

Prayer and Incarnation

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Contemporary theology is in confusion: which is at least to start with a proposition that nobody is likely to dispute. It is neither my present task, nor is it within my competence, to try to unravel the tangle; I am to be concerned with an examination of incarnational prayer within the contemporary situation. Nevertheless theology and prayer are inextricably bound together; theology without prayer is sterile, while prayer without theology can be over-fertile, giving birth to all sorts of outrageous monsters.

“Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.”² Thus: “. . . some experience of the life of faith precedes theology and may indeed be said to motivate it.”³ “Participation in a religious faith,” “experience of the life of faith,” are reasonable definitions of prayer: so prayer precedes and motivates theology. Conversely theology guides prayer, supplying it with an intelligible structure and foundation.

Modern controversy remains peripheral to my purpose, yet in view of this theology-prayer interplay, some attention must be given to it. After that it will be necessary to reverse the process and take a look at contemporary trends in spirituality: how in fact do modern people pray? What is their aspiration and *attrait*? What sort of questions and problems most frequently confront the spiritual director? Only after such a preliminary skirmish can we get down to our real business: an examination of incarnational-or christological-prayer as it impinges on the experience of the modern faithful.

1. Martin Thornton, “Prayer and Incarnation.” *Christian* 4, no. 4 (1978), 317-324. Transcribed by Matthew Dallman.

2. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology, revised edition* (SCM Press: London, 1977), 1.

3. *Ibid.*, 5

I

For present purposes the current debate might be seen as between the “orthodox” (a significant word since it means right worship instead of, or at least as well as, right belief) and the “radical.” This is an oversimplification: radical theologians may come up with a refined and enlightened orthodoxy, while all of the orthodox would be happy to be called radical in the literal sense of getting to the root of the matter; their objection is to the theory that you must cut down and burn the whole traditional tree in order to reach that root. However, the rough distinction should be fairly clear. Let us settle for orthodoxy as sanely conservative, paying humble if not uncritical homage to the wisdom of the past, regarding tradition not as antiquarian but as a living lifeline; as against the tear-it-all-down-and-start-from-scratch school. To narrow the context, we are concerned with those to whom the principles enshrined in the definition of Chalcedon are true, however validly the statement may be criticized, reinterpreted, or put into a different philosophical frame; and those to whom this formula, especially as it touches upon the full divinity of Jesus Christ, is regarded as suspect, inadequate, unintelligible or superfluous.

Given a controversy of this sort, it is impossible for a struggling Christian to remain unbiased; whatever one’s intellectual integrity and logical discipline, it is inevitable that the process of prayer itself, one’s intuition, faith-venture, experience, instincts, or whatever, will incline towards one side or the other. It is more honest to state one’s bias quite bluntly, inviting readers to adjust their response accordingly, than to claim impartiality. I am on the orthodox side, which brings me to a prior objection to the opposing viewpoint.

Much radical theology (another necessary generalisation within the brief compass of this essay) inclines to an arid intellectualism; a kind of neo-rationalism. What cannot be logically demonstrated or intellectually explained must perforce be dismissed. This is not only arrogant but curiously old fashioned; rationalism is itself two centuries out of date, and more recently I thought I heard something like its death knell in James Ward’s *Psychological Principles*, in F. R. Tennant’s tirade against the “psychologist’s fallacy,” and in A. N. Whitehead’s ‘philosophy of

organism.’ Even more curious is that this outlook runs counter to contemporary, existential-and indeed biblical-emphasis upon the synthetic wholeness of human experience. The contemporary stance might be expressed as something like: “I ex-ist, stand out in creation as self-conscious being, therefore I am.” Some of our radicals would appear to go back to quasi-Cartesianism: “I think, so perhaps I am, but nothing will convince me except cerebration.” One suspects this school to be confusing belief with faith, and then failing to see the connection between them: more simply, are they leaving prayer on one side? Or to introduce Professor Macquarrie's important distinction, are they confusing theology with philosophy of religion?⁴

There is nothing to be said in favour of obscurantism, or in favour of blind faith. There is much to be said for intellectual integrity, but the first step towards it is the admission of intellectual inadequacy, especially when we are dealing with the superior human aspiration like prayer. All of which is not to side with the simple faithful against the professional academic, to set piety against theology, but to insist upon the necessity of their marriage. Moreover, however interdependent the marriage partners, it is prayer, “participation in a religious faith,” that “precedes and motivates” theology. Total faith-experience, not just intellection, is our premise.

