

An Epistemological Critique of Our Knowledge of Christ

J. B. CHETTIMATAM

'And this is eternal life, that they know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent' (John 17:3).

Today, more than ever, human thought is riveted on a certain self-examination. An epistemological critique is occupying the centre, both in theology and philosophy. Do we really know ourselves, the meaning of our lives and our final destiny? What do we really mean when we say that we know?

The focal point of Christian Theology is Christ himself; it is our knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he took flesh and dwelt in our midst, that he suffered, died and rose again from the dead and thus saved us. Apart from 'How' we know all this, there is a more radical question: what is the meaning of saying that we know these basic facts of faith? This latter question is the more important one and only after settling it can we answer the 'How' of our knowledge of Christ. I shall examine here a few approaches to solve these basic questions of Christian epistemology. In the context of history we shall ask first: what do we mean by saying that we know Christ? This will involve another question: whether we really know Christ. After discussing these I shall deal with the 'How' of our knowledge of Christ and examine the basic attitudes involved in the contemporary approaches to Christ.

Information as a Goal of Knowledge

The widest meaning of knowledge is information. Any data concerning a particular object, statements, concepts, symbols and signs, descriptions and indications can be put together into this category. This concept of knowledge agrees with the common definition of truth as conformity of our mind with a thing. Hence any information brings our mental picture closer to the thing as it is in itself.

A great deal of the popular concern about the knowledge of Christ stops at this level of information. The figure and height of Christ, exact dates of his birth and death, details of place and circumstances, the actual words he uttered, a correct chronology

of the events of his life, of his sermons, miracles, and especially of his Last Supper, betrayal, condemnation and death are all methodically and meticulously investigated. The exclusive emphasis on the physical reality of Christ and the concern to get a complete and accurate biography are typical of our journalistic preoccupation.

What is it to know Christ ?

Approaches to Christ Our Saviour

But the Christian concern for knowing Christ was never for mere information, for the simple satisfaction of an intellectual curiosity. The apparently pragmatic statement of Melanchthon, *Hoc est Christus cognoscere, beneficia ejus cognoscere* (to know Christ is to understand his gifts), was true to a great extent in Christian epistemology. The depth of the knowledge of Christ was measured by the depth of the benefits received from him. Still, the explanation of the nature and meaning of this knowledge was coloured by the different philosophical points of view.

The Gnostics

The gnostic Christians were influenced on the one hand by the Platonic philosophy of ideas (considered as the prototypes and sources of all things), and on the other hand by the sundry elements of the mystery cults. For the latter, Christ was simply the pre-existent spiritual Man, first manifested in Adam the first man and then more fully in the Redeemer. Hence, Christ could have no contact with flesh and suffering. His humanity was just an appearance. Christ is fully what each man ought to become through the ultimate *gnosis*.

The Stoics

For the Stoics on the other hand, Logos is the immanent principle of cohesion, action and nature (*Logos endiathetos*), evolving into all particular beings (*Logos spermatikos*), finally manifesting itself (*Logos prophorikos*).¹ The early Fathers of the Church were impressed by the sublimity of the Stoic moral ideals. Some of them had also been initiated in their early education into the quasi-mystical concept of the immanent *Logos* in nature. They could not resist the temptation to use this handy explanation to show the saving reality of the Incarnation. It easily agreed with the personified word, wisdom, law, and the *shekina* of the Bible, and also satisfied the Hellenic quest for an intermediary being to bridge the gap between the absolute and unapproachable Godhead and the limited, concrete world of material beings.

When Apollinarius pushed the *Logos-sarx* concept to its extreme conclusion and said that in the Word-made-flesh the Logos

¹ Cf. J. Lebreton, S.J., *History of the Dogma of the Trinity*. Vol. I. London (Burns, Oates & Washbourne), 1939, pp. 30-39.

substituted for the rational part of human nature, he was giving expression to the epistemology of a number of early Christian thinkers:

A *physis* is made up of two parts, as the Logos with his divine perfection contributes a partial energy to the whole. This is also the case with the ordinary man, who is made up of two complete parts which produce one *physis* and display it under one name.²

Thus the Incarnate Logos constitutes a single *physis* with the body.³ Even those like St. Athanasius who, on the basis of Scriptural statements admitted a rational soul in Christ, could not find a real function for this rational part. The principle assumed by them is that when the original appears in its full strength, the participated should surrender its function though the latter is not totally substituted: Christ's body is only a part of the cosmic body which the Logos vivifies; hence the Logos can very well immediately actuate it; the Logos which is present everywhere simply concentrates its action in one particular case.⁴ From this it can be seen how even staunch defenders of faith like Athanasius were imbued with Stoic philosophy. This quickening of the body by the Logos is considered the point of humanity's encounter with Christ the Saviour. Substantial unity between God and man in Christ was the basis of man's salvation, according to the Fathers.

