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Current Issues in Christology

Three major issues in contemporary christology are the resurrection of Jesus, the role of narrative in christology, and the claim that Jesus is universal savior. Recently three books have appeared, each dealing with one of these issues.

In *The Resurrection of Jesus*, Kenan Osborne clearly states his objectives: "first, to assemble in a readable and understandable way the contemporary scholarly research on the resurrection of Jesus; second . . . to formulate . . . the aspect of religious experience as central to an understanding of the resurrection; third, to indicate in a brief way a possibility to develop a more unified Christology" (1).

In the first of four chapters Osborne presents an overview of the theological research on the resurrection of Jesus from the past eighty years. He makes several very important points, many of which are developed in subsequent chapters. I note four.

First, he points out the solely apologetic treatment of the resurrection by the manuals. Understanding the tomb and appearance narratives literally, the manualists thought such texts confirmed the truth of Jesus' claims and proved his divinity. Second, in view of historical critical methods, we can no longer read these texts literally or physically, and we must distinguish between their historical and their theological claims. Too many focus upon secondary issues and miss the primary (a point to which I shall return). Relative to what is primary and secondary, Osborne rightly points out that there is little binding doctrine regarding the specifics of the resurrection, such as, what the disciples actually saw. Third, preaching, catechetics, and liturgical prayer remain innocent of recent scholarship on the resurrection. Nor has this scholarship filtered down to the ordinary Christian. Fourth, he rightly but too briefly notes that present experience is important for our interpretation of the resurrection.

In chapter two Osborne discusses the many voices of the New Testament concerning the resurrection and raises significant issues for systematic theologians, which he addresses in chapter three. For example: (1) the special role for Peter in the Easter experience; (2) the role of women in the rise and proclamation of Easter faith; (3) the social and ecclesial nature of the Easter experience; (4) the connection between Easter faith and the Eucharist; (5) the *disbelief* and *non-recognition* motifs of the accounts. This last point is an important one. Belief in the resurrection is not caused by touching, seeing, hearing, or by an empty

tomb, which are *secondary* issues. It ultimately demands an act of faith that God has raised Jesus, the *primary* issue. This act of faith is a gift of God's grace and, as we learn especially from Paul (1 Cor 15:8), is associated with a profound religious/revelatory experience, which is now expressed in christophanic language (i.e., the appearances). This appearance language, therefore, is derivative and hence not to be taken literally. All of this raises questions regarding the "bodily" nature of the risen Jesus.

Chapter four presents a unified christology, that is, one which integrates into a coherent whole the three moments of the gospel narrative: (1) pre-existence and infancy, (2) the public ministry, and (3) the resurrection. Much in this chapter appears to be an "appendage."

Of the many important points made in the book, I wish to comment upon two. First is the use of historical-critical methods. Osborne rightly shows the significance of using these methods to interpret the empty tomb and appearance narratives. They can help to determine what these narratives do not mean. He could have complemented his treatment with a more explicit and detailed employment of literary-critical methods, which are designed to "break open" texts, to release their semantic plenitude. Osborne is to be praised for working out the implications of applying historical-critical methods to the tomb and appearance narratives. They no longer mean what they "seem" to say. Their meaning is a bit more complicated than a literal reading. The fact that contemporary biblical methodology and their endorsement by the Church (for over *fifty* years now!) have not filtered "down" to the people and influenced preaching and catechetics is inexcusable.

Second, Osborne's understanding of the "appearances" deserves attention. Though he seems to claim that his explanation is novel ("it is my thesis that . . .," 109), it can be found in several authors, beginning with Bultmann's "Jesus rose into the faith of his disciples" (see also, Marxsen, Schillebeeckx, Pesch, Mackey, McDermott, and, arguably, Rahner). Perhaps Osborne could bolster his position here through further exploration of the possible linkage between the Eucharist and Easter faith.

