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ONTOLOGICAL THRESHOLDS AND CHRISTOLOGICAL METHOD

The Christian faith, according to Alfred North Whitehead's familiar premise, 'has always been a religion seeking a metaphysic'.[1] Although it is debatable whether one should accept this thesis in a constructive sense, it does not appear that Christian belief from either an offensive or defensive position has the option of escaping from its philosophical implications. If, for example, a meeting with Christ occurs—either in an initial New Testament sense or through secondary channels in a contemporary moment—which functionally produces an existential consciousness of liberation that one may even dare to call 'forgiveness of sins', what confidence may he have that the experience is real and not only apparent, enduring and not just exuberance of mood, an encounter with life that touches the whole of his concern and not merely one atomistic fragment? These are surely questions which admit varying degrees of solution; yet they are genuine experiential issues which call for a recognition of ontological depth if they are to retain their functional effectiveness. This necessity which theology has of fulfilling its task within the comprehensive context of ontology is portrayed convincingly by Gerhard Ebeling in his essay entitled 'Theology and Reality' when he affirms:

> 'Theology has to do with reality as a totality—not with the sum of all the realms of reality and all the ways in which reality encounters us. . . . However much theology is based upon the testimony of Christian faith, it has yet to make good faith's claim by bringing to expression what unconditionally concerns every man in his totality.'[2]

Christian theology, therefore, cannot be content to deal only or even primarily with manifestations and functions, but must concern itself with ontology—that is, with the question of the correspondence between the expression of a thing and its reality.

I

If one has accepted a revelational priority in his understanding of the sources for Christian theology, he will have no conscious desire to allow the philosophical form of ontological question and answer to determine the content of

[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 50.

[2] Gerhard Ebeling, 'Theology and Reality', inaugural lecture at the University of Zürich, 10 November, 1956, in his *Word and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 199.

his knowledge of God in Christ; however, the existential affinities between the philosopher's inevitable handling of metaphysical issues and the believer's conviction regarding the nature of divine reality are at least analogically comparable.[1]

The philosophical search for the ontological endeavours with a staggering audacity to penetrate to an understanding of being which, though it must be historically conditioned, is not determined by the individual or cultural setting. Ontology, explains John Herman Randall, Jr., seeks to analyse 'the generic traits manifested by existences of any kind, the characters sure to turn up in any universe of discourse—those traits exhibited in any '*ousia*' or subject matter whatever, the fundamental and pervasive distinctions in terms of which any subject-matter may be understood. . . .'[2] Such an open approach to the whole realm of reality is philosophically commendable, yet there is a need to recognise certain underlying presuppositions which are present as the actual unfolding of the task takes place. To begin with, it should be acknowledged that, wherever understanding is sought, man as existing individual, or in religious terms, man as creature, seems to have no possibility of escape from an ontological frame of reference. It is in this vein that Willard Quine assumes, 'Ontological statements follow immediately from all manner of casual statements of commonplace fact',[3] and Paul Tillich concedes, 'Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological'.[4] To be sure, there is no value in a mere verbal or definitional victory; but it could be more than semantically relevant to realize that even the denial of the possibility of ontology is an ontological evaluation of reality. For even if one could retreat into a rigid individualsim, he would do well to understand that he draws limits only at the frontier of his claim to knowledge, not necessarily on the nature of reality itself. Gabriel Marcel comes boldly to this issue when he concludes: 'The *cogito* merely guards the threshold of objective validity, and that is strictly all; this is proved by the indeterminate character of the *I*. The *I am* is, to my mind a global statement which it is impossible to break down into its component parts'.[5] He reasons still further that

'to withdraw into oneself is not to be for oneself nor to mirror oneself in the intelligible unity of subject and object. On the contrary . . . here we come up

[1] The reader will find an informative historical treatment of the relationship between ontology and theology as interpreted particularly from the contemporary continental theological perspective in Hermann Diem, 'Dogmatik zwischen Personalismus und Ontologie,' *Evangelische Theologie*, 15 (1955), 408–15.

