1 Christology as natural theology: methodological issues

1. Introduction

My topic is Christology; my thesis, the coherence of Christology; my theme, Christ as the One in Whom all things hold together. Metaphysically, Christ is the center both of Godhead and cosmos. Existentially, Christ is the integrator of individual positive personal meaning; psychologically, our inner teacher; body-politically, the organizer of Godward community. Christ saves us by virtue of being real and really present: Emmanuel, God with us, sharing our human condition; ascended to His most glorious throne in heaven at God's right hand; in the most blessed sacrament of the altar; and in the hearts of all His faithful people. Switching from object- to metalanguage, from the order of reality to the order of theory, turn-of-the-twentieth-century Anglicans declare that Christology is the centerpiece of systematic theology, that which integrates the creed, that from which we reason up to the Trinity, down to creation, out through the Church to the world. My own conviction is that they got this substantially right. Thus, in arguing for the coherence of Christology, I will take the coherence of theism for granted. But I will not treat Christology as an optional supplement to generic – what philosophers of religion often call "restricted-standard" – theism. My contention is that, because of its explanatory power, Christology has an integrating force of its own.

In the order of discovery, my argument begins with soteriology: with the fact that the human condition generally and Divine–human relations in particular are non-optimal. Christ becomes an explanatory posit, which shows how these non-optimality problems

can be solved. More particularly, my argument will be that a Christology that is *metaphysically high* – interpreting Chalcedon, one that posits that in Christ the Divine Word assumes a complete human nature, so that there is one person or supposit and two natures – and *materially low* – following nineteenth- and twentieth-century tendencies to see Christ's human being as much more like ours than patristic or medieval western scholastic theology would ever allow – solves the problem of horrendous evils. Chapter 2 will present the soteriological explananda. Chapter 3 will examine what Christ's human nature would have to be like for Him to carry out those soteriological jobs. Chapters 4 and 5 will turn to attempts to make sense of a God-man in terms of the conceptualities of psychology and metaphysics. Among other things, I hope to show that the turn away from medieval metaphysics – sometimes towards other philosophical outlooks but more often resolutely away from philosophy to other disciplines – has left contemporary Anglo-American Christology in shambles, where it has not altogether washed it away. My remedy is a return to philosophical theology and to metaphysics in Christology, where medieval metaphysics is my favorite (although not the only) option!

Theoretical coherence is exhibited in part by showing how a single explanatory posit can do many explanatory jobs. My analysis of human non-optimality problems and their solution so integrates God's creative purposes with Christ's saving work as to usher Christ into a variety of theoretical roles. Chapter 6 focusses on Christ as Inner Teacher; Chapter 7 as cosmic center; Chapter 8 as the firstborn in resurrection and harbinger of cosmic renewal; Chapter 9 as priest and victim in cosmic sacrifice; and Chapter 10 as really present in the sacrament of the altar.

1.1. The scandal of Christology

To many, these agenda will seem not only unpromising but perverse. This book began as Gifford lectures, which are supposed to be on

natural religion, a syllabus designation that presupposes a divide between *natural* theology (which is understood to cover whatever could be proved *sola ratione* to all reasonable human beings) and *revealed* theology (which is epistemologically dependent upon revelation). The idea that some religious tenets could be proved to every rational person has an ancient and honorable tradition, reaching back through thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophical theology all the way to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* Euclidian model of science. It persisted into the modern period through Descartes, Leibniz, Samuel Clarke, and Christian Wolf. It flourishes in the present, not least among neo-scholastics and neo-Thomists. Depending on the optimism of the period and particular thinkers, the existence of God, some or all of His perfection-making attributes (knowledge, wisdom, power, goodness; sometimes simplicity, immutability, incorruptibility, eternity), and some generic features of His providential design have occupied the turf of natural theology. But Trinity, Christology (Incarnation and Atonement), and the sacraments have been paradigms of revealed theology.

