

# The Sense of the Word

K. CRAGG

'Speakest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?' (St. John 18:34) seems on the face of it, especially in the English New Testament, a rather pointless query on the part of our Lord in reply to Pilate's question as to whether He was 'King of the Jews'. Yet a little reflection reveals that it has within itself a whole world of significance. For it was impossible for Jesus to have given a categorical answer Yes or No, without first ascertaining Pilate's sense of the word. Was the governor using the word 'King' in the familiar way a Roman would? In which case the meaning could only be political and the answer would be 'No, I am not'? Or was he, conceivably, repeating an accusation, with another import, which someone else had put on to his lips, in which case the answer might be Yes? With a soldier-like impatience of these 'subtleties' Pilate brusquely repudiated Jesus' enquiry and proceeded to ask bluntly: 'What hast thou done?' At the end of the exchange he seemed convinced that there was no political implication in the alleged 'kingship' though he continued to use the term in ironically reporting his findings to the Jews.

Is there not much the same situation in the whole ministry and public career of our Lord? It centres around the cognate word 'Messiah'. Had Jesus allowed men to understand that His Messianic mission had the character they considered appropriate to Messiahship, He would have played into the hands of their imperfect concepts. To have said: 'Yes, I am Messiah' without anticipating and abating their conceptions would have been to convey falsehood, in the very act of uttering truth. If, to avoid this, He had denied all such claim, He would have been, again, untrue. He would have been thus forestalling a misunderstanding by committing a falsehood. In His own meaning of the term, He *was* Messiah. The only thing then was to break out of the cross-purposes in which the terminology was involved and press the issue beyond Whether Messiah? to What Messiah? If we keep this situation firmly in mind we have both a striking clue to the whole movement of the Gospel narrative and a moving example of what is inseparable from all spiritual communication.

What a fascinating study it is, this inter-action between the shape of the expectancies of Israel into which Jesus came and His actual Messianic decisions and character. Only in the light of the

kind of Messiah Jesus was do we learn the dimensions of what Messiahship must achieve, and by what means. But this lesson, in the nature of the case, could not have been learned save in the living context of His actualization of Messiah's purpose. 'The Lord whom ye seek shall disconcertingly come to his temple, even the messenger . . . whom ye delight in', the prophet Malachi had said, perhaps with an intention of irony about 'whom ye delight in' which was more deeply valid in the history of the encounter between Jesus and the Jewry. The one whom they were proud to anticipate came into the context of their nationhood, their worship, their view of history, but in terms that were altogether surprising and uncongenial. His continuity with all these expectations was at the same time a break in continuity. He belonged with the conventions but only unconventionally. His contemporaries were aware of all the precedents but quite unready for the actuality.

So it was that we find them saying: 'How long do you hold us in suspense? If thou be the Christ tell us plainly' (St. John 10:24). We can almost sense the exasperation in these words. By 'plainly' did they mean 'a way that we can recognize' or 'a way that we can approve'? Was their suspense not largely disapproval? There was nothing finally equivocal in Jesus' words and deeds, only the cross-purposes in which they and He saw the implications of the focal concept. Thus it was that so much of our Lord's public teaching revolved around issues of authority over the Sabbath, disease, sins, over the 'I say unto you' claims, over His quite unMessianic practice of companying with publicans and sinners. Likewise the major notes of His intimate private education of the disciples concerned, first, their discovery and confession of His identity (at Caesarea Philippi) and then the revelation of the suffering that identity involved. So incompatible in their thoughts were these two lessons that they were never learned in harmony until after the Cross.

Surrounded as He was by such popular concepts that ran counter to His own inner definition of Messiah's rôle, how could His loyalty thereto have been other than a perpetual 'setting of His face'? If we ask ourselves whence that definition and its patient pursuit we must seek its inner springs in the Sonship of Christ. It is true that there were the prophetic descriptions of the Suffering Servant, especially Isaiah 53. But these were neglected, and indeed abandoned, in the contemporary mind. The Targum had largely re-written that great passage, so that, for example, 'By his stripes we are healed' became: 'By devotion to his words our sins shall be forgiven'. Instead of 'He was led as a lamb to the slaughter' they read: 'The mighty of the peoples he shall deliver up like sheep to the slaughter', while 'the travail of his soul' became: 'the subjection of the nations'.<sup>1</sup> Though there can be little doubt that Jesus' understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Wm. Manson, *Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 229-232.

