

Unproven philosophical assumptions, not valid arguments, are behind the current attempts to deny the Catholic doctrine on Christ.

Some modern views on Christ

By Leo Elders

■ For a devout Christian nothing is more consoling than to think of Jesus along the lines of the hymn *Jesu dulcis memoria*. It may happen, however, if he reads certain recent publications in the field of Christology, that he will get confused. He may come to the realization that his faith, which he received from the Church, is different from what the authors write. He may feel hurt in his most cherished convictions and not understand how certain writers can propose opinions which seem to be at variance with the Christian creed. Time and again he may speak about his suffering and indignation with a friendly priest and ask for an explanation of why these new opinions can be spread in the Church. In view of this it may perhaps be helpful to attempt to give a survey and appraisal of some re-

cent Christological thinking.

Ever since the end of the 18th century, rationalist authors have suggested that the piety of the faithful hid the person of Jesus behind a veil of myths and that the historian should try to uncover the real Jesus. This line of thinking found its culmination in *Die Christusmythe* (1909) of A. Drews, who went so far as to deny the very existence of Jesus. Another group of authors developed, against the general background of Hegel's *Logik*, a theory of projection: man would project his needs and desires outside himself and so constitute the contents of Christian religion. For instance, Feuerbach explains the dogma of the incarnation as the elevation of man to divine rank — at the level of human consciousness — and, therefore, of God's descent. It

would seem that these kinds of projection or objectivation theories did have some influence on modern Christological thinking.

Some reduce Jesus

The attempts of rationalist authors to discover the real Jesus, freed from the traits ascribed to him by devotion or dogma, have failed and often ended in a subjective construction: Jesus was reduced to a prophet who wanted to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, but who failed; or Jesus was made a revolutionary preacher in the social field, etc. Nowadays several scholars such as, for instance, G. Bornkamm, feel that it is not possible to write a purely historical life of Jesus in the sense of a complete biography. The reasons are that, on the one hand, the greatness and depth of Jesus leave behind all the schemes of traditional biography and, on the other hand, the gospel stories are not just historical documents but also express the faith of the evangelists. This consideration led Bultmann to conclude that the question of the historical Jesus is theologically unsound. However, Bultmann's position was sharply criticized by Käsemann and others, and nowadays an author like Pannenberg wants to reach the historical Jesus through the kerygma of the Church of the first century. If we can reach, in this way, the historical Jesus, we no longer need to preach the faith, he feels, in an authoritarian way, but we can solicit adhesion upon scientific grounds which everybody can verify. Within the Catholic Church exegetical studies were accelerated after the Vatican Council and results were vulgarized, as if all were

driven by the secret hope that through *Formgeschichte*, *Redaktionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte* a wholly new understanding of Christ would be reached. It was often forgotten that the meaning of Holy Scripture as the Word of God is the doctrine of the Church, and that scientific exegesis therefore has an auxiliary, rather than a determining task. Only he who in submission to the Magisterium and in full adhesion to the doctrine of the faith studies Holy Scripture can find the fulness of truth which God intended to convey to his Church. Now we know as believing Christians that there is a total continuity between the historical Jesus and the glorified Christ.

Rationalists: Creed evolved

It is this continuity which was rejected by rationalists such as A. Loisy. According to them the orthodoxy of the doctrine of the faith is a myth because the Christian creed is the result of an evolution in the thought of the succeeding Christian generations. Loisy, as well as Harnack, wanted to explain how Jesus of Nazareth had reached the rank of God. Jesus would remain the Great Teacher of religious truth; for Harnack he was a supreme wise man, for Loisy a seer, but if some wanted to see more in him, they did not object to that either. The apostles felt the need to express their new faith, Loisy suggests, in doctrinal formulae (*Jésus et la tradition évangélique*, 1910, p. 251) and, finally, in the Hellenistic communities the idea of Christ the Savior imposed itself (*Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*, 1919, p. 351). It follows from this view, as the encyclical *Pascendi* has rightly observed,