[2] John Herman Randall, Jr., 'Metaphysics: Its Function, Consequences and Criteria', *The Journal of Philosophy*, XLIII (18 July, 1946), p. 401.

[3] Willard V. Quine, 'On What There Is', *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. II, No. 5 (September 1948), p. 29.

[4] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University Press, 1951), p. 71.

[5] Gabriel Marcel, 'On the Ontological Mystery', in *The Philosophy of Existence* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1949), quoted in Jerry Gill (ed.), *Philosophy and Religion* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1968), p. 39.

against the paradox of that actual mystery whereby the I into which I withdraw ceases for as much, to belong to itself. "You are not your own"—this great saying of St. Paul assumes in this connection its full concrete and ontological significance. . . .'[1]

There is, furthermore, as Paul Tillich has pointed out, a positive experiential basis for the projection of ontological categories as a clue to human life in that 'the concept of true being is the result of disappointed expectations in our encounter with reality'.[2] It would seem, then, that the very structures of experience, such as are reflected in man's perennial struggle between form and vitality, to cite only one example, are constituted to arouse in him an intuitive impression of an ontological oneness or wholeness which lies behind the fragmented pattern of his dealings with men and things. This, of course, does not mean that a unified reality is 'there' to be found and explained, but one may so *interpret* the phenomena of experience and thereby offer a plausible theory for the almost universal appearance of such anticipation. In other words, the Christian thinker can with some warrant assume philosophically an 'ontological anemia' in man which expresses itself in concern to know and participate in that which is real and ultimate in much the same manner (though not on exactly the same basis) in which theologically he posits the belief that all men are sinners and need God.

Another existential encouragement for recognising the need for an ontological response can be seen in the fact that man relates to his world as though he believed in the logos-quality or rational cohesion of his environment. In an effort to make conceptual room for an ontological Christology, T. F. Torrance reasons that when man raises the question concerning the rationality of the universe, he not only must depend upon its intelligibility to determine the answer but he must assume it even to be able to place the question. It is not possible to ask a meaningful question of one's environment and at the same time to call in question the category of meaning itself and presume to stand outside the realm of intelligibility. If this is attempted, the result can only be a surrender, sooner or later, to irrationality. 'Before the question as to the relation between our knowing and ulimate rationality we cannot but stand in awe and acknowledgement, and can ask our questions rightly only within the actuality of that relationship'.[3] In other words, the intelligibility of human discourse and the rational interest which man has toward the understanding of his place and destiny implies, if it involves any meaning at all, an ontological congruance between reality and experience.[4]

[1] Gabriel Marcel, 'On the Ontological Mystery', in *The Philosophy of Existence* (New York: The Philosophical Library. 1949), quoted in Jerry Gill (ed.), *Philosophy and Religion* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1968), p. 39.

[2] Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[3] T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 53–4.

[4] An illustration of this principle on the scientific level is provided by Max Black when, in dealing with the relationship between scientific models and their subjects, he confesses, 'we pin our hopes upon the existence of a common structure in both fields.' Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 238.

Thus far, effort has been made to say only that experience makes ontological *questions* unavoidable and that, growing out of experience, there are some reflections which support the belief that positive ontological insights are *possible*. What can now be said about ontological conclusions and the decisive matter of their verification? Without entering into an extended consideration of the intuitive, pragmatic and rational or reflective avenues of experience through which all truth claims must be evaluated, the following thesis is proposed as the central means for the validation of ontological concepts. One may in epistemological faith hold an ontological interpretation of a thing, person or ideational realm to be valid to the extent to which the 'reality' is capable of creating in his experience the conditions which appropriately correspond to his conceptual understanding of that which is claimed to be 'real'. Although continual reconceptualization of the ontological categories and restructuring of the experiential channels of encounter with the 'real' through which verification takes place will be necessary, such an 'ontological-existentialism' could help avoid the dangers of a merely speculative postulation of reality and also point away from a positivism or functionalism which is reluctant even to approach an ontological formulation. It remains to be shown how this thesis is relevant methodologically to the question of ontology and Christology.