My second criticism of much (obviously not all) radical theology is that it is inclined to be narrowly biblicist. The New Testament is placed against its widest contemporary background, all the scholarly tools of the critical trade being brought to work upon it. But it is then abstracted from its ecclesiastical context. If theology is as defined, as the Church clarifying its experience, then the total, ongoing life of the Church cannot be ignored: “the theologian speaks out of the community of faith, the philosopher of religion is an individual investigator.”⁵ The biblical interpretations of the Fathers and the Schoolmen may be questioned by contemporary scholarship, but they cannot be ignored, and the doctrinal formulations arising from Patristic and Scholastic interpretation cannot be dismissed. You cannot reach the root by cutting down the tree. I find it difficult to subscribe to the view that the Church, however defined, was infallibly

4. Ibid., 21-25.

5. Ibid., 2.

inspired when it wrote the New Testament and formulated the canon, and has been consistently wrong ever since.

It is conceivable that the Church might have interpreted the experience of the Last Supper as a dominical exhortation to a sort of extended, secularised, grace-before-meals, while developing a liturgical extravaganza at the heart of which was ceremonial feet-washing. According to the Fourth Gospel, should not something like this be the central act of Christian worship? But no New Testament scholar however objectively glued to the text, can ignore the fact that throughout its progressive life-history, the Church has thought and acted differently. In *fine*, you cannot do theology, even biblical theology, without reference to how the Church, that is Christian people, felt, thought, prayed and worshipped, throughout the ages, not excluding our own. Biblicism reduces itself to religious philosophy.

My last dissatisfaction with the radical school is that it appears to be deficient in pastoral perception. This needs explanation. I have no use for the view that all theology ought to be immediately applicable to the practical situation; that books and lectures that do not inspire parish priests to produce next Sunday's sermon with added zeal are to be dismissed as academic and useless. But if we stick to our definitions, theology should articulate the total experience of the living Church, which includes the prayer and experience of its individual members. If Auntie Emily tells of visions of angels behind the henhouse it is the business of theology to discern, investigate, diagnose and guide. In my experience, which is inevitably both narrow and biased, orthodoxy is surprisingly good at this; its theology may be written in what looks like metaphysical obscurity, yet it manages to keep one foot firmly on the ground, behind the henhouse. Radical theology is inclined to be academic in the wrong sense, which is itself unorthodox. The vast Augustinian corpus for example: *De Trinitate*, *Confessions*, *Enchiridion*, *et al*, may not be easy reading but it is all pastorally orientated. It is the work not of an academic but of a struggling Christian and a Bishop dealing with a diocese. It is all embedded in prayer and a sunny spot behind the henhouse is not a bad place from which to tackle it. Radical theology looks lost outside the senior common room.

II

That launches us upon our investigation from the opposite, and primary, position: how do modern people pray? What is their aspiration, *attrait*, learning, experience, which it is the business of theology to clarify and articulate?

Riding rough-shod over the sophistries, we must begin with some explanation of what I choose to call the existential stance. By this I refer to the instinctive, intuitive, conditioned outlook of modern Western people, especially in so far as it differs from the outlook of the recent past. The change has come about in the last century, perhaps since 1900, perhaps 1914; that is for the sociologists and professional historian-anthropologists to argue about. The point is that modern people think and live according to existential, rather than substantive, principles and interpretations. Modern people in the Western world are existentialists, even if they would be surprised to be so described and even if they have never heard of Sartre or Heidegger. I support this viewpoint by asking a simple question: what is a rolling-pin? The Fathers of the Church, the Schoolmen, the Caroline Divines and the Victorians would answer that it was a cylindrical piece of wood; modern people would define it as a tool you made pastry with. The first is the substantive answer: what is it made of, what are its attributes? The second is the existential answer: what is it for? how is it used and experienced?

The change is recent. The Victorians spoke of gold-sovereigns, we do not talk about paper-pounds, because we are no longer interested in what money is made of, only in what we can do with it, how we can experience its worth.

I am almost forced to change sides and throw in my lot with the radicals, who recognise that our credal formulae, including Chalcedon, are written in language that makes little sense to modern people, and which is no satisfactory guide to contemporary christological prayer. To the modern Christian, a list of the divine attributes is as helpful as a wooden cylinder is to a budding cook. Is Jesus a redemptive presence or a metaphysical complex of natures and persons and substances? My orthodoxy here recognises the genuine strengths of the radical position. But will the radical respond by mitigating his intellectualist, biblicist, and

anti-pastoral emphases, and begin at the beginning: how do modern people pray? And which of us can best guide them?

