THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

By TAD W. GUZIE

A FRIEND and I were listening to the last part of Handel's *Messiah*, that remarkable collection of bits and pieces of biblical texts associating the christian with the messiah's own victory. I know that my redeemer liveth. As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. If God be for us, who can be against us? Worthy is the Lamb that was slain and hath redeemed us to God by his blood: blessing and honour and glory and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. And that fugal Amen that lifts the listener into the clouds.

It would be hard to imagine someone of Handel's joyous temperament working for very long with images of calamity and destruction and final judgment. But in any case my friend was newly struck with the *absence* of such imagery from the whole last part of the oratorio. A day later when I sat down to this essay, the music kept running through my head, saying things about interpretation and how mercilessly subject to interpretation our religious consciousness really is. There is no reason why Mr Handel and the clergyman who chose his texts could not have emphasized the more dire apocalyptic imagery and thus given *The Messiah* an entirely different feeling and tone.

So for the death of Jesus. The cross too has a feeling and tone in our consciousness, depending very much on what sort of interpretation controls our awareness. Jesus was a man who died. For many it all stopped there; his death was a fact and the fact had no special meaning. On the face of it the cross was, as Paul noted, simply foolishness; it made no sense as a religious event.[1] But those who underwent the experiences called easter and pentecost gave it a

[1] 1 Cor 1, 17–25.

meaning. They interpreted not only Jesus's death but his whole life, right back to his birth. They saw him as the second Adam, the new Moses, the true high priest, the cosmic Christ in whom all of creation would be restored.

But where does it all end? What guarantee have we that religious interpretation will not go too far? What assurance is there that as the process of interpretation goes to work on the whole thing, the real Jesus is not going to be swallowed up in some great mythological Amen?

Interpretation begins as an effort to unfold the meaning of an event, but as the process continues it is not always controlled. Like a stone wrapped in a snowball and sent rolling down a snow-covered bank, the event can get so wrapped in interpretations, one layer added to another, that there is sometimes little relationship between the last layer and the first event lying somewhere inside. One need only think of what happened to the eucharist, which began as a simple ritual gesture 'proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes'. Centuries later, after interpretation had been laid upon interpretation and one had to deal with the tenth or eleventh layer – which was roughly the state of things by the time the eucharistic question had become formulated in concepts like 'real presence', and 'transubstantiation' – it was not always an easy matter to see how the interpretations related to the original event.

Popular piety has always had a hand in the process, and a strong case can be made for saying that popular interpretation has had a more potent influence on the development of christian thought than have theologians. Popular piety embodies the lived understanding of faith; indeed, it was not trained theologians who devised the earliest interpretations of Jesus. Theologians come along and lay out that lived understanding in disciplined statements, which then feed back into popular piety, and the dialectic begins anew.

Now one can come away from the dialectic with a picture of Jesus which has little resemblance to a man who was 'tempted in every way that we are'.[2] Dogmas have not always helped matters here. For instance, Nicaea's teaching on the consubstantiality of the Father and Son *presumes* the historical person and work of Jesus. It focusses on his relationship to the Father at the level where the philosophical theorizing of the day handled such relationships: namely, in the external world outside time and history. What the council did

[2] Heb 4, 15.

was extremely important. If Arius's way of locating the Son in that world had been accepted, and if the Son were to be seen as an intermediate creature between God and man, this would have meant that God cannot communicate directly with man or reveal himself fully *in* a man. But once people no longer look to a primordial world for an explanation of the reality of this world, a concept like consubstantiality is liable to lose its original meaning. Removed from its own world-view and passed through over a millennium of popular understanding, the orthodox reaction to arianism has contributed much to the creation of a Jesus who is as unreal as is, to us, the world of pre-existent beings with which Nicaea had to deal.

The dogma of Chalcedon raises the same problems. 'Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man'. Today one hears the first half of the statement quoted entirely too often apart from the second half, probably in reaction to all the emphasis currently being placed on the manhood of Jesus and the humanistic aspects of the gospel. This is a curious reversal of the original context of the dogma, which was trying to correct distortions in the opposite direction. It was becoming apparent by the middle of the fifth century that, so long as theologizing on Christ *began* with a pre-existent Word who in the course of time became man, it was not at all easy to get that Word fully enfleshed and thus maintain the real humanity of Jesus – which, after all, was the starting point for the faith-interpretations of Jesus's first disciples.

Chalcedon therefore asserted that whatever we say about Jesus's divinity cannot conflict with his full and complete humanity. We know his divinity only *in* his humanity. Whatever we say about him as God can be truthfully said only when we start with a real person who lived our human condition and died in it. Chalcedon was reaffirming, in a particular historical and philosophical setting, the core of christian belief which had already been clearly stated in the less philosophical language and imagery of the New Testament writers: Jesus is the unique mediator between God and mankind, himself a man.[3] The dogma thus talks about Jesus's relationship to us and to God. It does not talk about his self-awareness, his growth as a human personality, his concrete experience of the human condition.

