

Christology Reconsidered*

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Professor Pittenger re-examines the Christological interpretation of Jesus in the light of and in terms of the process philosophy whose exponents, A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, the author cites with approval and unbounded admiration. The 'process' thinking and terminology are obvious in such statements as the following: 'God remains unsurpassably God, yet he is active in and present in the world, working in every occasion or occurrence so that each of these may realize to the fullest its potentiality, providing the aim which will make such fulfilment possible, surrounding and soliciting and luring and attracting each occasion towards its fulfilment, never overriding its own freedom of decision, yet always seeking to invite the occasion to become truly itself' (p. 150).

'Each man is a certain specific "routing of events" or a serial routing of occasions. That is, each man finds his identity through his movement forward towards the actualizing of his subjective aim' (p. 47).

'In the series of occasions which constitute the human existence of Jesus, a character appears which is qualitatively different from that found in other such series of occasions. Yet this is not utterly unlike other occasions of human existence. But is distinctive and is qualitatively different from other events' (p. 124).

The author's Christological position shows the same Antiochene tendency as in his earlier works which hold that 'Jesus is the most classical instance of the general activity of God'. In this book the author does not retract any of his main emphasis in the two earlier books on the same subject: *Christ and Christian Faith: Some Presuppositions and Implications of the Incarnation* (1941) and *The Word Incarnate* (1959), but reiterates that while 'the humanity' of Jesus should not be underemphasized 'the divinity' of Jesus should not be overemphasized at the expense of either. His understanding of the divinity of Jesus does, however, go no farther than that 'we see in him both the

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perfection of human existence and the expression in that existence of the divine reality, we name, God'. One has to keep one's eyes skinned to catch the exact intent of the author when he says 'the nature of the reality' which was encountered 'was nothing other, nothing else, than God himself, active here, present here, saving here'; 'In Jesus, "the very God", the true deity himself had been met in this historic event; no created deity was involved; this was nothing less than God himself.' 'This was God, true God, cosmic God, whom men met in Jesus.' 'The ultimately divine, cosmic deity himself, had been present and at work in that man' (p. 8).

The author agrees that we should be loyal to what in contemporary idiom is styled 'the thrust of the tradition' to which we belong; but he deprecates 'slavish following of the precise words found in some classical definition of the doctrine of the person of Christ'. What is required is not a 'verbal' but a 'vital' orthodoxy. Christological formulation should use 'the language of the divine activity', not 'the language of the divine being'. Throughout the book the author leans on the Fathers for support for his stress on the humanness of Jesus.

In the concluding pages of his book he makes his position very clear. In his own words: 'The event of Christ is a human and historical event and this same event is a point at which God is acting in a manner unparalleled elsewhere. The way in which our Fathers in the faith asserted this double-truth was by talking about very God and very man hypostatically united in the person of Jesus Christ. Their intention was right . . . their manner of phrasing it does not help us today in making identically the same affirmation of faith' (p. 151).

Pittenger's position can be stated as follows:

- (1) We meet 'very God' in the Christ-event.
- (2) Jesus is an historical figure and a human being.
- (3) Jesus is not God, but God and this man Jesus are in a relationship of the most complete interpenetration which can be explained only on the analogy of personal union, not identity, not togetherness, but union.
- (4) The root attribute of God is Love. God is a Lover and man is a lover and God loves man and enables man to love God and men.
- (5) The Cosmos and the human race are in the process of 'Love-in-action' towards self-actualization in a full life of love-relationship.

He develops these ideas under the following major heads:

- (1) The genuine, complete normal manhood of Jesus.
- (2) The 'real presence' and activity of God in Jesus, and the sinlessness of Jesus.
- (3) The location of the incarnate work of God in the total constellation of all the past behind him, the present

- during his earthly ministry and the future that followed his human existence.
- (4) There is a distinctiveness and speciality in Jesus' accomplishment which, while not utterly different from other events, was uniquely 'important' in the ongoing process of God's purpose so as to arrest, influence and transform human history towards fulfilment.
 - (5) The finality or decisiveness of Jesus Christ.
 - (6) Jesus during his earthly ministry differs from other human beings only in degree not in kind.