On the other hand, those who emphasized the complete humanity of Christ and the existence and role of the rational soul, tended with their *Logos-anthropos* formula to postulate two distinct persons in Christ, a man called Jesus merely inhabited by the Divine Logos.

Aristotelian Epistemology

A definite shift from the Stoic, Platonist and Neo-Platonist epistemological outlooks to the Aristotelian hylemorphic mode of conception helped theologians like Didymus of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuestia and others to save the perfect human nature of Christ and the redemptive meaning of the Incarnation without calling into question the one divine personality. The test of knowledge and truth in Aristotelian epistemology is objective evidence,

² Apollinarius, *De Unione*, 5, cited in Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition, from the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*. London (A. R. Mowbray), 1965, p. 224.

³ Grillmeier, *ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 17: The Word, 'even while present in a human body and Himself quickening it, was without inconsistency quickening the universe as well, and was in every process of nature, and was outside the whole, and while known from the body by His works, He was none the less manifest from the working of the universe as well.' *The Writings of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, Vol. IV, p. 45.

impartially assessed. Didymus appeals to this objective evidence of Scripture to emphasize the perfection of Christ's human nature. The Incarnation is not a mere appearance. The Word of God has taken a complete human nature, soul, body and spirit.⁵

The Aristotelian hylemorphic conception of man as composed of body and soul was just the counterpart of Aristotelian epistemology: our objective and rational method of knowledge which detects the spiritual essence in matter follows our mode of being as spirits in matter. Theodore of Mopsuestia's principal argument against the *Logos-sarx* conception is that it simply misses the reality of Christ's human nature, because it does not take into account the weakness of a body actuated by a finite spirit: 'If the divinity takes the place of the soul, it (i.e. the body) had nothing, neither hunger, nor thirst, nor was it tired, nor did it have need of food.' All these human needs arise from the weakness and imperfection of the human soul and from its incapacity to suffer fully all the needs of the body. If Christ did not take up our weak and suffering nature, he did not redeem us. Aristotelian theology—remaining quite in the background and buttressing the Biblical concept of the plan of God—along with the eschatological meaning of the Sacred Liturgy, helps Theodore to see synthetically the existence of our world in the plan of salvation moving toward its eternal fulfilment, with the Word Incarnate as its focal point.⁶

Thus, in the early Church, Gnostic, Stoic, Platonic and Aristotelian epistemologies applied to the reality of Christ constituted the background for the Christological controversies. The Church did not consciously take sides in this philosophical battle. Nor could she, on the other hand, ignore the different approaches altogether. What she could prudently do—and actually did—was to go beyond the philosophical premises, insist on common sense conclusions and work out a compromise terminology.

Pope Leo in his *Tomus ad Flavianum* simply bases his whole argument on the first sentence of the Apostles' Creed: One and the same who was born in eternity of the Father was also born of the Holy Spirit and from the Blessed Virgin Mary. Christ's human nature by virtue of its birth from the Virgin through the Spirit could not be tainted by sin. Yet it was fully and really human. Thus the two natures are intact, and unconfused, and united in the one Person of the Son of God! This is the substance of the mystery of Christ.

The Epistemology of St. Augustine

This common sense approach of Leo has behind it a genuine epistemology which is a specific contribution of the West to a critique of the knowledge of Christ. St. Augustine very ably made use of it. His epistemology grew out of the tension within

⁵ Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, pp. 271–274.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 338–347.

his own mind between Manichaean dualism and the Neo-Platonic mystical outlook. It is best exemplified in his *Confessions* in the tension between his vision at Ostia⁷ and his analysis of the episode of stealing pears.⁸ God is so near and yet so ineffable; man is all freedom and yet incapable of doing anything good. Between God and man shines the personality of Christ, the one Mediator. In Augustine's Christology this concept of the Mediator joins in one a static doctrine of the two natures with a dynamic soteriology.⁹ The Neo-Platonic idea of the union of the material world with the One through the mediacy of the soul made it easy for Augustine to say that Godhead and soul could unite more easily than soul and body.¹⁰

An Epistemological Critique of the Early Church Christology

If we examine these various approaches to the knowledge of Christ in the early Church and their impact, certain points become evident.