Reverend Leo Elders, S.V.D., was born in Holland and studied at the universities of Utrecht, Montreal and Harvard. He was a professor of philosophy for twelve years at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. Currently he is teaching philosophy at the diocesan seminary in Rolduc, Holland. Fr. Elders has published five books on philosophy, was editor-in-chief of ten volumes on theology in Japanese and has authored more than thirty articles on philosophical and theological subjects. He is now preparing a new book on Thomistic metaphysics.

that the historical Jesus was falsely represented by the faith of the first Christians.

Modernism was condemned and seemed to have been overwhelmed by the vigorous reaction of the Church. The problems, however, which gave rise to it survived, and fifty years later some theologians were apparently still wrestling with them.

Karl Rahner, for instance, feels that traditional Christology is ontological in character and should be replaced by what he calls transcendental Christo-

logy. This means more or less the following: man has an opening toward the Absolute and is continuously called by God. Only because man is this opening, the Incarnation becomes possible. The Hypostatic Union is the autotranscendence of the mind toward God and the absolute autocommunication of God. Christianity is the absolute religion because it teaches that God and man reach the limit of their being. Salvation is Incarnation. Christology is the end and the beginning of anthropology and anthropology is, in its most radical realization, theology (*Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 151). A difficulty regarding Rahner's view is this: Why do not all men share in the Incarnation, if the latter is to be explained by the radical opening of man? In the second place, sin does not fit into the picture, whereas according to the revelation Jesus became man to free us from our sins. Finally, Rahner does not explain why, in the period before the Incarnation, mankind needed a time of preparation.

Schoonenberg speaks

Rahner's Christology seems to depend on a philosophical position rather than on theological data. It also is the root of his theory of the anonymous Christians, and it has the built-in risk of leading less prudent disciples to justify revelation by means of anthropology and to place the criterion of revealed truth in man instead of in God.

P. Schoonenberg believes that the Christological struggle between Antioch and Alexandria has never been resolved because the pre-existence of Christ had been overstressed. Actually, according to Schoonenberg, we cannot say anything about God insofar as he

pre-exists to creation. Hence he identifies the processions with the missions of the Divine Persons. When the Church speaks of the pre-existence of Christ she cannot but mean the existence of Jesus. As a man of history Jesus is God's last work, but it is impossible to show by argument that Jesus is superior to Buddha. Only through love can we show his truth to the world. (Cf. *Sept problèmes capitaux de l'Eglise*, Paris, 1967, p. 153). It would seem that this theory was rejected by the Church in the Christological Declaration of 1972 in which we read: "The opinions according to which it has not been revealed and is not known by us that the Son of God subsists from all eternity in the mystery of the Trinity, as distinct from the Father and from the Holy Spirit, are contrary to this faith. . . . The assertion that the human nature of Jesus would exist not insofar as it has been assumed in the eternal person of the Son of God, but rather in itself as a human person, is also contrary to the faith."

'See through' the formulae

In 1974, E. Schillebeeckx published *Jesus. Het verhaal van een levende*. According to the author, the articles of the faith depend on the conceptions proper to a certain period of history. We who live in the spiritual climate of the 20th century should try to see through these formulae and even through the answers of the authors of the New Testament in order to discover the meaning of Jesus. Schillebeeckx does so in the second part of his book (pp. 85-324), but the result is rather meager: on the occasion of his baptism by John a certain man has had a mysterious experience; he follows God's

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calling and grows toward an intimate union with him. Jesus had a characteristic goodness, insisted on God's Fatherhood, was opposed to the Zealots, but hardly performed real miracles, did not forgive sins, did not establish a Church and did not know the precise meaning of his death as a sacrifice of reconciliation. There was no resurrection of the body of Jesus.