The Manhood of Jesus

In the language of process philosophy Pittenger says that 'the deity of Jesus . . . is that which is *act* of God in him'. 'If some absolute difference in kind, from other instances of God's revelatory and salvatory work in the world, is predicated of Jesus, then Jesus would be a strange visitor from some other sphere and irrelevant to us and his saving work would be regarded as "done to us" rather than "done in us" and the Lord would appear as a meaningless monstrosity in a world which neither needs him nor can accommodate him.'

The manhood of Jesus was complete, compounded like all manhood of fully human body, mind and soul. Jesus was a Jew of his own time and place, a genuine human being in all his Jewishness, physically, physiologically and psychologically.

One has to admit that the author gives a valid reason why Jesus would be irrelevant to the human race if he is different in kind. He argues that only 'a man' could make available 'the new life' that the Gospel proclaims. 'If Jesus released the divine love into human life in an unprecedented manner and degree, he did this because in all respects he shared the manhood which is ours; and if we, in our turn, can appropriate that love released in his accomplishment, it is because it was disclosed and made effective in those very human terms which are also ours' (p. 40). 'To assert a difference in kind is to make the love *unavailable* to us. For it is only in our human situation, as men, that we can be loved of God. It is only as we are given love in terms which we can grasp—in human terms—that we can make it our own and let it remake us' (p. 132).

'If the experience of new life in Jesus is a true experience, coming from God himself, it must be made *available*, in the actual concrete human situation under the actual concrete human condition.' There should be 'the *availability* to men, as men, of that which God did in a man' (p. 11).

The author refers to Gerald Downing's book, *A Man for Us and a God for Us*, and slashes his statements: 'Jesus is God accepting crucifixion' and 'the carpenter was God' as 'nonsensical kenoticism', for 'Jesus is the human act in which the Love that is God is operative in terms of human existence. But, can one

say so simply and without qualification that Jesus is God? Surely not . . . the Fathers themselves nowhere made an absolute identification of Jesus and God' (p. 42).

In this connection he makes a passing reference to the doctrine of the Trinity and seems to chuckle over it with sarcastic delight when he says: 'The doctrine of Trinity was devised to avoid the danger of saying that all of God was incarnate, although what was incarnate was, truly and entirely, divine.' He refers to Downing's treatment of the Trinity as a community and says that it 'would seem to commit him to a position not far from tritheism'. He makes a dig at the Anglican view and says: 'Mr. Downing could have avoided the trap of that peculiarly high Anglican theory of a social Trinity for which not even St. Augustine can properly be claimed as an expert witness.' I wish that the author could read what Raymond Panikkar has to say on this in *The Trinity and World Religions* (CISRS) especially on p. 66:

'The Augustinian "psychological" conception of the Trinity is well known: *we are, we know, we will (or love)*: I *am* knowing and loving, I *know* myself as being and loving, I *will* to be and to *know*—an inspired conception most certainly and one which enables us to approach the divine mystery by taking as our starting-point man, the image of the Trinity in the innermost and truest part of his being. Yet in spite of its validity, its anthropocentricity is very obvious: the Father, Being; the Son, Intellect; the Spirit, Love.'

Sinlessness of Jesus

In considering the 'sinlessness' of Jesus the author gives a refreshing definition of 'man' and 'sin':

'Man is a lover who is in need of a returning love, enabling him to become what in the divine intention he was created to be. He is such a lover because his creator is first in loving him; his God, too, is first of all and primarily the lover (p. 21). In this context "sin means the refusal to play one's part in the total expression of love in action. Man is made to become a lover; he acts in ways which distort that aim. He fails to become what he is created to become; sin is not the breaking of static laws given once for all. It is failure of Love-in-action. Sin is violation of love"' (pp. 51-52).

