testament. He is one reality, one individual, one person. And this unity is thought of as starting from God the Word. God himself effects our salvation in Christ by His entering into our existence and our history. It was necessary that God himself should come down as man among men, only one at once divine and human could bestow afresh the gift of the Spirit and be the second Root of a new humanity.

18. K. Rahner, *Ibid.*

19. *id.* According to B. Welte, Jesus is the fulfilment of that unlimited openness which is constitutive of being human and whose truth is openness to God. *Homoousios hemin*, in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon* (ed.) A Grillmeyer-H. Bacht, III, pp. 51-80. This conception has the advantage of making the insights of modern anthropology about man's openness to the world fruitful for Christology.

20 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 10. As Rahner puts it, "man is only really known in his 'indefinable' essence when he is understood as *potentia obedientialis* for the divine life and when this is his nature". And he goes on to say that "One can even try to understand the hypostatic union in the line of the absolute fulfilment of what man means strictly speaking", *Ibid.* p. 186.



It was, of course, perfectly right to regard the life lived by Jesus as a human achievement. Jesus was a real man, subject to the conditions and limitations of humanity, with a human will that had to make its continual choices in the face of life's temptations, and thus His goodness must be quite realistically regarded as a human achievement. But goodness in a human life, even in small proportions, is never simply a human achievement. All goodness in a human life is wrought by God. That is the other side, and

somehow that side comes first, without destroying the human. And therefore the goodness of Jesus can ultimately be described only as the human side of a divine reality, which, so to say, was divine before it was human. The divine is always prevenient. Thus the dilemma disappears when we frankly recognize that in the doctrine of the Incarnation there is a paradox which cannot be rationalized but which can in some small measure be understood in the light of the 'paradox of grace'.