So far from a likely meeting ground for all reasonable persons, Christology is arguably the *root* of Christian revealed theology and so is fundamentally divisive. Religiously, Christ is a point of contention among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim adherents of biblical religion, not to mention among theists generally, *a fortiori* between Christianity and South and East Asian religions. Sociopolitically, Christ is held guilty by association with Roman, "Holy Roman," and British imperialism. For centuries, the charge of "Christ-killer" fueled anti-Jewish pogroms, the pejorative "infidel" sponsored the disastrous Crusades, suspected insincerity in the profession of Christ justified the Inquisition, etc. Even in the present, many missionary efforts continue to manifest cultural arrogance.

Most obviously, Christology seems bound to be divisive because it rocks and reels on epistemologically quaking ground. Trends in biblical criticism – which first surfaced in the Enlightenment (with Spinoza and Lessing) and gained momentum at the end of the

nineteenth century, avalanching into the twentieth – took the step of counting the Bible generally and the New Testament in particular among historical documents rightly subjected to the analysis of historical methods, and then (over several decades) proceeded to undermine confidence in their historical reliability. Many circles have abandoned the search for *Jesus ipse* or for *ipsissima verba*, conceding that we are left with (at best) second- and third-generation polemical documents that (via the methods of social history) tell us more about the communities from which they emerged and their struggles than about Jesus himself and what he said and did. Even the evidentially more optimistic Schweitzer and succeeding generations of "questers" offer cold comfort, introducing to us a series of culturally conditioned "historical" Jesuses, each in his own way theologically unpalatable to many.

Moreover, there was (and is) a mounting (not to say idolatrous) fascination with "the scientific worldview": with the triumphal claim of scientific method to be the one really "objective" source of knowledge, the one whose deliverances are and ought to be convincing to every rational person; with the accomplishments of science engendering the belief, fostering the hope, propounding the dogma, that science – biology, maybe just physics and chemistry – will be able to explain everything without remainder; with a picture of the universe as a closed system that, however probabilistic, admits of no miracles. Yet, for Christians, Christ not only performed miracles – exorcisms, cures, walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes, changing water into wine – Christ was and *is* the biggest miracle, the Divine Word become flesh, surely a phenomenon well outside the explanatory scope and capacities of the natural sciences!

As St. Paul declared long ago, Christology is a scandal both to Jews and Greeks. How can we blame Christian theologians who find traditional Christology an embarrassment to be somehow de-emphasized, marginalized, reduced, or relativized? The demands of contemporary rationality and civility alike seem to require it.

1.2. *Evasive maneuvers*

At a very high level of generality, we can distinguish two types of reaction to these developments, by those who enter into them deeply and feel their power.

1.2.1. "Least-common-denominator"?

One response upholds the ancient and medieval ideal of a rationality common to all human beings. On this approach, least-common-denominator becomes *an epistemic norm*, dictating what can be counted as ground-level real. Least-common-denominator is also advanced as *a pragmatic counsel and moral norm*. How often do social scientists and political commentators in effect urge us to follow the Cliffordian deontological principle not to accept or embrace anything as true on insufficient evidence, in order to stifle irrational forces in our society, to bring an end to religious warfare and ethnic cleansing, because Clifford's principle will leave us unentitled to believe those things that divide. "*Eliminative*" versions require our many and varied cultural disagreements to be shaved away, skimmed off, and boiled down to a common core that everyone can accept. The trouble is that eliminative least-common-denominator outlooks are symbolically too impoverished to organize and orient human life. Liberal democracy advocates that the state restrict itself to a least-common-denominator ideology, but this is in order to leave room for different individuals and groups to embrace a variety of alternative and richer schemes. The original intention was not that the shared ground of civil religion should do the whole job.