The 'Saviour' aspect of Jesus is relegated to a subsidiary position. He regards the remedial aspect of Jesus' death as only secondary. Dogmatic theology would receive a rude jolt here, for 'a man' different from all other men only in 'degree' cannot be a saviour. Only God can save and no man, however perfect he may be, can do so. It is questionable whether the world does not need a saviour but needs only an enabler to help mankind in

its 'becoming' process. It is his view that to many theologians the concept of sin is more central than God himself, the incarnating act of God is nothing other than the remedy for man's sinfulness. It is his contention that a theology which professes to accept God as creative source and calls him good has to begin its work by speaking of the goodness of the divine intentionality, that which desires, whether man sins or not, to share goodness with others. He admits that 'a chief result of what was accomplished by God in Christ was the opening up to God's children of a new and living way to their heavenly Father in spite of their sin', but comments that 'to centre attention here seems to make what was done in that human life of Jesus a by-product of our sinfulness rather than integral to the divine purpose and so revelatory of the very heart of the divine Lover' (p. 64). In his obsession with the root attribute of God, Love, he brushes aside the whole question of sin, forgiveness and judgement as of no great moment.

'The love wherewith Jesus loved and loves us is indeed nothing other than the human expression of the Love' of God. 'It is that Love now expressed in human Love-in-action which speaks to us and conforms us to itself.' He questions the validity of what John Hick calls 'numerical identity' of 'Jesus' *agape* with the divine *agape* in *Christology at the Crossroads* (p. 18) as God and man, the Creator and creature, would become identical; and he explains that 'it is participatory and co-operative, God using a personalized human instrument, in the fullness of that personality and that humanity to effect his purposes in human affairs' (p. 63).

The author feels that we should not exalt only the individual Jesus but take the whole Christ-event into account in understanding the Gospel. 'If God's activity is seen in Jesus that activity must be taken as having occurred in and through the whole constellation of which that figure is the centre' (p. 81). 'A man's identity or selfhood is not found when we point to him alone; it is found when he is located in his total context' (p. 79).

Finality—The author claims that there is a finality or decisiveness about Jesus in the sense that Shakespeare, for example, may be called 'final' in all English dramas because he is a universally acknowledged classic instance in a given genre. He agrees with Arnold Toynbee that Christianity is guilty of an imperialistic arrogance towards other religions and a most unchristian pride in its exclusive claims, and adds: 'Whatever decisiveness or finality is predicated of Jesus is predicated not of the historical figure in supposed isolation from his consequences in history, but is predicated of the complex reality of Christ in his Church, Christ with his consequences in the world of human experience and in the ongoing history of the human race' (p. 98). He believes that the Christ-event has a decisive significance as revelatory of the point and purpose of the whole enterprise in which God is engaged: 'The decisiveness which Christians ought to claim is for the divine activity in the world of creative advance, given expres-

sion in a distinctive fashion in the Christ-event' (p. 99). It will be rewarding to compare similar ideas expressed by Bishop Newbigin in *The Finality of Christ*, especially Ch. IV: 'The Clue to History'.

Mission—Pittenger then proceeds to examine what mission is and what the task of the Church is, but he does it in a very superficial manner which is far from convincing. His arguments, based on the Whiteheadian 'importance' of the event in world history, do not carry conviction and he himself has to admit that this is a matter of 'subjective apprehension', 'faith'; but concedes that there is a place for the apologetic approach (p. 104) although he agrees that no one can be argued into faith. Rightly he attacks the threat of hell-fire for those outside the Church. He says: 'The task of the Church in its proclamation is not to make salvation possible for men. That is God's business. The Church's task is to announce that the God from whom no man can escape is none other than the God whose love is declared in Jesus Christ. Once one knows oneself to be loved like that, one knows also a compulsion to do all in one's power to make it possible for others to be loved in the same way' (p. 107).

Perhaps the author is aware of the weakness of his position and a possible self-contradiction on the mission of proclamation, and closes the discussion with a gratuitous assertion: 'To say that man can come to authenticity of life without having encountered Jesus and at the very same moment to say that meeting him is a decisive matter is not to talk absurdity but to state the paradox of Christian faith when it is at its best' (p. 108).