II

Like its philosophical counterpart, Christian ontology arises from the unsatisfied longings of experience; however, in theology, the expectations have been not only awakened by natural experience, but intensified by encounter with God through Scripture. The tension between the ontological Subject of Scripture and the biblical materials themselves is clearly perceived by Karl Barth when he writes: 'In seeking to understand I must advance to the point where it is well nigh only the riddle of the *substance* that confronts me, and really no longer the riddle of the *text* as such'.[1] It might therefore even be possible to paraphrase Tillich's statement mentioned earlier by suggesting that the theological desire for a comprehensive ontology is at least in part the result of disappointed expectations in one's encounter with the unreconciled phenomena of Scripture. Fortunately, there are more positive bases for Christian ontology which can be seen in the implications of redemption itself. Hugh Montifiore illustrates this principle well when, speaking of the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, he concludes that he enabled man

'to accept himself and thereby to enter into a right relationship with God and with his fellow men, and so to fulfil the purpose for which he was created. It is

[1] Karl Barth, preface to the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, as it appears in Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 380.

because Jesus achieved this that his disciples began to recognize in him One who in some way was to be identified with him who brought the Jews out of Egypt and who fashioned the stars and the earth.'[1]

The very moment one ceases to speak universally and philosophically about being—and for that matter even theologically about God in a generalised sense—and starts talking about the revelation of God in Christ, the particularity of this manifestation makes any consideration of ontology all the more problematic. Nevertheless, this is the heart of the matter for Christian theology, because whatever ontological dimension is biblically and appropriately ascribed to God is, according to some major strata of biblical formulation, applied with equal weight to the person of Christ. Do not certain prominent strands of Scripture[2]—even though they are not identical in either analogy or meaning and surely must have arisen out of a functional soteriological crucible of experience—indicate an intention to give expression to an ontological reality beyond the immediate encounter? A representative systematic response to the 'trans-functional' language which characterises these scriptural patterns is provided by Emil Brunner in his interpretation of the Christological hymn in Philippians. He attempts to deal with the redemption provided by Christ by recognising both its historical occasion and eternal origin: 'It is absolutely true that the source of this movement is within eternity, that is, both the will to send the Son and the willingness to be sent belong to that mysterious realm. For not only the One who sends is God, but also the One who is sent, the Son.'[3] Then he proceeds to summarise the importance of the ontological sphere clearly but not at all too sharply, declaring:

'To regard this as a "speculative" idea means that one is still held in the grip of historical positivism; that one has not yet discovered the dimension of faith. If *this* is empty speculation—as quite naturally it must seem to unbelief—then the whole of the Christian religion is speculation, everything, that is, that goes beyond the ascertained facts of history. But faith only begins where the historical perception ceases. . . .'[4]

With strikingly similar force Gerhard von Stammler in his splendid treatment of the role of ontology in theology warns that the interpreter who surrenders his task in face of the demands of ontology 'proves only, that in that moment he feels no authority of the Spirit'.[5]

[1] Hugh Montifiore, 'Towards a Christology for Today' in A. R. Vidler, ed., *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 167.

[2] For example, Philippians 2: 5–11; I Corinthians 1: 30, 8: 6; II Corinthians 4: 6, 8: 9; Colossians 1: 15–20; Ephesians 1: 3, 19–23; Hebrews 1: 1–4, 13: 8; Mark 13: 24–27; Matthew 11: 27, 24: 42; John 1: 1–18, 10: 30.