A few friendly criticisms: First, there are several points regarding style. Why in a popular work does the author give the complete Greek texts for the tomb and appearance narratives and use phrases such as *Ausgangspunkt* or *communicatio idiomatum*? At times this work seems needlessly repetitious and filled with sideline discussions. It is not always easy to follow the author's train of thought or to know exactly what his position is. Second, in dealing with the resurrection the author needs to distinguish clearly between its historical, hermeneutical, and theological aspects. Third, while Osborne discusses the importance of the resurrection for the *humanity* of Jesus, he neglects to discuss the

constitutive significance of the resurrection for Jesus' sonship, messiahship, lordship (for example see Rom 1:3-4; Acts 2:32-36; Phil 2:9-11). In some way the resurrection is a *trinitarian* event; that is, in and through the resurrection the Father *fully* anoints Jesus as Christ and Son through the power of the Spirit. Fourth, while I espouse Osborne's interpretation of appearance language, I have to ask: What brought these disciples to such a profound religious/revelatory experience? If all revelatory experiences are historically grounded, then what historical events gave rise to this experience which comes to be articulated in christophanic language? Without a revelatory experience grounded in historical event(s), we have kerygmatic or revelatory docetism, Bultmann's problem. Fifth and finally, was it only Jesus' humanity or human nature which was raised and not Jesus' person? By raising this question we must address the adequacy of the "one divine person, two nature" neo-Chalcedonian model of christology. That takes us to Michael Cook's *Christology as Narrative Quest*.

Cook's underlying questions are: "Has our image of Jesus . . . shifted? And if so, is this a legitimate shift and does it remain in continuity with the human, historical Jesus of Nazareth . . . (and) the ways Christians have imagined him and brought him to expression throughout the centuries?" (7). To respond to these questions Cook analyzes four faith-images of Jesus: the beloved Son of Mark's Gospel, the pre-existent Son of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the incarnate Word of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, and the rejected prophet of the Mexican-American experience.

Cook's thesis, which he explores through an analysis of the four texts corresponding to the four images, is that "we begin in story and end in story" (58). Therefore, "more conceptual kinds of language as exemplified in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas are legitimate and necessary but always subordinate to the primacy of the story that is the foundation and only adequate context for such language" (212). Hence, stories that have metaphoric impact, that is, which reveal new ways of seeing and hearing, are the primary means of divine revelation. It follows that narrative is central in communicating the significance of Jesus. All images of Jesus "are funded by story and must return to story in order to have an adequate and appropriate context of meaning" (176). Hence all christology is on a "narrative quest."

Cook's ultimate goal is "to affirm the legitimacy of each faith-image of Jesus within its particular cultural and historical conditions while freeing the normative and authoritative tradition from any form of cultural and/or intellectual imperialism" (213).

Given the questions, thesis, and goal of the book, Cook's point is that it is the founding and funding role of narrative in christology that

enables us on the one hand to affirm the legitimacy of each of the four faith-images of Jesus and, on the other hand, to find continuity within the tradition. I believe that Cook establishes his thesis and fulfills his goal. I am not sure that he answers adequately his opening questions.

In his "Introduction," Cook discusses foundational issues and presents the overall plan and purpose of the book. Chapter one, "The Centrality of Narrative in Christology," discusses the nature of and relationship between symbol, metaphor, analogy, and narrative and then takes up the centrality of narrative in and for human experience and as a linguistic-hermeneutical category important for interpreting theological texts. This first chapter is a very compact presentation of the more significant literature dealing with "the linguistic turn" and its role in theology. It is aimed primarily at establishing Cook's thesis stated above. Chapter two takes up the image of the beloved Son in Mark, a narrative about Jesus which emerged because "we cannot really understand who Jesus is without telling the *whole* story" (69). It is the story of Jesus' journey to the cross that provides the understanding of titles such as Christ, Son of Man, and Son of God. Jesus is God's Son only as the crucified. In chapter three Cook considers the creedal image of Jesus as the preexistent Son. After treating the biblical foundations of creeds, their emergence from baptismal experience and their various roles, he concludes, in accordance with his basic thesis, that their fundamental character is not primarily to be systems of doctrine but to be story. "They are summaries of the gospel, digests of the scriptures" (110). Therefore, the key to interpreting the image of the preexistent Son in the Creed is the story which underlies it, especially the Gospel of John. At this point Cook presents a highly compact though somewhat confusing treatment of preexistence in John. He concludes that it is the *human, earthly* Jesus who is the preexistent Son in a *personal* and not merely ideal way. Abstract speculations and conceptualizations about a preexistent *logos* apart from the concrete man, Jesus, and his soteriological story and hence about an immanent trinity apart from an economic, soteriological trinity are not biblically warranted. Cook calls this separation found in the creeds of the inner divine life (immanent trinity) and the divine involvement in the creative process (economic trinity) "an epoch-making paradigm shift" (136) which has led to very abstruse speculations on the inner workings of the triune divine life as well as to the inadequate christologies of Alexandria and Antioch.