(a) Each mode of approach to the knowledge of Christ appears as an attempt for evaluating and understanding our unique experience of Christ in faith. Hence an epistemological critique for the knowledge of Christ has a limited scope. It is part of our *fides quaerens intellectum*, the weak and inadequate effort of the human mind to give a reasonable account of its faith. Hence, it should in no way supplant faith or neglect any of its factors. This is at the same time a limitation of theology, and also a guarantee of its fidelity to the Word of God. It is not any free enquiry into the uncharted realms of the suprahuman. The initiative in our understanding of God and of Christ is from the divine side. The unique encounter with Christ in faith is the necessary basis for any meaningful critique of the knowledge of Christ. For that very reason it is not an aimless enquiry. At every step faith is the beacon light guiding the course of theological investigations. So St. Augustine was able to say: *Credo ut intelligam* (Belief is the basis of understanding).

(b) An epistemological critique of the knowledge of Christ has its own dangers. Any critique is undertaken on the basis of a certain philosophical outlook, which itself has a profane history and its own suppositions and implications. As the Christological heresies clearly bear out, these implications and suppositions can easily mislead one and make one miss certain delicate shades and emphases of faith.

There is also danger of a subtle syncretism. Every philosophy and concept even has also a religious past, with its own particular interpretations of the religious sentiments of man.

⁷ *Confessions*, Bk. IX, tr. Rex Warner. New York (New American Library, Mentor-Omega Book), 1963, pp. 200-204.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Bk. II, pp. 45-49.

⁹ Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 467.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Letter*, 137, PL 33, 520.

Gnosticism had its own religious shades drawn from various Middle Eastern mythologies and mystery cults. Hence when these are employed to express our experience of Christ, the original Revelation gets projected on a non-Christian or pre-Christian background which does not always lend itself to the correct understanding of the Christian message.

(c) But this is not an unmixed evil. More often than not this left-over from the pre-Christian past can help to give an authentically human touch to our understanding of faith. Jesus Christ is Word-made-flesh, and nothing good and sound in our humanity is rejected by Him. Besides, each system of approach, each method of epistemology provides a new avenue to deepen our understanding of Christ. Our experience of Christ in faith is unique and ineffable. It has, so to say, an epistemological polyvalence that can be brought out only by the application of different systems of thought and by looking at the mystery from different angles. Thus Gnosticism emphasized the divine mediatorship of Christ, while the Stoic *Logos-sarx* pattern underscored the immanence of the Word-made-flesh. Aristotelian concepts with their clarity and precision helped to resolve conflicts in spite of the compromise involved in fixing upon any one definite formulation.

(d) The sobriety of Ecclesiastical definitions all through the Christological controversies shows the need for a certain detachment from philosophical systems. At Ephesus it was the traditional belief of the faithful summarized in the title 'Theotokos' that provided the key for resolving the Nestorian controversy. At Chalcedon it was Leo's appeal to the simple creed that showed the way. What is generally known as the 'sense' of the Church is very valuable in deciding questions of faith, because it has the freshness and spontaneity of the simple faith of Christians unprejudiced by philosophical suppositions.

(e) Theological definitions have a certain inadequacy. All the neat formulations which helped to solve the Christological controversies did not resolve the problem of the knowledge of Christ: What is to know Christ? Is it having a few neat formulas, or condemning and excluding other erroneous formulations? After all these theological discussions in the last resort one is often left with the unsophisticated faith of simple Christians. All the erudite discussions of the theologians often seem to contribute very little to deepen faith.

The 'How' of the Knowledge of Christ: A Critique of Contemporary Approaches.

In contemporary thought the fulcrum of speculation has shifted from the 'What' of our knowledge to the 'How'. How can and should we reach Christ? Every school and shade of contemporary philosophy has given its own twist to this question. I shall not go into a detailed description of these different schools

since they shall in one way or other be dealt with in other papers. I shall here deal with them only so far as they affect an epistemological critique.

