

UNIT 5: INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTOLOGY

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1.1-3, 14

Christian theology emerges from the human encounter with God in Jesus Christ; it is an attempt to come to terms with the 'trauma' of Christ. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth claimed that Christian theology is the attempt to articulate the meaning and implications of the statement 'Jesus is Lord'. Over the first four centuries of its life, the Church came to realise that ideas about God, humanity, creation and salvation had been consummated in a devastatingly beautiful way: through the one who was incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended, and continues to be present in his body, the Church, and guides the Church into truth by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A new language had to be formed in order to speak of what Barth called 'the Christ event'. This demanded reflection on the very nature of language itself, and what it might, or might not, be appropriate to say in reference to our deeply mysterious encounter with Christ. It involved the formation of the language and logic of Christian theology with reference to the *Logos* – the Word and Reason of God. It is therefore unsurprising that all epochs and traditions have exhibited at least this common characteristic: that Christ is the beginning and the end – the alpha and the omega – of Christian theology.

However, Christian theology cannot simply be reduced to speech about Christ alone (a tendency which is often pejoratively referred to as 'Christomonism'). Why not? Because to speak about Christ is also to speak about the Trinity, ecclesiology, soteriology, scripture, theological anthropology, and so on. Christology is, as it were, the central connection between the various parts of systematic Christian theology.

As you deepen your study of this central area of Christian theology, it is therefore important to remember the sheer breadth of Christology and the extent of the implications of humanity's encounter with Jesus Christ. First, bear in mind that Christology is not simply the study of the person and work of a man who happened to live about 2000 years ago. Why not? The contemporary theologian Graham Ward argues that Christ's identity – including his bodily identity – is in

flux throughout the gospels.¹ Christ is first identified as the baby at Bethlehem. However, the bodily identity of Jesus seems strange, for this is a body which heals other bodies, walks on water and is transfigured. In some sense, Christ's identity is displaced at the Last Supper when he declares before bread and wine that 'this is my body; this is my blood'. Christ is crucified and risen, and his identity is apparently displaced again at the ascension. The story of Christ meeting two travellers on the road to Emmaus once again associates the recognition of his presence with the breaking of bread, an action which is now shared by Christians across the world. St. Paul identifies Christ with the Church, and we are told in the letter to the Ephesians that Christ now 'fills all in all' (1.22). The identity of Christ therefore begins with a single baby, but moves out to fill all things.

This suggests that Christology is both **particular** and **universal**. It is particular in the sense that Christology concerns the individual Jesus of Nazareth, and the New Testament claims that Christ is for every single individual *qua* individual. Christology is universal in the sense that Christ now fills all things (the ascension is the *completion*, not the end, of the incarnation) and is for everyone. If Christ is divine, there can be no limits to divinity itself. It is startling to reflect that, for the first time in human history, the Gospel is a message which is *for everyone* – not simply a political or intellectual elite, nor a particular people at a particular time, nor a certain race of people. Christ is declared as being 'for all'. This is a genuinely *universal* teaching which nevertheless addresses every *particular* person. So Christology, or Christian faith, cannot merely be 'a personal faith in Jesus Christ', and neither can it merely be a generalised universal faith with no personal implications.

So Christology is concerned with our encounter with Christ in Jesus of Nazareth, but, insofar as Christ 'fills all in all', Christology has boundless implications – concerning our understanding of God, creation, human nature, salvation, the Church, politics, ethics and so on. This is the essential thrust of the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar whom you will encounter later in this Unit.

Secondly, bear in mind the implications of the utterly radical and shocking teaching that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. Why is this so crucial? Because if a finite material life can exhibit the fullness of God's love (as the Church declares it did in the person of Jesus), then, in principle, there is no limit to what material nature *per se* might exhibit. Material creation, because it has been the bearer of divine revelation, has been shown to carry the potential to bear the fullness of truth. This has radical implications for finite material life because such life (in

¹ Graham Ward, 'Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus', in J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998).

other words, creation, of which we are a part) can, by God's grace, be saturated in truth and beauty. Quite literally, Christ presents us with endless possibilities for participating *as material human beings* in the fullness of God's life.

The study of Christology is therefore a daunting but thrilling prospect. This part of the module aims to help you to pick your way through a labyrinthine subject. We will begin at the beginning, with what the New Testament says about Jesus of Nazareth. For some, this will be nothing more than a reminder that the New Testament offers a very varied picture of the identity and meaning of Christ. We will then progress to the Church's distillation of its teaching about Christ at the ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451). The so-called Chalcedonian definition – that Christ is two unmixed natures in one person – becomes definitive for all later orthodox Christologies (and defines negatively many heretical Christologies). We will then move forwards to the high Middle Ages to examine St Anselm's and St Thomas Aquinas's understanding of the incarnation and their answer to the question 'Why did God bring salvation by becoming man?'

These first four sections set the scene for a study of more recent Christology, first in the work of the German Protestant Karl Barth (1886-1968) and the Swiss Roman Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988). Barth is probably the most influential twentieth century systematic theologian of any tradition. Von Balthasar was very influenced by Barth – he wrote a book on Barth's work and they corresponded a good deal – but was in the end suspicious of the influence of Hegel on Barth, and Barth's 'low' ecclesiology and classic Protestant objection to Mariology. Von Balthasar is regarded as one of the most polymathic, original and prolific writers of the twentieth century. His theology deeply influenced the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The Christologies of these two giants of twentieth century systematic theology will be the subject of the fifth section.

Barth and von Balthasar worked in the German speaking world during the devastating World Wars of the twentieth century. Both represent an attempt to resist what they regarded as the modern tendency towards idolatry, secularism and nihilism which had led to the rise of National Socialism in Germany. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Christian theology attempted to come to terms with violence and genocide on an unprecedented scale. This caused a return to an emphasis on the God's solidarity with suffering humanity in the form of his crucified Son. An emphasis on the kenotic suffering of Christ had been apparent from the late nineteenth century, but this was later accompanied by a Lutheran style *theologia crucis* in the work, for example, of Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann's Christology particularly emphasises eschatology and hope, themes

which were deeply attractive in the midst of the ruins of central Europe. This will be the topic of the final unit.

This part of the module will work at a rapid pace, but it is hoped that your knowledge of some central methods and topics in systematic theology will be enhanced. As you progress through these units, remember that the theology of Christ begins and ends with the exposition of the meaning and implications of the first chapter of the Gospel of John: the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.