But popular understanding of the dogma has applied it to Jesus's personal psychology. There are surely few christians who (along

[3] 1 Tim 2, 5.

with the church fathers themselves) have not fallen into the trap of thinking of Jesus as one who played out a script written by his Father – a script which, thanks to his divinity, he knew and understood well in advance, including how it would all end. Even the most sublime and edifying kind of faith-interpretation cannot be allowed to cloud over the fact that Jesus was a person who experienced the world *as we experience it*. The story of the agony in the garden implies that acceptance of death was, to say the least, a real struggle for him. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read that Jesus submitted so humbly that his prayer to be rescued from death was heard.[4] The gospel writers indicate that his prayer was one which any genuinely pious man would make in the face of death: he prayed that the bitter chalice would *pass him by*.[5]

The point is that his victory over death, and the answer to his prayer to be rescued from death, came in a way unforeseen by him (as answers to prayer usually come to us as well). This point is too often muddled by popular understanding, which implies that the only reason why Jesus did not in fact use his divine powers to come down from the cross was that the moment was not yet ripe, and he *knew* just how he would be vindicated. Though he believed in his Father's absolute faithfulness to him, Jesus could not have known the outcome of his struggle with death unless he were exempted from the human condition. Maybe we are tempted so to exempt him because we just cannot fathom such a degree of trust in God.

In all of this we see the tendency of religious interpretation to degenerate into magic. Magic, in anything but its poetic sense, involves an attitude which does not take finite reality seriously. Magic deals with supra-human means of escaping from or overcoming the human condition; it does not deal *with* the human condition. Christian faith refuses magic. It does so in its insistence that we are to find and understand the transcendent in the finite Jesus, who remains finite even as the first-born from among the dead. This is what is meant by saying that Jesus is truly God *and* truly man. Why then, given its refusal to do so in principle, should christian faith let any of its interpretations of Jesus run in the direction of the unreal or the magical?

Here we need to recall how the religious imagination works. Justin Martyr illustrates it well. He was one of the first christian writers, himself a convert from greek philosophy, who defended christian ideas to the learned world of the second century. In one

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[4] Heb 5, 7. [5] Mt 26, 39.

place Justin writes that when christians talk about Jesus Christ, who was crucified and died and rose again and ascended into heaven, 'we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you consider sons of Jupiter'. Justin goes on to show how Jesus is the son of God in a unique way, but first he is interested in similarities:

> If we assert that the Word of God was born of God in a special way, different from ordinary births, this should be no extraordinary thing to you, who say that Mercury is the angelic Word of God. And if anyone objects that Jesus was crucified, in this too he is on a par with those reputed sons of Jupiter of yours who suffered (Aesculapius, Bacchus, Hercules, etc.). When we affirm that he was born of a virgin, understand this in connection with what you say about Perseus. And when we say that he cured the lame, the paralytic, and those born blind, we seem to be talking about deeds very similar to those which Aesculapius is supposed to have done.[6]

This sort of comparison sounds shocking to many a contemporary christian. In our preaching and catechetics we have not yet come to terms with the fact that ideas like divine sonship, a god who dies and rises, miracle-working and virgin birth were well known before christianity came along. Such ideas, as the study of history and culture and psychology shows, belong to a whole category of ancient myths and symbols which express man's eternal hopes. It is only natural that if such ideas *are* radical symbols, they would have been used to express faith in Jesus as the one who fulfils man's hopes.

Like the hero-gods of antiquity who conquered the powers of evil and who are frequently shown conquering dragons, Jesus is seen as one who vanquishes the powers of death and darkness. All of the church fathers' imagery regarding Christ's victory over Satan is very much in line with ancient mythology. There are close similarities between Orpheus and Christ: both were men who became mediators of the divine, a role which both the orphic religion and christianity symbolize in the image of a good shepherd. The notion of a cosmic man – one who stands at the beginning of life, or who represents the final goal of life and creation – is found under different names and personifications in China, India, and ancient Persia. Paul is by no means using an original image when he develops the parallels and contrasts between Adam and Christ, the first and second cosmic men.

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[6] Justin, *First Apology*, chaps. 21–22.

Many god-heroes of antiquity undergo death and re-birth or ascension. Justin chooses examples only from graeco-roman religion. The same process of death and re-birth is emphasized in ancient rituals of initiation which identify the worshipper with the life of the god. Once again, John is not being original when he interprets the christian initiation of baptism as a 're-birth'.[7] Nor is Paul when he interprets it, even more vividly, as a ritual in which we 'go into the tomb with Christ and join him in death so that we might live a new life'.[8] In the ancient world and in primitive tribes today, initiation rituals often take place at various stages in one's life, defining the passage from one stage to the next. This idea too is archetypal, and it is carried on in any religion that provides special rites at the time of birth, marriage or death. The same basic symbolism is woven into the interpretation of the passover as a rite commemorating the hebrews' passage from Egypt to the promised land, from slavery to freedom, death to life: and finally Jesus's own 'passing over' from this world to the Father.[9]

Other parallels between christianity and the pagan religions can be brought forward, including, as Justin mentions, the idea of a virgin birth. Christian teaching insists that *Jesus* is unique: nowhere does it say that the *process of interpreting him* is unique. The problem arises only when the process of interpretation comes to obscure what *is* distinctive about christianity, namely the person of Jesus. This has happened in the course of christian history, and it began happening even before the first century was over.