The Evolution of Contemporary Thought

A revolutionary change in perspective set in with Renaissance Humanism which diverted the attention of philosophy from the object of knowledge to the thinking subject itself. The 'Cogito' of Descartes with his 'clear and distinct idea' as the norm of truth set the style for modern philosophy. Kant's triple Critique demanded that human knowledge which has a spiritual autonomy of its own be judged not through the norm of a world of objective beings, but rather in terms of its internal creative freedom. German Romanticism provided human knowledge with a certain internal dynamism which embraced even the evolution of the objective world. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nineteenth-century Rationalism introduced a radical method of historical criticism which emptied the Gospel of all that was miraculous, extraordinary and supernatural and left Jesus a mere Jewish leader glorified and apotheosized by his disciples. Thus a radical opposition was introduced between Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

With the two world wars there came about a definite shift in the theological perspective of the West. Rationalism, Idealism and Materialism overdid their jobs and produced a general reaction to them bordering on a preoccupation to keep away from such stereotyped rationalistic patterns of approach. Today there is a general opposition to systems and rationalistic methods of approach. Theologians in general try to reach Christ through non-rational methods, namely, through the dialectics of faith, through a new historical perspective, by way of an existential encounter, by means of the community and above all through Hope.

Dialectics of Faith over History

The tragedy of World War I brought a crisis. Great masses of people lost everything in life and their faith as well. They were not influenced by the rational arguments of traditional apologetics and by the historical approach to Christ. A good number of zealous and devout Christian theologians, faced with the liberal historical criticism of the nineteenth century, despaired of restoring faith in Christ through 'historical' means. Karl Barth found in the crisis of Europe and in the opposition between history and faith a symbol of the universal crisis between the Eternal and the temporal: the transcendence of God can never be reached from our side. God is not an object of our knowledge and action. 'Religion' is only a sign of our arrogance. Our knowledge of Christ is through Revelation. It does not attempt to achieve a balance between the divine and the human, but only conquers

not mere objects, actions and relations, but the reality of God and Christ interpretatively presented to us. We ourselves are in a way actively involved in that interpretation as in the aesthetic experience of a beautiful sunset.¹⁷

Theology of Hope

Ernst Bloch, a Marxist, but with a positive approach to Judaeo-Christian religions, has fathered what is today known as the Theology of Hope. For him existence is not merely of the past, nor merely of the present, but of the future. Jürgen Moltmann, J. B. Metz, W. D. Marsch and Gerhard Sauter have developed this line of approach in Christian theology. Theology is not 'faith seeking understanding' (Anselm: *fidens quaerens intellectum*), nor loving coming to knowledge (Augustine: *Tantum cognoscere quantum amatur*), nor even faith seeking expression (Ebeling) but rather '*Spes quaerens intellectum*'. For Bloch, Yahweh is the 'time-God' full of the future, and, according to him, Exodus 3:14 is 'I will be who I will be'. In Moltmann's Christology Easter is central: to recognize the resurrection is not merely to recall a past event but to see in it 'the future of God for the world and the future of man'. The Church itself is an Exodus community with an eschatological orientation in everything from which and for which the community lives.¹⁸

Basic Lines for an Epistemological Critique of the Knowledge of Christ Today

These various approaches to Christ may appear disparate and contradictory. Indeed, the real differences among these schools should not be lost sight of. Yet they have a certain basic unity of outlook which helps us to formulate the principles of an epistemological critique for the knowledge of Christ.

(1) *Functional Christology*—One of the outstanding features of contemporary theology is what is rather wrongly called 'functional Christology'. This designation may give the impression that Christ is only a function in our religious experience. This is definitely wrong: the reality of Christ is the pivotal point of theology. On the other hand, accent should not be placed on the physical aspect of Christ, the nature-person metaphysics, and the nude historical data gathered through rational investigation. What is central is the Christ event and its meaning for man's redemption. Knowledge of Christ should be a saving experience. It is practically, *beneficio ejus cognoscere*. This does not imply a utilitarian outlook but involves the very scope and meaning of

¹⁷ J. Macquarrie, *God-talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theologie*. London (S.C.M.), 1967, pp. 102-122.

¹⁸ Cf. Gerard O'Collins, S.J., 'The Principle and Theology of Hope'. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 21 (1968), pp. 128-144.

the Incarnation, which is not for the sake of God but for the salvation of man.