[3] Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 310.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Gerhard von Stammler, 'Ontologie in der Theologie?' *Kerygma und Dogma*, 4 Jahrgang, Heft 3 (Juli 1958), p. 159. 'Wer vor der Ontologie in der Theologie kapituliert, beweist damit nur, dass er in diesem Augenblick keine Vollmacht des Geistes spürt.'

At this juncture the relationship between the philosophical questions sketched in the first section and an ontological approach to Christology can come more distinctly into view. Heinrich Ott helps to link the two areas together when he explains that the problem which besets all theology is 'whether the subject-object pattern provides a suitable ontological framework for an adequate presentation of a real redemptive history.'[1] Theology, therefore, inherits the philosophical question: Is there a structural schema in reality itself which must be assumed before it is possible to have confidence in any conceptual or linguistic expression of meaning? This issue is related basically to Christology by R. H. Fuller in his interpretation of the systematic theological significance of the second chapter of Philippians. He admits it is possible to argue that

'this ontic language is merely the translation into Greek terms (and mythological terms at that) of what the earlier functional Christologies were affirming. This is true, but it is not the whole truth. For it is not just a quirk of the Greek mind, but a universal human apperception, that action implies prior being—even if, as is also true, being is only apprehended in action.'[2]

Reliance on this subject-object structure of reality and experience enables Karl Barth to amplify his understanding of 'Christological revelation' into a theological model of 'Christological Being.' Observe how he moves methodologically from revelation to ontology when he expounds that the uniqueness of Christ's revelation and reconciliation for us is 'the analogue of what God is in His Being antecedently in Himself, the Son of the Father, beside whom there can as little be a second, as there can be a second God alongside of the one God.'[3] In other words, 'We have to take revelation so utterly seriously that in it as the act of God we have to recognise immediately his Being as well'.[4] And is it not also the correlation of subject-object which permits Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus—God and Man* to espouse a resurrection Christology which is retroactive ontologically? He believes that the profoundest elements in both Greek and Hebrew thought concerning the nature of truth permit an ontological understanding of Christ which is confirmed by his resurrection. Writing on a pivotal theme which seeks to reconcile systematically such biblically contrasting Christologies as Incarnation and resurrection, he claims:

'Jesus' essence is established retroactively from the perspective of the end of his life, from his resurrection not only for our knowledge but in its being. Had Jesus

[1] Heinrich Ott, 'Objectification and Existentialism,' in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth*, II (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), pp. 317–18.
[2] R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1965), pp. 248–9.
[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1949), p. 487.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 490.

not been raised from the dead, it would have been decided that he also had not been one with God previously. But through his resurrection it is decided, not only so far as our knowledge is concerned, but with respect to reality, that Jesus is one with God and retroactively that he was also already one with God previously.'[1]

Although these above-mentioned Christologies stem from a variety of biblical emphases and even involve different balances in methodological approach, they indicate a willingness to build upon a subject-object structure in reality as reflected in Christ in a way that may not at all be unlike the existential ontology which is implicit in scriptural Christology.

There is always the danger that such foregoing ontological concepts and their verbal forms may be speculative and irrelevant. However, if Christology is not to be constructed on an anthropological foundation but rather upon revelation, and if there really is a biblical need for a Christological position which takes its points of departure not exclusively from the acts of Jesus but from the *person* interpreted through his acts, then an interpretative scandal is bound to appear *somewhere* when the theological effort is made to show the relation of the divine to the human. It is tempting to say with Oscar Cullman that 'Christology is the doctrine of an "event", not the doctrine of natures'.[2] But it may be wiser to admit that the ultimate issues of the interplay between God and man on any level, whether 'event' or 'natures', shall always involve a relationship which defies definition and at the same time precludes the submission of either one of the elements to the other. On this very point James Barr observes that the current hostility between metaphysical and event-centred Christology is not only the result of the historical-critical method of exegesis but also stems from an interpretation of revelation that has been far too confident of its understanding of the nature of 'history'.