The first result of this change of outlook is an emphasis, either recognised or subconscious, upon total integrated being rather than psychological analysis of the person. In current jargon, prayer concerns the whole being, it is a total response, an absolute commitment. If the movement may properly be called existential, it is also both biblical and dominical: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.” But if we recognise the biblical doctrine of man, this must mean all at once not faculty by faculty.

This accounts for the modern reaction against Ignatian-type mental prayer, and consequent movement towards simple contemplation. The one is discursive, analytic and intellectualist—“mental” in fact—while the other is concerned with total synthetic experience. So Ignatian-type mental prayer would appear to be the natural carry over from a good deal of radical theology today, hinting that such theology is not only out of step with contemporary philosophy but also out-of-date for modern pastoral practice.

The emphasis is on relationship, in Christian context baptismal relationship. Modern prayer begins not with something one does but with the acceptance and working out of a status that one has been given. In the next section I hope to show that this, too, fits in very well with orthodoxy, and that we are liable to come to a savage full-stop without incarnational and christological orthodoxy.

If spiritual direction is to be competent, such christological orthodoxy expressed in contemporary, non-substantive terms, can prove a great stimulus, especially with incarnational contemplation. On the other hand, contemporary spiritual guidance would lose much efficiency if Chalcedon were completely thrown away. Despite five centuries of legitimate criticism, the condemnation of the four heresiarchs still offers invaluable safeguards and warnings. When put together, ancient and modern interpretations of orthodox christology combine vital experience with clarity of thought.

III

Precisely what is meant by incarnational prayer? This question can now be examined in the light of the foregoing, and such examination should throw light on its congruence with radical and orthodox christologies.

I suggest that four main types, or stages, of prayer come under the general heading of incarnational. They overlap, yet they are progressive stages in which incarnational theology needs to become more sophisticated and more important.

The first stage is prayer based upon the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. What did Jesus teach about prayer? Comparatively little, but enough to give some sort of guidance. The *Pater Noster* itself can be studied and analysed to give rise to specific forms and methods. The example of Jesus is more fruitful: did he himself adopt any specific method, outlook or ascetical structure? This question has been fully examined by many scholars and, despite obvious disagreements in interpretation, a clearer pattern emerges.⁶

The living and praying Christian is guided by the scholars, but he also needs guidance from Christ himself, which means meditation upon his words, works and acts. Some kind of Ignatian-type, discursive exercise comes in at this point.

The christological assumptions of those making this type of prayer will colour its value and authority. Yet it is not wholly incompatible with radical, quasi-Arian interpretation; Jesus is a significant teacher of prayer, who may be studied in the same way as St Bernard can be studied. But there are snags when this sort of christology is placed in its wider New Testament context, and still more when it is widened into the whole ascetical tradition of the Church. The holy women and St Thomas the Twin worshipped Christ; to devout Jews to whom idolatry is the sin of sins, this can only mean that they regarded his as divine: Chalcedon grows out of the experience of the living Church. Moreover, the multifarious and diverse schools of prayer which later arose not only followed Chalcedon, but they would all fall to pieces without it.

6. For example, J. Jeremias, *The Prayer of Jesus* (SCM Press: London, 1962); Lewis Maclachlan, *The Teaching of Jesus on Prayer* (James Clarke: London, 1960); William Barclay, *The Mind of Jesus* (SCM Press: London, 1960).

The second stage of incarnational prayer is that which sees Jesus as Mediator and Intercessor. This might be stretched into compatibility with an Arian christology: Jesus is invoked to mediate and intercede after the fashion of the invocation of the saints. But more difficulties arise. Why should any mediator between God and man be required—the time-honoured Protestant question? Because of the infinite gulf between them. We are inevitably led into the doctrine of the Trinity without which no christology makes sense. Jesus points to the transcendent Father. The New Testament is clear about that if it is clear about anything, and yet the error of immanentalism is rife in contemporary prayer, life and thought. If man was made but little lower than the angels it is forgotten that the angels were made infinitely lower than God. So any genuine mediator must be considerably more than human: *Cur Deus Homo?* is still a good question. Perhaps a quasi-Arianism, or some more sophisticated Arian interpretation might still just be possible. But if that is so we have departed from meditation and descended to invocation, or straight intercession. But invocation-intercession, in any Christian sense, depends on the doctrine of the Church, which in turn depends—as we shall see later—on orthodox christology.

The third stage of prayer is that which arises from the idea of encounter. Jesus is neither ancient teacher nor remote intercessor but living presence: “Lo, I am with you always.” Prayer now consists in meeting with the living Christ; eucharistically, recollectively, and by way of continuous personal guidance. We no longer live according to remote and objective Christian principles, neither do we rely on some shadowy faith that Jesus makes continual intercession to the Father for us. Jesus is here, over there, in encounter, to talk to, lean on, argue with; he is our friend and brother, present guide and leader. Right action depends not on principles but on what Jesus commands here and now; right prayer depends on his initiative. We approach the situation-casualty in ethics and the existential interpretation in prayer: there is Christ and here am I, so let us talk, embrace and work things out from where we are.