Messiahship belonged essentially with the Suffering Servant prophecies, this general forsaking of the latter requires that we look elsewhere also for His ultimate decisions. We still have to ask why it was that He accepted so decisively what was so generally repudiated. The answer takes us to His Sonship to God. His Messianic decisions and obedience were both the expression of a most intimate, filial relation to His heavenly Father and the realization of what that Sonship meant. Just as, in notable words, the way in which Jesus was Messiah cannot be separated from the sense in which He was the Lord, so the light in which He saw Messiah is the light by which we see God.

This deep harmony between the status of Jesus as Messiah and His being the Divine Son is a most important truth in our Christian theological relation to the thought and attitudes of Islam. But it has also been set forth briefly here, as a prelude to the argument that in our trusteeship of the meaning of faith in Christ's Divinity we are, *vis-à-vis* Muslims, in much the same need of clarity as when the term 'King' was in crucial inter-change between Pilate and Jesus. Is it not just as futile to play into the hands of misconception with the word 'Son' indiscriminatingly as it would have been for Him to discuss 'Kingship' with Pilate without first elucidating how Pilate meant the word? Have we not in our theological encounters with Islam in this realm much the same verbal situation as existed between Jesus and Jewry over 'Messiah'? So often the issue has raged around Whether Christ was the Son of God, rather than concerning What being the Son of God could be?

To have men say a vehement No to the first is not to introduce them to the reality of the second. And argumentatively to affirm the first is not of itself to clarify the second. For there is widespread unawareness throughout Islam as to what the central dogma of Christian faith really means. We all stand in great need of a creative custody of 'the sense of the word'. There is at least in some segments of Islam the prevailing error that sets the doctrine within a pluralism and thus misses the essential truth that the Father-Son theology is an understanding of Unity. ('Take me and my mother for gods . . . '—Surah 5:116.) A more serious and intelligent kind of attitude (and therefore much more potential of communication) occurs in a passage at the close of Surah 4. Here in verse 170 it is argued that 'Messiah will never scorn to be a slave unto God'. This assurance is made the basis of a conviction that, therefore, He can never possibly have laid claim to Sonship. The underlying thought, clearly, is that to be 'Son' must mean to be a pampered favourite for whom 'service' would by status be excluded. But since Messiah is gladly and evidently 'servant' to God, this fact rules out as both illusory and blasphemous the false attribution to him of claims about Divinity. How melancholy it is for the Christian mind to reflect on this measure of misconception is seen when we remember that in Biblical, Christian terms the Son and the Servant (as we have

already indicated) are precisely not incompatible, but mutual and reciprocal. The quality of 'service' required of the Messiah is such that only the 'Son' can bring: and the reality of His Sonship is learned in the perfection of His service. The great passage in Philippians 2:5-8 is eloquent in this regard. 'The form of God' and 'the form of a servant' are there understood as belonging together. That 'Messiah never scorns to be a servant unto God' is a glorious truth of the Christian faith, but the Quranic implication excludes from it the very core of its reality.

If this is some measure of what is at issue over the Muslim-Christian disparities at this point, what can the Christian theologian do to convey the sense of what he means across the barriers of misconception? He must take creative hold upon the objections and turn them into positive clues to his witness. He must be prepared to abjure merely terminological argument, which anyhow has a way of turning reverent mystery into irritating platitude. He must be ready to think his way into the thought structure of the other party in venturesome reliance upon the Holy Spirit. He must learn to see his own meanings in the terminology of those to whom he speaks. Believing as he does that God in Christ was 'the Word made flesh' he must be ready to see all his words about the Word servants of the same enterprise.