'Thus it is natural for many of us to come to think of "natures" in the sense of the old Christology as a "speculation" while at the same time treating so grossly uncertain a concept as Heilsgeschichte as if it was some kind of firm ground. This in itself is no decisive argument; but it is not without importance.'[3]

[1] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 136. Cf. Gerhard Ebeling's interpretation of the Hebrew meaning of truth where he offers this definition: 'Real is what has a future', (*op. cit.* p. 208), and notice further his approval of the following description from H. von Soden: 'Truth is not something that lies somehow at the bottom of things or behind them and would be discovered by penetrating their depths or their inner meaning; but truth is what will transpire in the future. The opposite of truth would so to speak not really be illusion, but essentially disillusion (in the commonly accepted sense of disappointment). What is lasting and durable and has a future is true, and that holds supremely of the eternal as being imperishable, everlasting, final, ultimate.' 'Was ist Wahrheit?' *Urchristentum und Geschichte*, Ges. Aufsätze und Vorträge, ed. H. von Campenhausen, Vol. I (1950), 10 f., quoted by Ebeling, *op. cit.* p. 209.

[2] Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, translated by Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 9.

[3] James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 86.

The principle, therefore, seems tenable that as long as it is maintained that salvation is from God and not man, the gospel will contain an offence to man that will demand his faith, and it is probable that the content of that faith will need to include not just a functional but a Christological perspective which, if it is true to some valid aspects of biblical witness, will centre in Christ's person and will include relevant ontological implications.

III

But why, one may ask, have those levels of Scripture been chosen which present, or at least allow, an ontological Christology as the logical or topical starting point for a systematic Christology? To this it may be answered that the existential element must be the controlling factor in establishing the theological balance to be placed on the different strata of biblical material and also in guiding the selection of the most adequate and comprehensive Christological model. It is here that the systematic concern for comprehensiveness overtakes in theological significance the biblical interest in the chronological appearance of the concept. *Neither comprehensiveness nor chronological sequence as such are to be given theological status in themselves*, but the question must be formed: Where does one find that content within Scripture which in Christian experience conceived both individually and collectively is the most existentially creative? Once this is established, the concepts which describe that creative source must be given their most comprehensive expression systematically.

Precisely for this reason an incarnational model commends itself to this writer because, within the experience of the church, it has been, and remains equal to if not superior in creative force to the other Christological motifs. This is due largely to its capacity to envisage most successfully the biblically explicit link between God as Creator and the person of Christ as redeemer. Furthermore, the incarnational theme seems to be best adapted not only to convey its own distinctive contribution, but also to contain other facets of Christ's person and work—such as his obedience to the will of the Father even to the cross, his designation as Son through the resurrection, and his eschatological significance as coming Lord and Judge—most comprehensively within the breadth of its conceptual structure.

If, consequently, an incarnational Christology can be granted on the grounds of creativity and comprehensiveness as proposed, it may serve, as already intimated, as the primary model for picturing the rational framework which God intends man to have concerning the relation between himself and the world as this is discerned most distinctively in the juxtaposition between creation and redemption. This relationship is examined with penetrating depth by T. F. Torrance in his recent work, *Space, Time*

and Incarnation, and due to the inherent cohesion of his argument, and precision of language, certain stages of his thought deserve to be presented in progression and with some fullness. He understands the Incarnation

'as the chosen path of God's rationality in which He interacts with the world and establishes such a relation between creaturely being and Himself that He will not allow it to slip away from Him into futility or nothingness, but upholds and confirms it as that which He had made and come to redeem. Thus while the Incarnation does not mean that God is limited by space and time, it asserts the reality of space and time for God in the actuality of His relations with us, and at the same time binds us to space and time in all our relations with Him. We can no more contract out of space and time than we can contract out of the creature-Creator relationship and God "can" no more contract out of space and time than He "can" go back on the Incarnation of His Son or retreat from the love in which He made the world. . . . That is the infinite freedom and the unique kind of necessity that hold between God and the world, which not only preserve its contingence but which so ground it in the being and rationality of God as to provide for us in our creaturely existence an intelligible medium and an objective basis for all our relations with God. . . . In this way the Incarnation together with the creation forms the great axis in God's relation with the world of space and time apart from which our understanding of God and the world can only lose meaning.'[1]

