

Volume XII Number 2

Autumn 1989

KING'S

Theological Review

Preserving God's Creation. Three lectures on Theology and Ecology. II <i>John D. Zizioulas</i>	41
Alfred Russel Wallace: Theistic Darwinism <i>J.M. Ross</i>	46
Problems with Ecclesiastes...? <i>Stephen Sims</i>	49
Inspiration and Incarnation: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology <i>Alan Spence</i>	52
"Classics of Western spirituality", II: Three medieval women theologians and their background <i>Nicholas Watson</i>	56
BOOK REVIEWS	65
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

INSPIRATION AND INCARNATION: JOHN OWEN AND THE COHERENCE OF CHRISTOLOGY

ALAN SPENCE

In 1647 a Mr John Biddle published in London a booklet entitled *XII Arguments Drawn our of the Scriptures wherein the commonly-received opinion touching the Deity of the Holy Spirit is clearly and fully refuted*. He was a brave man to do so, for in the time of the Commonwealth, a denial of the Trinity was a capital offence. Biddle was duly imprisoned and his works burnt by the hangman.

One of his arguments drew attention to the difficulties raised by the traditional interpretation of Christ as the incarnate Son of God.

What need was there that the Holy Spirit should be given unto Christ, to enable him to do miracles; and an Angel appear from heaven unto him to strengthen him; or why should he so earnestly expostulate with God for forsaking him, if Christ were he, by whom the First Creation was performed, had a Divine Nature and was God himself? ... would it be said of him that had the Divine Nature, that he did miracles, because God was with him, and not rather, because he was God? ... would not the Divine nature in Christ, at this rate, be in the mean time idle and useless?¹

In short, why should the Son of God need the assistance and comfort of the Holy Spirit, could he not act in and through his own power? Should we not say of Jesus that God was with him, rather than claim that he, in his own person, was God?

Biddle's argument was by no means original. Adoptionist theories of this form and the far more subtle arguments of Arius had been debated at length in the Patristic Church. Yet, although the christological discussion developed in sophistication and a number of alternatives were recognised as inadequate, it would appear that the central problem of christology remained unresolved. The schools of Alexandria and Antioch represented two quite different ways of understanding the person of Christ, and the Council at Chalcedon was unable to resolve the conflict that had arisen between them. In fact the debate among the opposing groups dragged on well into the seventh century.

How are we to summarise the two main christological alternatives that continued to characterise the Church's interpretation of Christ? Norman Pittenger offers a useful outline of the contrasting types.

One group of Christians has tended to say that this person is God living and acting humanly. Another has tended to say that this person is the Man in whom God lives and acts.²

For a thousand years after Chalcedon one of these perspectives was to dominate at the expense of the other. Christ was widely interpreted as the incarnate son of God

and the Gospel witness to him as a man anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit was almost totally neglected. This is why Biddle's booklet is historically interesting. It heralded the introduction to England of Socinian ideas and in so doing drew attention to a quite different way of understanding the person of Christ, that is, as a man inspired by the Spirit. It was a perspective which was to influence the christology of the next two centuries, encouraging an interest in the details of the human life and teaching of Jesus as embodying the substance of the Christian faith, while promoting a general scepticism for the Church's historical dogmas.

The twentieth century, however, has witnessed a fairly widespread return to an interpretation of Christ resembling the incarnational christology of the historical tradition, but in which the idea of revelation rather than incarnation is used to conceptualise his divine status. The outcome is that the Christian community today, like the Early Church, continues to be faced with two rather different ways of understanding the person of Christ, that is, as the revelation of God in the form of a human, or as a man so totally open to God and continually empowered by his Spirit in his divine mission that it is appropriate to consider him as being one with God. Karl Rahner describes these different approaches to the interpretation of Christ as the metaphysical type, a christology developing downwards from above and the 'saving history' type, a christology viewed from below.³

Clearly it is possible to characterise these alternate christologies in a variety of ways. Some years ago, Professor C.F.D. Moule gave the title 'Inspiration and Incarnation' to one of the chapters of his book *The Holy Spirit*. In his discussion of the theme of prophetic inspiration he was concerned that some sort of distinction be maintained between a consideration of Christ as one who was fully inspired by the Spirit in the manner of the prophets and as God incarnate in an absolute and unique sense. Faced with the theological difficulties involved in explaining how these concepts could be coherently applied to the same person, he made the following comment:

... although it may be impossible to work these observations into a coherent system it is more realistic to hold them together in a paradoxical statement than to force sense upon them by overlooking some of the phenomena.⁴

Moule rightly recognises that an adequate christology must incorporate the perspective of both incarnation and inspiration, but the recourse to paradox is a heavy price to pay for the defence of his argument. It too easily closes out rational discussion and relinquishes the field to those who reckon the Christian faith to be intrinsically incoherent. If incarnation and inspiration do characterise two equally valid ways of understanding the person of Christ, does not our commitment to rationality compel us to carefully examine whether it is possible to integrate them theologically? I believe that it does and the aim of this paper is to suggest one way in which these concepts might be more coherently held together.

Chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and later Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, John Owen, as the leading Puritan

theologian of his time, was instructed by the Council of State to answer the arguments raised by Biddle and so defend the Christian faith. What is of particular interest to us is his affirmation of both an incarnational and an inspirational christology, to use Moule's terminology, in what appears to have been a remarkably consistent theological system.

What then were the salient features in Owen's exposition of Christ's person? The underlying framework of his whole interpretation was that of the incarnation of the Son of God. By this he did not mean the transformation of the eternal Son or Word into humanity, but rather the assumption by the Son of human nature into personal union with himself. With this careful use of words, Owen safeguarded the integrity of the divine nature, God in his being remains God. Nevertheless the person of the Son does not merely enter into a relationship with a human being, rather in taking to himself all the properties of human nature, it is proper to affirm that he, that is the person of the incarnate Son, is a true man.

Although the resulting union is a consequence of the Son's volition, in that he freely chose to take the form of a servant, it is nevertheless a natural rather than a voluntary union. The 'oneness' is a matter of essence or ontology rather of will or action. It is a hypostatic union because the person of Christ is one individuated or distinct entity, that is, one *hypostasis* or person.

So far, Owen has adhered fairly closely to the type of christology developed by Cyril of Alexandria. He differed, however, in the way he was to maintain the integrity of both Christ's humanity and his divinity. If his person is not to be considered as a mixed or hybrid being, part God and part man, then both his human and divine natures, although inseparable, need to be recognised as in some sense distinguishable, each operating in accordance with its own characteristic properties. The *communicatio idiomatum* is used by him merely as a linguistic tool to explain why one nature is referred to as one subject of the properties of the other, but it does not imply any actual transference of properties between the natures.

What then is the functional relation between the human and divine natures of Christ? Ontologically they are substantially united in one *hypostasis* or person, yet if they form two distinguishable principles of operation, how are we to understand their interaction? In short, how does the divine Word lead, guide or determine his own humanity without undermining its integrity and turning it into a mere, passive instrument of the divine subject?

Owen's deceptively simple answer was that it was by means of the Holy Spirit.⁵ The significance of this idea both for christology in particular and for theology in general cannot be easily overestimated. It allowed him to conceive of the man Christ Jesus as one upon whom the Spirit was operative in every aspect of his life. The Holy Spirit formed his body; enabled him to advance in wisdom and grace; comforted him in trial; equipped him for his prophetic ministry; empowered him to perform wondrous deeds; sanctified his life; raised and glorified his body.⁶ In close harmony with the Gospel record Owen could affirm all the elements of what we have described

as an inspirational christology, yet he was able to do so within the framework of an Alexandrian interpretation of Christ as the incarnation of the divine Word.

We might say incarnation and inspiration served as complementary accounts or interpretations of Christ's person. However, to speak simply of complementarity does not solve all our conceptual difficulties. Inspiration and incarnation suggest to our minds quite different ways of thinking about Christ and if we are intelligently to maintain both we need to be able to bring them into some sort of conceptual unity. To help clarify what we mean by that let us briefly consider the way these concepts function in Owen's christology.

His account of the Spirit's work in the new creation is in certain respects parallel to his outline of the Son's mission to the world. This story, as the other, has its starting point in the counsels of God and the sending act of the Father.

(W)hen God designed the great and glorious work of recovering fallen man and the saving of sinners, to the praise of the glory of his grace, he appointed in his infinite wisdom two means thereof. The one was the giving of his Son for them, and the other was the giving of his Spirit unto them.⁷

Whereas the Son was given by God that "all breaches and differences between them and us be removed, perfect peace and agreement made, and we rendered acceptable and well-pleasing in his sight,"⁸ so the Spirit was sent that "we may be kept and preserved meet for communion with him as our God, and for the enjoyment of him as our reward."⁹

This parallelism is also apparent in his accounts of the Son and the Spirit's action with respect to the humanity of Christ. It was the Son who assumed human nature into subsistence with himself, yet it was the Spirit who formed, sanctified and energised that assumed nature. Now these respective narratives are in essence what we mean by the concepts of incarnation and inspiration. They are not just any two of a large number of stories that could be told of the person of Christ, rather they provide a suggestive or even determinative framework for all other accounts of Christ's person, we could say they function as 'master stories.'