Trouble was inevitable, because the tools of interpretation which the ancients used were tools which could be indiscriminately applied to any sort of reality. Stories about the world of Olympus and the doings of the gods before time began explained mysterious ultimates like the origin of the universe, of sexuality, of good and evil. This same type of imagination, which appeals to a primordial world in order to explain this one, was also applied to significant historical events. Indeed mythical thinking – which heightens some details, suppresses others, and in no sense recounts the entire event – is man's most natural way of holding onto the *significance* of an event or person, be it the Exodus or Jesus or George Washington. And there lies the difficulty.

What is finite experience and what is not? What belongs to the

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[7] Jn 3, 1–8. [8] Rom 6, 4.

[9] Jn 13, 1. For a fine exposition of archetypal symbols, see Jung, Carl G., *Man and His Symbols* (London, 1964).

world of meaning and what is historical fact? What belongs to the transcendent world and what has really taken place in our own? Mythical thinking does not distinguish. It interprets an event in the very act of reporting it, because it does not see an event as worth reporting *apart from* its meaning. It draws no line between the event and the interpretation and thus leaves an ambiguity.

Who is the real Jesus and who is the mythologized Christ? Who is the real Jesus, and where is the dividing line between him and a Christ who might be interpreted beyond recognition? To the extent that mythical thinking operates in the gospels as a method of interpreting Jesus, these questions are not really answered. For once the process of mythical interpretation goes into full operation, there is no intrinsic method for controlling the process. Myth *can* give us the genuine meaning of an event or a person; but it can just as easily move us outside the world of history and finite experience into a world of pure meaning unrelated to real life: and ultimately into a world of magic.

We know next to nothing about the century-long process whereby the small collection of writings called the New Testament were sifted out from a vast body of texts, all claiming to be authentic expressions of christian faith. What we do know is that the sifting took place in the face of a strong tendency to do away with the humanity of Jesus. All of these writings, both the accepted and the rejected ones, were interested in the meaning of Jesus, and all of them used myth. But *what* Jesus, and where *is* his meaning to be found?

Many writings attempted to convey his meaning by endowing him with incredible powers, even in childhood, or by presenting one who was not a man at all, but God playing at being a man. In the *Acts of John*, for instance, at the moment of the crucifixion Christ appears to John who is hiding in a cave. It is all an act for the crowd's sake, he tells John; he is only apparently being crucified. And then Christ goes on to explain the symbolism of what is (not really) happening on Calvary. This latter approach really simplifies the whole thing. God is ultimate meaning. And if Jesus is plain and simply God, your problem of meaning is solved without having to mess about with the finite, and the fact of a man who died.

The same question keeps recurring. Nicaea and Chalcedon had to deal with attempts at philosophical expression which were not yet sufficiently nuanced, and which were unacceptable precisely because they diminished the reality of Jesus. The two councils thus made their contribution toward a christological 'logic', a set of

guidelines for speaking about Christ within a particular philosophical frame of reference. But fed back into the popular religious imagination, notions like 'Christ and the Father are of the same substance', or 'Christ is truly God and truly man', easily become *mythological.* They acquire grossly inaccurate imaginative meanings. The progression of thought from the New Testament to the christological councils is an evolution from mythical thinking to logic and the beginnings of philosophical expression. Mythical interpretation is as valid the gospels themselves, but not when it is applied to the kind of *logical* definition which the conciliar fathers were searching for.

We are probably dealing here with a natural human tendency, for it is not at all easy to sustain the judeo-christian religious insight. The world surrounding the hebrews explained the universe, both human and divine, by appealing to a primordial and archetypal world which is reflected in the events of this finite world. Hebrew religious experience, on the other hand, insisted that God was to be found within history, within man's concrete experience. Christian faith came, asserting that God is to be found in the finite Jesus. But there is resistance to this type of faith.[10] We all possess an innate desire for the human condition to be other than it is, and this desire seems easily to translate into a desire for the magical.

In the apocryphal work mentioned above, Christ tells John the meaning of the cross. The cross, he says, is

> sometimes called my word for your sakes, sometimes mind, sometimes Jesus, sometimes Christ, sometimes door, sometimes a way, sometimes bread, sometimes seed, sometimes resurrection, sometimes Son, sometimes Father, sometimes Spirit, sometimes life, sometimes truth, sometimes faith, sometimes grace.

Half of the predicates sound absurd, but we do after all use the other half, of Jesus if not of the cross itself. Perfectly good mythical thinking brings the christian to say beautiful things about Jesus and his return to the Father, and we can rejoice that there have been men like Handel to make beautiful things even more exquisite. But at the centre of it all stands a real man who, convinced that his acceptance of death had to do with true life and with the coming of God's reign, laid down his life for his friends in the trust that God would save him from meaningless destruction.

That is the scandal, the absurdity. It is also the one thing christian faith can claim for itself alone.

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[10] The contrast between judeo-christian faith and other types of religious experience is well sketched by Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York, 1959).