(2) *Knowledge of Christ and Salvation History*—The initiative for our knowledge of Christ is from the part of God. Christ is God's revelation. He is not an isolated fact in history either. He sets the tone and style of the whole history of salvation and provides consistency to the course of events in all their contingency. This is what sets apart salvation history from profane history: Christ is not a mere object, an historical reality to be merely located at a particular point in human history like Socrates or Caesar. He is an integral part of God's plan for human salvation, nay, the focal point, in a certain way the summary of human history. We can truly know him only in that context. The whole history of the Chosen People, their prophecies, aspirations all reveal this salvific plan of God culminating in the Christ event and in and through it stretching human history into eternity.

Hence any true knowledge of Christ is tri-dimensional. It has a vital reference to the long past of salvation history. Yet, all the reality of the past is exerting its influence in our present knowledge of Christ in faith and implies in itself a pledge of fulfilment in the future. The connecting point of this past and future is the personality of Christ acting here and now.

(3) *Personal Encounter with Christ*—Hence, the central factor in our knowledge of Christ is this meeting with Christ. Since it is an encounter with our Saviour it touches the core of our personal existence and involves our whole being, all our past, all that we are and all that we have, and also all our future with its aspirations and expectations. So the knowledge of Christ is an existential encounter in the full sense of the term. It is, therefore, a wrong procedure to present Christ as a mere religious leader like Buddha or Mohammed and to make a comparison of his life and teachings with the story and tenets of other religious founders. The efforts of traditional apologetics to show the excellence of Christ's teachings, the moral excellence of the Teacher, the credibility of his miracles and the rest failed to carry conviction. Such a dry treatment often failed to bring men to face their Saviour. Call to salvation sounds first in the hearts of men, in the deepest stirrings of their soul. Only this call of God sounding from within in conjunction with the external word announced by the Church brings about this existential encounter.

(4) *Encounter of Persons in Christ*—Knowledge of Christ is a real meeting of a person with a person. What the medieval Hindus said about the knowledge of God may be rightly applied here to the knowledge of Christ: He who says Christ *was* or Christ *is* does not know Christ. Christ is not a mere object of knowledge among other objects. Nor is he a person among other persons, an indifferent 'he'. Even to address Him as an alien 'Thou' does not satisfy the demands of Christology. His personality of the Son has made us what we are, namely, sons in the one Divine

Son. He had embraced us all and each human person in a comprehensive 'we' that extends in and through him to the community of the Trinity. In this 'we' there is no spirit of slavery, but only the freedom of the children of God. This filial freedom is produced by the regeneration effected by the Holy Spirit, by which we cry with the Son 'Abba' to the Father. Only in this trinitarian 'we' a true knowledge of Christ is attained.

(5) *Christ, the Word, Redeemer and Creator*—This Trinitarian 'we' sounds in us as the saving word of Christ. In such a Christology the analytical distinction between the person of Christ and his redemptive work, between God the Creator and God the Redeemer are transcended. Experience of the Word which was in the beginning was with God, and was God, brings us the experience of salvation. This salvation is our recreation according to the unique image of the invisible God. Hence by implication it recalls to us the creation of all things in the beginning in Christ, as a first moment in the work of salvation. This gives a Christic dimension to the whole universe. Nothing is left out of the total picture of the Incarnation. The Word-made-flesh is in a way inseparable from the Cosmos and any one who denies an aspect of the universe and any of its authentic values is denying an integral part of the Incarnation.

Conclusion

Convergence of Schools in the Knowledge of Christ

One outstanding factor of present-day Christology is that the sharp divergences between philosophical schools are fast disappearing in their application to theology. This is primarily owing to the fact that people are not very much interested in abstract systems or purely theoretical discussions, but concentrate their attention on the concrete reality of life. Christ is looked at in view of his actual involvement through his incarnation in the burning problems of humanity. Hence, the preoccupation is not for determining the dimensions of his physical reality, but primarily for finding out what he means for the man of today. This is a phenomenological approach that agrees with the interpretative symbolic theology.

We see in Christ at the same time the precarious condition of human existence emphasized by Heidegger and also the immanent teleology of our intelligent spirit. Crucified Christ embraces the whole suffering humanity with all its aspirations and contradictions. Hence, only through an intimate knowledge of Christ can we understand modern society, and only by knowing modern society can we understand Christ.