This analysis would help us understand why the early church took just one biblical notion — the Word became flesh — from among the many possibilities, expounding and formalising it in the Creed of Nicea and using it as a test of christological orthodoxy. The narrative suggested by those few words operated as the hermeneutical key to the interpretation of all else that was said of Christ's person. On the other hand, one could argue that those who were dissatisfied with orthodox christology and developed an alternative along inspirational lines, were in fact implicitly operating with a quite different 'master-story' essentially of the form: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.' It was the inherent difficulty in bringing these two stories together into one coherent account that led to most christologies having either an inspirational or incarnational form.

The significance of Owen's christology is that it makes possible the incorporation of these two master-stories into one narrative. The respective missions of the Son and the Spirit to the world, in particular as they are considered with respect to the human nature of Christ, were not perceived as mutually exclusive accounts but rather as complementing one another. They can therefore be woven into one story which we might summarise as, 'The Holy Spirit formed, sanctified and energised the human nature which the eternal Son had assumed into personal subsistence with himself.' The narrative of the incarnation is thus incomplete apart from the story of the Spirit's mission to renew the divine image in Christ as a prototype of what he would do in the Church.

If the step which Owen took so as to be able to affirm both an incarnational and an inspirational christology is comparatively straightforward, the question of whether he was justified in so doing is far from clear. A number of general difficulties arising from his exposition spring immediately to mind. First, there is the question as to whether a christology which affirms the distinct operation of Christ's two natures is able to maintain successfully the unity of his person as the one subject of his incarnate life.

Developing a conception common among the Latin Fathers, Owen's strategy was to identify the person or agency of the incarnate life with Christ in his office as Mediator, that is as the God-man. To do this he made a distinction between the person of the Son considered as incarnate, and considered absolutely, that is, as the second person of the Trinity. Such a distinction appears necessary if we are, in our explication of Christ, to be true to the Gospel account of his dependent and therefore subordinate relation to the Father as incarnate and yet also to maintain the ontological equivalence of status he has with respect to the Father in his divine being. Owen often described the incarnation as the event whereby the person of the Son, remaining what he was, became what he was not. In that there is no transformation of the divine nature, the Son remains what he is. But in assuming human nature to himself the person, as incarnate, becomes what he is not, that is one who is both God and man.

Conceiving of the person of Christ in this way does not imply that he is some form of *tertium quid* or divine-human amalgam, for his person is known always in two distinguishable natures. As to agency, Owen considered the person to be the original principle or agent of all that is done in the incarnate life; the natures are the two immediate principles by which and from which the agent works; the actions are the effectual operations of either nature; the *apotelesma* or effect of his actions with respect to God and men relates to the person, the Lord Christ, he who is both God and man.¹⁰

Owen's analysis here does present a problem with respect to the use of the word *person*. We now normally understand personal agency in light of a psychological model of a human person. But this model is clearly inadequate to express the agency of one who is God-man acting through his two natures, even though it might have value in clarifying what it means for that *person* to be and act as a human. The confusion arises because of the

development that has taken place in the meaning of the word *person*, a fact that needs continually to be borne in mind while reading classical christology.

A second difficulty which modern theology, in particular, has with Owen's christology is the use it makes of ontological categories in its interpretation of Christ. It is often held that nature language or the language of being is far too static to model the dynamic reality of Christ. Put in this form this was not a question which Owen was called to face directly. Nevertheless in his defence of the deity of Christ in the debate with the Socinians, the central issue concerned the nature of the Son's relation to the Father, a debate which I believe does have a direct bearing on the place of ontology in christology. The Socinian argument, in short, was that the relation must be understood in terms of Christ's mission or ministry, that is in functional categories only.

Owen, however, argued that the unique relation of the Son to the Father and the high status ascribed to him in the New Testament writing could not be adequately accounted for in terms of his mission alone. Treading a path similar to that taken by Athanasius in his debate with the Arians, who considered the relationship as being founded on God's will alone, Owen upheld the argument that the Son was of the Father's essence, as suggested by the model of natural generation. The life that is in God does not differ from his being and thus in communication his life to the Son there is an effective communication to him of the divine essence. "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." (John 5v.26). God's essence is interpreted both dynamically and vitally, sharing in that essence means that Christ himself becomes the active giver of life.

Owen also sought to undermine the position of his opponents by showing that the efficacy of Christ's ministry is in fact dependent on the nature of his person or being. He draws heavily from the argument of the book of Hebrews whose principal aim, he argues, is to establish the superiority of Christ's person to the angels, to Moses and to the Levitical priesthood, along with his close alliance to mankind, as the basis for proving the greater efficacy of his priestly sacrifice to that of that of the Mosaic order. The person, therefore, cannot be interpreted wholly in terms of ministry or function, for the efficacy of that ministry is itself dependent on the nature of the person. There were, for example, others before Christ such as Moses who...