That looks as if we are drawing nearer to radical christology, especially the type which argues that if Jesus is God, man, and sinless, then he is too remote to enter fully into the human situation. In fact we are drawing further away from this kind of thinking; there are far more snags than we

found before. Living encounter must mean a God-man encounter in two senses: first man meeting God, and secondly man meeting God transcendent through the mediation of a God-man. Because if Jesus is Man, pseudo-god, and possibly sinful, then we might find ourselves on happier terms with him than with the Christ of Chalcedon, but we are on no terms at all with God. So prayer has stopped. Moreover, could one reasonably speak of encounter with the living presence of a Man-possibly-sinful-pseudo-God? We can follow the written teaching of the man-Jesus or of St Bernard; we can ask either to intercede for us with the Father; we can believe in the communion of saints in which St Bernard is in some sort of living intercessional rapport with us, but can we realistically encounter the living and resurrected and glorified Bernard? Perhaps, but there is a difficulty and a difference: you cannot put Jesus at the top of the list. If the invocation of St Bernard means anything it depends upon a doctrine of the Church that depends on a christology something like Chalcedon.

The fourth stage is that which is, for reasons explained in section 2 above, generally adopted in pastoral practice and which seems meaningful and attractive to modern Christian people. This is the concept of prayer based upon the Pauline doctrines of the Church and of our status *en Christo*: the idea of *baptismal incorporation*.⁷ We do not merely encounter Christ, still less follow his teaching or ask for his mediation: we are “in Christ,” incorporated into the Body of Christ. What does this mean in terms of prayer and day-to-day spiritual experience? It means that the sacred humanity of Jesus is ontologically extended to embrace humanity, and in a particularly creative way, baptised humanity. The whole of our nature, the whole of our being, intellect, senses, emotions, intuitions, appetites, and the rest, are made one with their counterparts in the humanity of Christ: we are wedded to Jesus and the twain shall be one flesh: to taste an apple is to participate in the sacred humanity.⁸ Prayer becomes contemplative, non-discursive, total and supra-intellectual.

There is overlap; the prayer of incorporation, incarnational and eucharistic, does not preclude the concept of encounter, although it transcends it, neither does it eliminate the notion of mediation or New Testament meditation. But this common stage in incarnational prayer,

7. See E. L. Mascall, *Christ, The Christian, and The Church* (Longmans: London, 1946), 77ff.

8. G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1943), 57-8.

common in pastoral guidance and not particularly “advanced” but congenial to the modern temper, is wholly dependent upon orthodox christology. You can learn about prayer from both Jesus and St Bernard, you can invoke both to intercede for you, you might, at a stretch, encounter them both, but it is impossible to speak meaningfully about incorporation into the humanity of Bernard. The Jesus of Chalcedon is nearer than the saints so soon as one’s prayer has got off the ground. The conclusion is that if the neo-Arian christology is adopted then Christian prayer is confined to the kindergarten, from which it has no hope of emerging. We could, and strictly speaking should, go on further to stages five, six and seven: into the realms of Christian and christological mysticism. But space, not discounting this writer's limitations, forbids.

What I have tried to do in this brief essay, having freely admitted to personal prejudice, is to look at theology, both orthodox and radical, from the viewpoint of spiritual and pastoral experience, and of ascetical theology. I have little use for intellectual obscurantism, for blind faith, and still less for the criticism that the wretched radicals disturb the faith of simple Christians; a little disturbance does simple faith no harm, and if the incarnation is taken seriously and prayerfully, then faith must be severely tested every morning of the year.

From our stance, however, radical theology does not come out of the examination very well, for it would appear to suffer from a threefold restrictiveness: a narrow intellectualism, a narrow biblicism, and a lack of historical perspective. It is nothing very new; all three weaknesses arose in the eighteenth century and led into Deism. Today they go into the opposite direction towards an all-prevailing immanentalism: theology is displaced by religious philosophy, Christ becomes man, the Church is turned into a human society, and religion sinks into moralism. There is no place left for God the Father Almighty, and so for religion. Pastoral prayer—the adjective is superfluous—remains the premise and springboard for theology, and despite the interrelations, it must be the final judge of theology. Its judgement favours orthodoxy because only orthodoxy can support it. Theology is the articulation of the Church's experience, it is not speculation about God in a vacuum.