"*Reductive*" least-common-denominator approaches continue to use God- or Christ-language as symbols, but subject them to reductive analyses in terms of states or aspects of what least-common-denominator identifies as fundamentally real. Thus, Gordon Kaufmann, in his book *In the Face of Mystery: Constructive Theology*, lets "God" stand for the serendipitous creativity that has evolved

humankind and that moves creation forward in an ever more humane direction;[1] "Christ," not narrowly for the man Jesus, but for the whole new order of relationships which reveal the direction in which ultimate reality is moving – of self-sacrificing love and all-inclusive community – and so focus the norm and goal.[2] The idea is to borrow the motivational aura that still surrounds the old religious symbols, the better to focus a picture of the universe that will inspire and reinforce moral and humane behavior and projects. (Kaufmann does allow that other religions could offer the same sorts of reductive analyses. Insofar as they were well executed, religions would be on a par so far as their metaphysical grounding was concerned and superiority claims would have no justification. But not just any symbols would function to reveal the direction in which ultimate reality is moving and/or inspire human beings to live up to radical moral norms.) Yet, when all is said and done, reductionists like Kaufmann appear to "thin out" the significance of the old symbols so much that, while their approach does enable the present generation to keep up some ties (of *verbal* continuity) with their forebears by deploying the "same" symbols, it does not assign the symbols the kind of content that would keep the motivational aura from fading, and so does not endow the symbols with enough power to deter the younger generation from shedding religious labels as merely vestigial and adopt the framework of secular ethics instead.

1.2.2. Pluralisms

Pluralism begins from the other end of the spectrum. If least-common-denominator approaches arguably impoverish all competitors by deleting differences or explaining them away, pluralists pledge to preserve each of the world's great religions in all of their

[1] Gordon Kaufmann, *In the Face of Mystery: Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), e.g., ch. 23, 348–357, ch. 25, 375.
[2] Kaufmann, *In the Face of Mystery*, ch. 25, 382–391.

symbolic richness, and to appreciate how each is undergirded and textured by centuries of individual and collective religious experience. Yet, insofar as differences are retained, these systems can neither be held (at the theoretical level) all to be literally true at once (in the sense of corresponding with Reality with a capital "R",) nor (at the practical level) can they all be practiced at once.

Philosophically, members of the Rush-Rees Wittgensteinian school, represented most notably by D. Z. Phillips,[3] meet this difficulty by reaching for a form of *anti-realism*. They maintain that none of the religious language games or the belief-systems that go with them is true by correspondence with Reality with a capital "R," because there is no such thing as Reality with a capital "R." Rather, the criteria for what counts as real are *internal* to each language game. According to them, the notion of transcendent criteria of reality that operate outside any and every language game is philosophically incoherent, and turns the *external* question of which language game is really true into philosophical nonsense.

By contrast, in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, John Hick is a metaphysical realist in the sense that he believes in Reality with a capital "R" that transcends, is what it is, prior to and independently of any human conceptualities of it. Human "interaction" with Reality with a capital "R" evokes a variety of conceptual schemes and religious practices, such as are represented in the world's great religions. The problem is that Reality with a capital "R" is so disproportioned to our cognitive faculties that any ways of thinking or acting that we come up with are too distant from It to be *literally* true of (cannot nearly enough correspond to) It. Consequently, having begun his career defending the eschatological verifiability of religious language against second-quarter-of-the-twentieth-century logical positivism, Hick in effect concludes that religious outlooks and systems of thought do not have cognitive content but are at best

[3] D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), esp. ch. 1, 1–29.

mythologically or *metaphorically true* by virtue of their capacity to advance the growth of their practitioners from a self-centered to an other-centered to a Reality-centered manner of life.[4] He thus agrees with Phillips that the rationale for choosing to embrace a given religion (to play a religious language game) is *pragmatic* or *moral* in nature.[5]

1.2.3. Christology, reduced anyway?

Since Christianity numbers among the world's great religions, one would expect Christ to be allowed to retain a central place in its worship and practice; insofar as theological reflection is permitted by pluralists (as it is by Hick but arguably isn't by Rush-Rees Wittgensteinians), one would expect Christology to remain key in Christian thought. It would seem consistent with pluralist approaches to leave the *content* of traditional "high" Christologies – e.g., the claim that Jesus is God, the Incarnate Divine Word – in place while altering the understanding of their truth conditions (denying literal correspondence with Reality with a capital "R").