In chapter four Cook takes up Aquinas' image of Jesus as the incarnate Word. Since the *Summa* is anything but a narrative, Cook sees it as the most acute test of his basic thesis "that all our human attempts at systematic conceptualization . . . have their originating ground in stories . . . and must constantly return to these stories as the only adequate context for meaning" (159). When compared to the Jesus of the

story, Thomas's Jesus is somewhat docetic, since his humanity has all possible perfections (e.g., beatific vision, fullness of grace), a position difficult to sustain in the face of contemporary biblical scholarship.

In the final chapter Cook turns to liberation theology and its return to narrative, specifically in this instance the Mexican-American people's own narrative. Mexican-American liberation theology has its ultimate origin in the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. "And of course her story is inseparably the story of Jesus, her *mestizo* son" (178). The image of Jesus which emerges from an analysis of the Mexican-American experience is that of the rejected prophet. I found this chapter confusing. It seems much more occupied with Mary than with Jesus, to whom he dedicates only four pages.

Five reflections on Cook's book. First, this work is not for beginners. For example, to understand chapter one with its multiple references to and citations from leading hermeneutical and literary scholars demands more than an elementary background in the philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and literary theory. Often the citations shed little light since they themselves are in need of explanation. The same could be said to a lesser extent of the introduction and chapters three and four.

Second, we are frequently reminded that we must return to the originating story. But to whose version of the story? Mark's? Matthew's? John's? John Dominic Crossin's? Or John Meier's? It is not clear what the author's position is on this thorny question.

Third, I basically agree (I think!) with Cook's position on the "pre-existence" (a very tricky word!) of the Son. However, what makes his position confusing is that on the one hand he does not affirm a merely *ideal* preexistence of the *logos*, which then becomes person in Jesus. That is the position which he seems to affirm regarding wisdom in the christological hymns (113). Nor on the other hand does he affirm, as do Nicea and Constantinople, the personal (another tricky word) preexistence of the *logos asarkos* (the Word without flesh). Rather, he affirms the personal preexistence of the earthly, historical Jesus. On page 116 he raises the question: "How do we interpret the fact that for John it is Jesus, the human, earthly Jesus from Nazareth, who pre-exists with the Father . . .?" I do not see where he clearly answers that question. In any discussion of preexistence, one's understanding of eternity must be clarified. Is it understood protologically as a mode of being beyond time, timelessness, as with Boethius? Or is it understood eschatologically as the fulfillment and fullness of time, the recapitulation of time, as with the Scriptures? Cook is quite right in maintaining that the resurrection is constitutive of Jesus' "eternal relation to the Father" (138). But that claim seems to demand an eschatological understanding of eternity as the fullness of time, not timelessness.

On this question of preexistence, Cook seems influenced by James Dunn's 1980 edition of *Christology in the Making*. However, in the 1989 edition Dunn has developed his position, a development reflected also in his 1991 *The Partings of the Ways*. In the latter work, Dunn understands the Johannine preexistence of Christ in the same (impersonal) sense that Lady Wisdom preexists. "In the fourth Gospel, Son of God Christology is not distinct and different from Wisdom Christology" (Dunn, 244).

Fourth, Cook raises several questions at the outset. One of these deals with whether the shifts in our images of Jesus are legitimate and remain in continuity with the human, historical Jesus and the tradition. I am not sure what his answer is. If the credal teaching regarding the preexistent Son represents an "epoch-making paradigm shift" from the Scriptures (137). And if we must return to the normativity of the story of Jesus to interpret properly the Creed and thus prevent distortions (145, n. 72), then how can the image of the preexistent Son in the Creed be in continuity with the human, historical Jesus? (This is also an issue for the image of the incarnate Word in Thomas.) In fact, and I think Cook and I agree here, unless one does some hermeneutical "spins" on Nicea and Constantinople, the historical humanity of Jesus will be only nominally affirmed. Nor does returning to the grounding story necessarily ensure continuity; think of Arius who could cite the story until Athanasius was blue (or perhaps red) in the face.

Fifth, Cook often mentions Ricoeur's "aporias of temporality" and how the poetics of narrativity can respond to these aporias (e.g., 41, 53, 70). Unless one already understands Ricoeur (and possibly Husserl) on this point, I doubt that he/she will understand Cook. More importantly, how does Ricoeur's poetics of narrativity overcoming the aporias of temporality relate to the underlying questions, thesis, or purpose of this book? I am sure that it does, but how it does is not clear to me.