It is in the historical receptacles of place and sequence that man must look for that medium of intelligibility where God has elected to make himself available and within which our knowledge of him is objectively grounded by his own transcendent rationality. This is the basic reason a 'demythologising' of Christian theology and, for that matter, any attempt to reformulate the concepts of classical Christology by extracting from it the spatial and temporal referents can only lead toward incoherence.

Therefore, the mode of reasoning observed earlier, in which it was claimed that philosophical ontology is inescapable in an understanding of experience because man cannot without dire consequences remove himself from the causal relationships within the rationality of the universe, now takes on theological import under the categories of creation and redemption, particularly where God's redemptive event is believed to have intersected with human experience objectively in incarnation. Just as one in a philosophical sense cannot void the demands of causality and the intelligibility of the universe, so the Christian theologian asserts one cannot rightfully ignore the creature-Creator relationship. This consciousness of an inescapable involvement in creatureliness is, however, intensified for the believer who cannot and indeed hopefully has no desire to interpret reality outside the redemptive relationship in which he stands and which came as a result of God's appearing in Christ. Any attempt, therefore, to extricate oneself from the existential and *ontological conceptual* context in which that redemption

[1] Torrance, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–8.

has been provided can only blurr the distinctiveness, intelligibility and creative potential of the Gospel at its very source.

IV

There is, moreover, the need to expect that Christology should serve not only in structuring the concept of the intersection between the ontological and manifestational, but ought also to be capable of communicating the Gospel through insights which make possible a participation in its reality. 'In Jesus of Nazareth', writes Paul Lehman, 'the face of reality has changed and with this change, the experience of reality, the perspectives, terms, signs, and symbols by which the new reality is apprehended and interpreted have changed also'.[1] The correspondence which exists between ontological categories of apprehension and the necessity of existential involvement on the part of the believing participant is reflected in an exemplary manner by Paul Holmer when he suggests that 'the meaning of saying that Jesus is God is that in that historical person from the town of Nazareth I find the possibility which I am willing to actualise'.[2] Genuine involvement, however, in this kind of existential 'possibility' can only be functionally and redemptively effective if one can follow Jesus of Nazareth into a relational realm which is not just apparent but ontologically reliable, enduring and comprehensive. It will be remembered it was previously concluded that whatever interpretation of ontological reality might be offered, its validity could only be sustained through the capacity of the concept to engender in experience that which corresponds most appropriately to the understanding of that category. The endless definitional cycle which characterises every epistemological statement can only be broken out of if the ontological concept has the creative capacity to make contact with experience and empower man to realise his potential for authenticity. This is essentially what transpires biblically when it is claimed that the Word which was in the beginning with God and in reality 'was God' became flesh enabling those who received Him to 'become children of God'.[3] An ontological belief in a Christ who is indeed God, not only in his revelation but also in his being, must therefore be capable of creating in experience a quality of life which analogically demonstrates that conviction which the Christian holds as theologically valid in his understanding of God as real. The functional relevance of this approach in ontological Christology is summarised concisely by Gerhard Ebeling when he concludes that to the ultimate question of what is real, the most adequate theological answer 'will be to point to Jesus, of whom we confess that in him God became Man in order that we through him may become real'.[4]

[1] Paul Lehman, 'Logos in a World Come of Age,' *Theology Today*, XXI (October, 1964), pp. 275–6.
[2] Paul L. Holmer, 'Philosophical Criticism and Christology.' *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2 (April, 1954), p. 99.
[3] John 1 : 1, 1 : 12.
[4] Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 200.