Christ must be 're-thought'

The Secretary of the Papal Biblical Commission, Bishop Descamps, has shown that a good deal of Schillebeeckx's exegetical theories have no scientific basis or are untenable (in *Revue théologique*, 1976). It is hard to see how some of his conclusions can be brought into agreement with Catholic doctrine. But we have not yet finished our reading: in the third part of his study Schillebeeckx argues that after Jesus' death the disciples acquired the conviction that Jesus had been glorified by God. Four models or categories of thought belonging to the cultural milieu helped to express this conviction: an eschatological savior; a *theios anēr* (divine man); pre-existing wisdom; the suffering servant. The early Christians began to call Jesus Lord because he was conceived as a messenger of God. The powerful Hellenism proper to the theology of John imposed itself and has marked later Christological doctrine. Thus, according to Schillebeeckx, the Christians of today must again discover what Jesus means to them and try to express this in the categories of our time.

As the reader will have noticed, in this Christology Tradition and the Doctrine of the Faith no longer seem to have a binding force, so that it is

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superfluous further to comment on it.

The year 1974 also saw the publication of H. Küng's book *Christsein (On Being A Christian)*. Küng describes Jesus as the man who was against the Law and who might be called a civil revolutionary. He did not want any institutions, but he placed the service of one's neighbor above everything else. Jesus introduced a revolution in the way in which God was conceived. Jesus may have done some surprising things, but he did not perform any miracles in the strict sense of the term. Küng rejects any interpretation of the Last Supper which would see more in Jesus' words than a symbolic meaning. Jesus is not likely to have seen his impending death as an expiatory sacrifice; the meaning of the resurrection, the ascension and the descent of the Spirit is that Jesus lives forever. Resurrection means assumption into God's reality. The Easter experience of the disciples is an inner calling to faith: he who invited people to believe has himself now become the content of faith.

Bishops refute Küng

The titles that were given to Jesus are likely to have depended on the milieu in which the gospel was preached. These titles are not *a priori* infallible, but are *a posteriori* explanations. Expressions which are impossible to be believed should not be obstacles to faith. Küng thinks that a theology of the Incarnation would have replaced a theology of the elevation of Jesus. The higher the honor bestowed upon Jesus became, the greater were the difficulties of this Hellenizing theology. Difficulties could be solved if we as-



sume that Jesus, who is truly man, is also in the eyes of faith a revelation of God. The conception of his pre-existence depends on the gnostic climate of the first centuries. Küng furthermore thinks that the virginal birth of Jesus must not be considered a historical event and he hesitates to affirm that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine person.

The German Bishops reacted against this book in a *Declaration* issued November 17, 1977, and pointed out that several assertions in *Christsein* do not agree with the doctrine of the Church (*op. cit.*, p. 3). The Bishops first state that the divinity of Christ is neglected (p. 6) and that this leads to "a falsifying reduction" of the Gospel Message (p. 9). Among other things the Declaration also rejects Küng's view of

redemption (p. 13), and of our Christian vocation (p. 14).

An underlying conviction of Schoonenberg, Schillebeeckx and Küng is that the traditional doctrine of the Church is to a great extent formulated in Greek categories and that in our own day we should strip this "Greek layer" from the original message and state it in our own categories, for the Greek expression of the faith has become unacceptable to us. This conviction presupposes that a considerable part of the traditional doctrine of the Church is not the original message, but a Greek superstition; that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, of his resurrection, of redemption through his expiatory death, of sanctifying grace as a participation in God's inner life, etc., are congenial only to the Greek mind; that we cannot any more admit these truths which imply the view of the total historicity of truth.