But how, it may be asked, can this pursuit, in Islamic terms, of the sense of the word 'Son' be illustrated? Two theological examples may be suggested in reply. How they might be translated into the simpler exchanges of evangelism and witness is not here attempted, not because this aspect is unimportant but because our primary duty in these paragraphs is intellectual. The first concerns the frequent Quranic concept of the 'signs' of God. The term *Ayāt* makes a very fruitful study especially if an Arabic Concordance to the Qur'ān be enlisted so that the context of its occurrence can be compared. The underlying thought is that God has set in nature and in man, in history and in life, tokens of His mercy and His power. These are as various as the wide manifold of nature. But always there is the same connection between the 'sign' and the reverent, attentive mind. The casual and the ungrateful miss the meaning and ignore the significance. (There is in the Qur'ān a deep emphasis on the duty of gratitude: *Shukr* (thankfulness) is in very frequent antithesis, rather than *Imān* (faith), to *Kufr* (unbelief).) A right relation with God is one that reverently and intelligently gives thanks for His benefits as these are recognized in the mystery of sex, in the constancy of the seasons, in the rhythm of nature and in the fruitfulness of the earth. Muslim revelation is therefore committed to the faith that there are intimations of Divine ways in the mortal, natural, human realm, by which the Divine nature may in part be known. God is a God Who signifies significance to His creature man.

It may be well in parenthesis at this point to insist that the basic Islamic veto on *Shirk* cannot rightly be understood as

militating against this fact of the involvement of God (through His *Āyāt*) in the natural order and in human cognizance. In some quarters it has been fashionable to translate this fundamental concept as 'association' (between God and man understood). This translation is unfortunate since if there were in fact no association between the Divine and the human no religion, including Islam, would be feasible. There would be neither revelation nor prayer and the totality of Islam would collapse, not to say Christianity too. The veto on *Shirk*, which it may be observed the New Testament lays with equal majesty and no less urgency, does not mean that God and man are out of association. *Shirk* means violating the inalienable and unshared Divinity of God by attributing worshipfulness, power, wisdom, providence (or any other Divine activity or quality) to what is not God. Manifestations of His grace, of which God is the source, are evidently no *Shirk*, for the only perpetrators of the latter are men. These observations might be less necessary were the arguments that make the *Āyāt* no conceivable occasion of *Shirk* apply with equal weight to that central Christian doctrine about Christ which some in Islam have been so prone and so thoughtless to esteem as *Shirk*. For there also the entire initiative is with God and man's only part in the fact is the recognition of it.

This parenthesis, though negative in its origins, has already anticipated the sense in which the *Āyāt* of which the Qur'an speaks may become a means to the illumination of the Christian meaning of the ultimate 'Sign'. 'O Thou Lord of the great Sign' is a Muslim phrase of invocatory prayer. Could it not well describe the meaning of God in Christ? For the truth is that God has something to signify to man, so urgent, so crucial, so precious that only God suffices for it. So God becomes His own sign. It is a very Islamic principle that there are certain things for which God alone suffices, creation for example. The heart of the Christian meaning of the Incarnation lies in the conviction that revelation is another. It takes God we may say to reveal God. And when God reveals God, what is that but the Father and the Son, the enterprise in its heavenly initiative and in its actuality among men?

If it be objected that none of the *Āyāt* involves God in the human, except in tokens and events of the natural order, and that therefore they are no proper parables for the meaning of God in Christ, it may be said that the degree of the Divine involvement will be the degree of the Divine revelation. If the former must be 'spared' the latter must be limited. The fullness of truth cannot be apprehended in a revelatory economy of 'Sign'. Nor is it basically an Islamic principle that men are in any position to forbid things to God, such as we inevitably pretend to—if we insist He may not and must not be Incarnate. Surely it is God's alone to determine the patterns and criteria of His revelation. What we can see within the signifying of all 'signs' is that intimations of something Divine happen in the setting of something

temporal and human. The Christian faith in the Incarnation is only a fullness of committal to the same principle, such as is worthy of the munificence of God and the wistfulness of man. 'The Word made flesh' is God become His own Sign, and this in measure is the 'Quranic' sense of the word 'Son' a word which has in mind just this unstintedness of Divinely given significance.