...had as much power, and as great a presence of God with him, as any mere man could be made partaker of; yet was he not in his ministry the saviour of the church — nor could he be so any otherwise than typically and temporally.¹¹

Christ could effectively redeem the Church for, unlike Moses, he was in his person a son and not merely a servant, a sonship that consequently needs to be interpreted in ontological and not merely functional categories.

The third difficulty raised with respect to Owen's christology relates specifically to his central thesis — that,

other than in assuming it into substantial union with himself, the divine Son acts on his own human nature only indirectly and by means of the Spirit. Can such an argument be justified theologically? Owen defends it by demonstrating that the Gospels refer to the action of the Holy Spirit all aspects of divine empowering in Christ's human life and experience. He makes no attempt, however, to answer the opposing position, that is, that the divine Son does directly determine or operate on his own human nature.

In defence of Owen's thesis, however, it is worth considering some of the weaknesses that arise from this alternative position, that is, that the divine Son does act directly upon his own human nature. It is dependent on the idea that there is one immediate determining principle in the incarnate Christ and that that is the divine Son or Logos. Such a theory, it would appear, tends naturally to either Apollinarianism, the implicit denial of an active soul or ego in the humanity of Christ, or kenoticism, the transformation or limitation of the divine nature so that the humanity is not overwhelmed by its operation.

In either case, the integrity of Christ's active humanity appears to be threatened. The whole issue is thus transposed into a question concerning the reality of Christ's human experience. Did he stand as we do, a man before God, dependent on the divine Spirit for all aspects of his physical and spiritual being? Owen's soteriology, which recognises Christ's life to be a prototype of that of the Christian, requires that his experience of God be considered as wholly continuous with our own. The passion of Christ must also be interpreted in terms of his active humanity. The awful sense of spiritual desertion and separation from God known by him at Gethsemane and Golgotha cannot be glossed over and treated docetically. Full weight must rather be given to the fact that the cry of dereliction was that of man in deep spiritual darkness sensing that he had been abandoned by his God.

The theory that the divine Son acts directly on his human nature and is therefore the immediate subject of all Christ's human actions, simply does not accord with the Gospel witness to the reality of Christ's human experience. Far better, it seems to me, is to consider the subject of the passion to be the person of the mediator, the one who is both God and man, and who experienced all the darkness of spiritual dereliction in and through his human nature, a nature that always operated according to its own characteristic principles. But if this is correct, it would appear that Owen was justified in his thesis that other than in the personal assumption of human nature, the divine Son operated upon it only indirectly and by means of the Spirit. He has, therefore, established the link which holds together or integrates the two christological types which we have characterised by the concepts of incarnation and inspiration.

In defending the coherence of Owen's christology in the face of the three areas of difficulty outlined above, I am not arguing that he was wholly consistent, nor that the problem of Christology has finally been solved. Firstly, the ambiguous way in which he used the word person and his ambivalent approach to the indivisibility of trinitarian agency are but two important areas of his work that need further development. Secondly, Christ as

the object of our christological understanding must surely always remain a mystery which continues to defy adequate theological expression. Nevertheless, I believe the christology of John Owen does bring together these two distinctive ways of understanding the person of Christ in a manner which can bring greater coherence to the field of christological reflection.

NOTES

- 1 John Biddle, *XII Arguments Drawn out of the Scriptures wherein the commonly-received opinion touching the Deity of the Holy Spirit is clearly and fully refuted* (London, 1647), pp.27ff.
- 2 W. Norman Pittinger, *The Word Incarnate*, Harper (New York, 1959) pp.12-13, quoted by Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its basic Alexandrian character*, Mouton Publishers, 1984, p.21.
- 3 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol.XIII, E.T. by David Bourke, Darton, Longman & Todd (London, 1975), pp.213ff
- 4 Moule, C.F.D., *The Holy Spirit*, Mowbrays (London & Oxford, 1978), p.59.
- 5 John Owen, *Pneumatologia: or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, Works 3, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 Volumes (vols I-XVI of 1850-53 edition), Ed by William H. Goold, reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust (London, 1965-8), pp. 160ff.
- 6 Works 3, pp.163-182
- 7 Works 3, p.23.
- 8 Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, Works 11, p.232.
- 9 Works 11, p.232
- 10 John Owen, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity: as also of the Person and Satisfaction of Christ; accommodated to the capacity and use of such as may be in danger to be seduced; and the establishment of the truth*, Works 2, p.433.
- 11 John Owen, *Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ*, Works 1, p.86.