Partisans make noise

It would seem though that the above assumptions are gross oversimplifications and, as they stand, simply untrue, however much noise is made by those who raise the battle cry of de-Hellenization. Already the partisans of the German School of the history of religions at the end of the last century spoke of two components in Christianity, namely, a Greek and a Jewish element, but it should be pointed out that the Christian faith in creation and the resulting divinization of the cosmos, the Christian doctrine of incarnation, of redemption through Jesus' death, of the resurrection, etc., are wholly alien to the Greek way of thinking. It suffices to place the Nicene Creed beside the tenets of Greek thought to see the difference. Or it would be enough to read the works of

the early apologists and of Origen's *Contra Celsum* to convince oneself of the fact that doctrinally nothing has been taken from the Greeks. At the most we can say that certain terms have been borrowed from pagan sources and that certain themes helped the Christians, in an analogical way, to become aware of and to state explicitly what was implicitly contained in the faith and in Church life. As examples we may quote the term *logos*, redemption, new man, epiphany and point to the theme of the temporal power of Rome, which may have helped the Church to become aware of the authority of the bishop of Rome. Furthermore, the translation of the Bible into Greek led to a broadening of the meaning of a number of terms or to a shift in their sense. But all these factors as well as the spiritual climate of the Hellenistic world fall under the special preparation of the world for the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church. They do not mean that the contents of the faith or of Christian moral doctrine are wholly or partly Greek in origin.

Basic facts stand

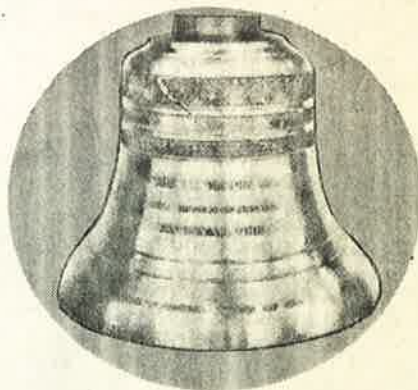
A careful study of the works of the Fathers, even of those who at first sight seem to have borrowed much from Greek philosophy (like Ambrose), yields each time the result that the Fathers use Greek thought, sayings and terms as instruments, but that the message they bring is wholly different. Likewise, the fierce opposition of men like Celsus and the Neoplatonist Simplicius and of the Roman aristocracy also shows that Christianity is anything but a Hellenistic enterprise.

We must finally say a few words on the so-called historicity of our thought.

It is of course true that, in different periods of history, men may have different pursuits and attitudes, but the basic facts of human life and of human concern remain the same for people of all ages. Moreover, we do have the capacity to understand what people of a different age say and do. A most telling example is the fact that we can perfectly follow the arguments of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, which shows that, in a way, our mind is above time. One of the great advantages of Christianity is precisely that it lifts us above the concerns of just our own age and allows us to belong to the people of God of all times and all cultures.

I hope that the above survey has made it clear that on the one hand there are no scientific arguments against the Catholic doctrine on Christ and that, on the other hand, we may not resort to unproven philosophical *a priori* in order to "explain away" whatever is difficult for modern man to admit. Recourse to biased philosophical assumptions in an attempt to explain the faith leads to a deformation of revelation, as the history of the great heresies shows. Rather, we should mind the words of St. Hilary (*De Trinitate* III, 26) to the effect that in our study of what God has wrought we may not proceed according to human opinion. The truth to which Christians assent is not man-made, but divine. Defective concepts of the human recipient or a perverse orientation of the will will mutilate revealed truth or adulterate it with man-made fiction (*Athenagoras, Legatio* 2; *De resurrectione* 14). Already St. Irenaeus observed that people sometimes adapt what is said in Holy Scripture to human theories (*Adv. haer.* I, 1). In his days so many false interpretations of

the mystery of Christ were proposed that he could speak of "a sea of error": error in the doctrine of the faith, he adds, is not always patent, just as in the case of imitation pearls, a layman will not always recognize their valuelessness. If we want to remain in the Truth, we must look up to the tradition of the Apostles, who never spoke in order to agree with prevalent views, but in order to reveal the truth (*Adv. haer.*, IV, preface). As Newman says, "the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound, not to descant upon it, but to venerate it" (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 1878, p. 357). ■



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