Kind or Degree—Bent upon driving home his belief that Jesus was not an ordinary man, but 'a man' and not a 'God-man' of the Chalcedonian two-nature theory, Pittenger says: 'When the Church Fathers rejected all docetism, refused to accept Apollinarius' version of the incarnation, labelled the opinions of a man like Eutyches as heretical and struggled with all their power to speak of Jesus as "of one substance with us as touching his manhood" and as sharing manhood with us in his mind, will, etc., as well as in his physical body, they were asserting the full reality of Jesus as genuinely human' (p. 120).

This leads him to the consideration of Jesus' uniqueness. He borrows the distinction made by Prof. Moule as 'uniqueness of inclusion' and 'uniqueness of exclusion', and claims for Jesus the former.

He states that it is a subtle and odd variety of docetism 'to say that the Christ-event is absolutely and completely different from other events—utterly and entirely *sui generis*. Jesus is unique in the inclusive total context of his human existence and its consequences in human history'. There is no cessation of the indefatigable activity of God in his world and among men, and in Jesus 'is the luminous centre, the focus of a never-ceasing relationship and revelation'. 'Christ is to be seen as the One in whom God actualized in a living human personality the potential

God-man relationship which is the divinely intended truth about every man' (p. 114).

Pittenger does not hesitate to assert that the love of Jesus was not different in kind from (1) God's love and (2) man's love. 'In respect to the love which Jesus Christ exhibited as a man, it is not entirely different in kind from the concern or caring which is found in men of goodwill. His human love is indeed most intense, most generous as it is also most exacting and austere. But its distinction from ordinary love is in degree—immeasurable degree to be sure—but not in kind' (p. 131).

Again, 'The love of God, or God as Love, in Jesus Christ is most certainly not absolutely different in kind from the love of God or God as Love, wherever this is seen in the history of the human race and in the experience of the sons of men' (p. 131).

The author repeatedly stresses that Jesus is not different from his earthly human brethren in kind, but only in degree. Jesus is not God who became Man but just 'man'. This man could ascend up the process of becoming, God 'abiding' in him and he 'abiding' in God, and reach the highest level of self-realization of innate human potentialities. This idea is not far different from the integral philosophy of Aurobindo who looked forward to the emergence of the Supermen through whom the whole cosmos will be elevated to higher levels of spirituality. Aurobindo conceived that man will, in course of time, evolve into Superman. Man is not the end of evolution. The cult of Superman is gaining ground today. Henry Bergson conceives that in the course of evolution many mystic beings will emerge and form a society. Aurobindo also conceived that the Superman with greater powers of consciousness and will must emerge in the world soon. Our mind is limited, ignorant and erroneous. Intuition comes to us momentarily and passes away. But in the Superman the supramental consciousness will be the permanent consciousness in man. The spiritual and supramental consciousness are much higher than the mental consciousness. The continuous and ceaseless evolution of man will result in the supramental spiritual being. A comparative study of the process-thinking of Whitehead, Hartshorne, Teilhard de Chardin and Pittenger and others, with that of the evolutionary philosophy of Aurobindo's *Life Divine*, will be a fruitful field of research for Indian scholars.

To those who are familiar with what Dr. Kaj Baago has been saying and writing in India, as for example, in *The Movement Around Subba Rao* (CISRS) and with the neo-Hindu and Vedantic schools of thought which look upon Jesus as a 'mere man' and all men as 'potential Christs', this stand of the author may not be startling; it may not flutter even the ecclesiastical dove-cotes which swim with or against ecumenical currents in the company of the liberal or radical theologians; but to the millions of Christians, both lay and ordained, it would be shattering, revolting and unacceptable. If these views are accepted then the Creeds will have to be abandoned and the Liturgy rewritten. If such

pronouncements should be made from the pulpit by any Bishop, I dare say the innocent faithful will burn both the pulpit and the Bishop, unless such high thinking filters down to the grass-root level of the common man and he also begins to reflect and live his faith existentially, and realizes that Christianity is not final, but that Christ is ; and that theology gives Christianity and heaven and hell after death, while Christ gives eternal life in the Kingdom of God, here and now.

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Book Reviews and Book Notes.