The second conceivable area of Islamic meaning where Christian belief may become articulate in communication takes us to the familiar *Asmā al-Ḥusnā*. These Beautiful Names of God, traditionally ninety-nine in number, are very familiar in Muslim art and in Muslim family naming. We invariably find them in grammatical construct with the word 'Abd, as 'Abd al-Nāsir, 'Abd-al-Rahmān, 'Abd al-Mun'im and the like. Some two-thirds of these names are Quranic in origin. Behind them lie some deep questions of theology, into which we cannot here enter. But the ultimate question is that of their meaningfulness. They are all, of necessity, terms which belong in human vocabulary. Many of them; like Karīm, Laṭīf, 'Azīm, Ḥalīm, Ra'ūf, are in constant use about men. How far are we right in taking the Divine Names as having an index in these human usages? We cannot of course have a theology, still less a religion, without using human vocabulary in reference to God. But the Islamic theologians were always loath to assume, still less approve, this practice, lest it should constitute a sort of *Shirk*. If God's being *Laṭīf* was to mean even something of what a man's being *Laṭīf* meant, then was not man made in some measure to share in Godness? This *Shirk* was unthinkable. Hence the tendency to use the names without enquiring into what, precisely, they meant, and the insistence that they did not mean the same as when the words were used in human context. This 'without asking how' formula, however, was in essence a negative theology, in that it only knew assuredly what God was not. One called upon God by the Names, as the Qur'ān directed (Surah 7: 180 and 17: 110), and in so doing, sought of Him to be to the suppliant what in fact He was. That God be to us what He is is assuredly one of the deepest meanings of all prayer, and petition is not necessarily less eloquent for being left unexpressed in invocation.

Yet unless there is a real calling of God there is no calling upon Him. A name can hardly be a vocative that is not somehow a descriptive. The reality of all religion finally turns upon the reality of God, that is, upon the meaning of His Names. He Who is willing to be meaningfully invoked is willing to be meaningfully named. The situation can only be really ordered satisfactorily if one sets it within a real belief in the real knowability of God. If God is ready in any sense to be involved in human meaning, have we not the kind of situation about which Christian theology is concerned in its understanding of the Incarnation, with the major difference that instead of being required to be reluctant in our thought of the Divine in the human, we are invited to recognize it with awed confidence and grateful wonder? It is clear that

mere denial of the fact of the Incarnation does not exempt people from the sort of issues with which it is concerned. The Christian faith about God in Christ is faith in a God Who can be meaningfully addressed because He has addressed Himself to the ultimate range of our need for the knowledge of Him. We no longer need to think of the human realm as something whose terms we can only use of Him with crippling provisos. Rather the conditions of our knowing Him are precisely the conditions His revealing of Himself has wondrously accepted. Christ is for us the Divine assurance of what the Divine Names do mean and of the fact that they are truly meaningful.

Is there not then a way from the *Asmā al-Husnā* to the Manger at Bethlehem and the Cross on Calvary? In Jesus Christ do we not have what has been called 'the great historic act of God's love for man'? The Self-limitation of God in Christ and His Self-humiliation, which look to Muslim eyes so incompatible with His majesty and Lordship, no longer seem to conflict with these, when we see Christ as our criterion for the fullness of Godhead. And when manhood, in Christ, becomes the vehicle of such Divine revelation, it no longer seems a dwelling place for God incompatible with His greatness. In either case it is 'in His light we see light'. If God is significant for man, may He not be so in man? Such is Christian faith in 'God the Son'. The term means that all that belongs with the eternal Godness of God is disclosed in the life and death of Jesus our Lord. Is not this, in paraphrase, what He meant in the prayer of St. John 17:5? Have we not, therefore, in the Divine Names, their possibility and their content, a hopeful realm of Muslim involvement with the Christian experience of the Incarnate Son and of Christian relatedness to the Muslim vocabulary of devotion?

It is not suggested in this brief exercise in frontier theology that all our situation in inter-religion calls for is a little ingenuity. God forbid! If the foregoing merely seems ingenious, it is a dismal and worthless failure. But in that event we shall fall back upon the principle and start again. We can never be content with our faith in 'the Word made flesh' for all men as long as that Word is thereby 'made puzzle' for any of our fellows. Can we not imagine our Lord Himself, confronted with a reverent Islam demurring at His Sonship, pursuing graciously, but unremittingly, the sense of the word. 'Are you using this word in a sense in which you (and I) instinctively reject it?' 'Or is it yet on your lips in the sense in which it belongs to Me?' And a question for ourselves: 'Should not your sense of the Word, make you the carefullest of all men with the senses of words?'