Returning now to Osborne from the perspective of Cook, I questioned the adequacy of the neo-Chalcedonian "model" of one person (the eternal *logos*) with two distinct natures. Without denying the "truth" affirmed through this model, many today question the adequacy of the model, itself influenced by philosophical presuppositions such as the absolute immutability of God, a notion with more affinity to Athens than to Jerusalem. The basic thesis of Cook's book, the hermeneutical centrality of the founding story, enables theologians today to retrieve the basic "truths" of the creeds and christological councils without necessarily accepting the onto-theological presuppositions underlying their articulation. In view of Cook's work, one could say that Jesus himself in his totality was raised and because of that resurrection he is Lord, Christ, and even "preexistent" Son.

In discussing Mark, Cook points out that “Jesus’ story is clearly identified as God’s own story” (80). That brings us to Scott Cowdell’s *Is Jesus Unique?* (1996).

Originally a doctoral dissertation, Cowdell’s book is a Herculean effort to present an overview of christology from 1965 to 1995 with a focus on the specific issue of the uniqueness and finality of Jesus. It is undertaken with a sensitivity to the many methodological issues raised by the shifting sands of a postmodern, anti-foundational, anti-metaphysical, historically skeptical, culturally-linguistically relativistic, and religiously pluralistic world. His bibliography of over three hundred entries is itself a gold mine. Cowdell approaches this mass of material by employing a typology or grid consisting of four quadrants: conservative, idealist, liberal, and radical. These quadrants are determined by the extent to which a theologian relies on revelation and/or ontology, as well as on historical-Jesus research and correlation with some universal human structure or experience. All but those in the last quadrant attribute some form of uniqueness and finality to Jesus.

Cowdell is to be applauded for covering such a massive terrain in roughly 450 pages and doing it with a generally clear style. Of course in offering a “Who’s Who” of the last forty years of christology and in formatting his material according to a preplanned grid, the author leaves himself open to two criticisms. First, it is very difficult for one person to master so many authors. Second, as Cowdell himself realizes, one can question not only the adequacy of his typology but also the placement of individuals within certain quadrants. While I highly recommend this book for anyone who is looking for an introductory immersion into contemporary christology, especially regarding the issue of Jesus’ uniqueness and finality, I do want to raise three questions. First, what does Cowdell mean by “unique and final”? Second, what has the Christian tradition meant by calling Jesus Christ unique and final (or the one and only)? Third, are the various positions dealt with in continuity with and faithful to this tradition or “Christian fact,” a term not easily admissible in our postmodern world?

This question deserves further reflection. In dealing with the issue of Jesus’ uniqueness and finality it is helpful to distinguish, with David Tracy, issues dealing with adequacy or intelligibility from issues dealing with appropriateness. The first concerns the need to correlate one’s position with contemporary experience so as to make it intelligible and credible. The second issue concerns appropriateness, the need to ensure that one’s position is in continuity with and faithful to the tradition or “Christian fact.” For the “radicals” of Cowdell’s fourth quadrant continuity is not an issue because the tradition is wrong. For them there is no fear of throwing the baby out with the bath water for the baby is the bath water. But how do the others fare in relation to criteria of appro-

priateness? Cowdell's own "hermeneutically sophisticated, liberal" approach—influenced by Tracy, Sobrino, Segundo, and Van Beeck—seems more concerned with the very valid and important question of how to make a credible case today for Jesus' uniqueness and finality. In other words, he faces up to issues of adequacy. My question is: What constitutes this uniqueness and finality for which we must make a case today? What is the "Christian fact?" If Jesus does not have a unique and final relationship with YHWH, why worry about how to make Jesus credible today? At least by the end of the day we need a christology "from above," one that ultimately accounts for Jesus' identity by means of God's unique reference to him, one that sees Jesus as the story (or self-exegesis) of God. Therefore, lest we end up throwing the baby out with the bath water in trying to make a case for the uniqueness and finality of Jesus today, we must first know who and what this Jesus is whom we have been affirming, praising, and even "doing" since the first Easter experience (Osborne's issue). To do that we must first return to the original Jesus-story in all of its forms (Cook's issue). Once we have critically or appropriately understood the "Christian fact," we are then left with issues of adequacy, namely, how to make that fact meaningful and credible today (Cowdell's issue). This last concern is no mean task in a totally relativistic, postmodern, anti-metaphysical world in which there are no "facts" in any sense since truth and being have been swallowed up by the presence (and boredom!) of absence.

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