In fact, this is not what happens. Even earlier pluralists, who – like Schleiermacher and Tillich – wanted to insist on some superiority for Christianity, felt it necessary to reconstruct traditional (patristic and scholastic) Christology in terms of their alternative soteriological requirements and philosophical commitments. More recently, pluralists – such as Hick[6] and Don Cupitt[7] – insist that belief in the superiority of Christianity has inspired Christians to do

[4] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), Part Four, ch. 19, 343–361.

[5] Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, ch. 2, 37, ch. 8, 149–160.

[6] John Hick, "An Inspiration Christology for a Religiously Plural World," in *Encountering Jesus: A Debate on Christology*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), ch. 1, 5–22, 32–38, esp. 13–17. See also his *Interpretation of Religion*, Part Four, ch. 20, 371–372.

[7] Don Cupitt, "The Christ of Christendom," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), ch. 7, 133–147, 205, esp. 137, 140–141.

many terrible things (to tolerate or promote anti-Semitic pogroms, to implement imperialist policies, etc.). Tracing the problem to the root of high Christology – the belief that Jesus is God and hence that *God* is the founder of Christianity – they conclude that high Christology fails their pragmatic test, and so must be supplanted by a low one, in which Christ is one remarkable religious leader among others, possessed of a high degree of God-consciousness and founder of an (until recently) highly successful religious movement. Belief systems of other religions might likewise need weeding by the pragmatic criteria. But Hick begins as a Christian, and for Hick repentance begins at home. Thus, while Hick has given considerable attention to Christology, it is largely by way of opposing traditional (patristic and medieval western) Christology as pernicious, and reinstating a Christ turn-of-the-twentieth-century "left-wing" liberal Protestantism would be happy with: Christ as one remarkable religious leader among others. Increasingly, in his later works, Hick's "soul-making" soteriology seeks ground common to the world's great religions – as Hick's description of the goal of spiritual development shifts from "Christ-centeredness" to "God-centeredness" to "other-centeredness" or "Reality-centeredness."

Hick's many books about religious pluralism are rich in provocative insights. All the same, his sociological objections to traditional (patristic and medieval western) Christology would be difficult to substantiate. It is not enough to point to *concomitance*: one must show that religion is a *salient* cause of the deplored effects. In fact, Christians do not seem *more* disposed to ethnic strife than others. Religion can be badge and banner, but it would be hard to show that the conflicts wouldn't have found some other equally handy pretext or "us-versus-them" marker. To target traditional (patristic and medieval western) Christology, one would have to show not simply that it was invoked, but that, apart from these doctrinal claims, the nefarious policies would not have been implemented, the horrendous action not undertaken. Hick's and Cupitt's thesis – that Chalcedonian Christology was invented because it was needed to

support Constantinian political ideology – is historically belied by the fact that Arianism nearly triumphed in the early years of Christianity's being made an official religion in the Roman empire. Chalcedonian Christology cannot have figured as a motivator for many, insofar as it is not clear how widely the theological issue was understood.

2. Sceptical realism: the project, reconceived

By contrast, in matters philosophical and theological, I am *a sceptical realist*. I count myself *a realist* about philosophical and theological theories in that I believe (contrary to Rudolf Carnap[8]) that there is some fact of the matter, prior to and independently of what we think, believe, or conceive of in our theories – some Reality with a capital "R" to which our theories may or may not correspond. I am a *sceptic*, however, because I believe that the defense of any well-formulated philosophical/theological position of any interest will eventually involve premisses which are fundamentally controversial and so unable to command the assent of all reasonable persons. Moreover, sceptical realism (as I understand it) breaks the link between cognitive content and truth on the one hand, and epistemic decidability on the other. Thus, philosophical and theological claims – "Mental events are token-reducible to physical events," "A tree is a collection of ideas in the mind," "Mind and body are distinct substances," "The divine essence is supposited by three persons," "There is one person and two natures in Christ" – may be counted literally meaningful and asserted as true, even if human disagreements about them are naturally undecidable in this life. (An omnipotent God could, of course,

[8] Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," in *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*, ed. Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 233–248.