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Ann Christie

Ordinary Christology: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to identify and critically to analyse the ordinary christologies of a group of thirty regular Anglican churchgoers. Ordinary christology, by the definition employed here, is the account, by believers who have received no formal theological education, of who Jesus was/is (christology) and what he did/does (soteriology). Data was gathered by means of in-depth interviews. Three main christologies are identified: these are designated as functional, ontological and sceptical christology. Functional christology considers Jesus to be the Son of God, not God and is effectively Arian; ontological christology holds the orthodox doctrine that Jesus is God; and sceptical christology doubts or denies altogether the divinity of Jesus. Three main soteriologies are also identified: these are named as exemplarist, traditionalist and evangelical soteriology. Exemplarist soteriology emphasises the life and death of Jesus as exemplary; traditionalist soteriology cannot articulate a theology of the cross at all; and evangelical soteriology hinges on substitutionary atonement and a personal relationship with Jesus. Functional christology and exemplarist soteriology dominate the sample.

Difficulties with the 'traditional' theology of the cross, and the idea that God's forgiveness is dependent on Jesus' atoning death, are widespread amongst the sample, indicating that new ways of telling the story of how Jesus saves are urgently required if Christianity is to capture again the imagination of our contemporary world. Various formal characteristics of ordinary christology are also brought to light. The ordinary christology of this sample is story-shaped, avoids metaphysical speculation, highlights the affective dimension of christology, resists learning christological dogma and is primarily non-cognitive. It also shows that christology is at heart an on-going hermeneutical process rather than a doctrinal system, and it suggests that what matters most in christology is not right doctrine, but letting the story of Jesus have its way with us.

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**Ordinary Christology:
A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal**

by

Ann Christie

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Contents

1	Introducing christology	1
	Classical christology	2
	The state of christology	9
	Learning christology	15
2	Studying ordinary christology	21
	Empirical theological research	21
	Descriptive research: a hermeneutical-phenomenological approach	24
	Anything to declare?	29
	Choosing an empirical research method	32
	The qualitative research interview	35
	Data analysis	39
	Theological analysis	42
	Some methodological problems	43
3	Functional christology	50
	Absence of a doctrine of pre-existence	50
	Absence of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity	53
	Jesus is not God	57
	Virginal-conception christology	60
	Spirit christology	64
	Jesus is divine?	66
	Functional christology	68
	Arianism all over again?	72
	Modalist tendencies	74
	Assumptions of orthodoxy	77
4	Ontological christology	80
	Jesus is God	80
	Tritheistic tendencies	84
	Incarnational christology	87
	Truly human?	90
	'It really happened'	93
5	Sceptical christology	98
	A problem with miracle	98
	History challenges dogma	102
	Liberal tendencies	105
	Radical liberal christology	107
	Jesus the representative human	110
	Human not divine	113

6	Three soteriologies	116
	Exemplarist soteriology	116
	A martyr's death	116
	An exemplarist interpretation of the cross	119
	The cross as a demonstration of the love of God	123
	Traditionalist soteriology	126
	A traditionalist interpretation of the cross	126
	Forgiveness without an atoning death	131
	Eternal salvation through merit	135
	Evangelical soteriology	139
	Substitutionary atonement	139
	A personal relationship with Jesus	145
7	Soteriological difficulties	150
	Saved from what?	150
	Where is the evidence?	152
	Why did Jesus have to die?	154
	A sadistic God?	158
	How does Jesus save?	164
	Salvation through Jesus alone?	170
8	The dominant soteriology - Jesus as exemplar	178
	Jesus as the moral ideal	178
	The rule of love	181
	Christianity as morality	185
	Jesus as the norm for moral life?	187
	The impact of Jesus on the moral life	192
9	Some formal characteristics of ordinary christology	199
	Ordinary christology is story-shaped	199
	Do ordinary believers 'do christology'?	204
	Ordinary christology and affective christology	211
	On not learning christological dogma	215
	Is ordinary christology essentially non-cognitive?	222
10	Christology as process	230
	Engaging with the story of Jesus	230
	Difficulties of engagement	234
	The story and salvation	242
	Is Jesus really that important?	246
	Concluding remarks	256
	<i>Summary of Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research</i>	261
	<i>Appendix A: A Typical Interview Schedule</i>	264
	<i>Appendix B: Age and Gender Details of Sample</i>	266
	<i>Bibliography</i>	267

Chapter 1

INTRODUCING CHRISTOLOGY

‘Who do you say I am?’ Jesus is reported to have asked his disciples. Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ.’¹ This study seeks to ask the same question of a group of ordinary churchgoers. Who do they say that Jesus is? What significance do they attach to him? These questions have traditionally been discussed in Christian theology under the heading of christology. Christology is the branch of Christian theology which studies the person and work of Jesus Christ, investigating who he was (or is) and what he did (or does). Ordinary believers, by the definition employed here, have not studied christology as an academic subject. Their christology is non-academic and non-scholarly. Ordinary christology can thus be defined as the account, by believers who have received no formal theological education, of who Jesus was (or is) and what he did (or does). The aim of this study is to identify and critically to analyse the ordinary christologies of a group of ordinary believers.

In Christian theology, a distinction is usually made between the doctrine of the person of Christ or christology (who Jesus was/is), on the one hand, and the doctrine of the work of Christ or soteriology (what Jesus did/does), on the other. This distinction is made purely for reasons of convenience. The doctrines of the person and work of Christ are inseparable, since it is not possible to speak meaningfully of a person’s identity apart from that person’s activity. Who one is and what one does belong together. Questions about being and doing, or identity and function, are two sides of the same coin.² For the sake of convenience and clarity, however, I will maintain the distinction between christology and soteriology in the analytic chapters of this present work. Ordinary christology will be discussed in chapters 3 to 5 and ordinary soteriology in chapters 6 to 8.

¹ Mark 8:29 (cf. Matthew 16:16 and Luke 9:20).

² On the relation between christology and soteriology, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 270-272 and John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 5-7.



This study of ordinary christology is based on in-depth interviews with thirty regular Anglican churchgoers. The methodological issues will be discussed fully in chapter 2. I will begin this opening chapter by outlining the doctrinal norms against which ordinary christology has to be tested, and finish by saying something about the learning of christology.

Classical christology

The New Testament itself contains a multiplicity of christologies. Peter's christology, his confession that Jesus was the Christ, could be said to mark the beginning of christology or even of Christianity itself. According to Paul Tillich, 'Christianity was born, not with the birth of the man who is called "Jesus", but in the moment in which one of his followers was driven to say to him, "Thou art the Christ."'³ In confessing Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ, Peter was recognising and declaring him to be the long-awaited Messiah, the One anointed by God to be the Saviour of his people Israel. Such a confession would have signalled in a very powerful and evocative way how important and religiously significant a figure Peter considered Jesus to be. The title 'Christ' (or 'Messiah') actually has a range of meanings and carries with it reference to a complex strand of Jewish expectation. It has no connotation of divinity. The title 'Christ', however, quickly developed into a second proper name so that Jesus became known as Jesus Christ most probably shortly after his death. Jesus Christ was then shorthand for Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ.⁴ For most people today, however, the title 'Christ' has entirely lost its theological connotations and is treated purely as a surname. I stopped asking a question in the interviews about the meaning of this term because it became clear very quickly that the interviewees had no idea that it had any meaning.⁵ It

³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol.2 (London: James Nisbet, 1957), 112.

⁴ In Paul's letters the title 'Christ' has become more or less equivalent to a proper name and the titular significance has almost disappeared. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: Continuum, 2003), 197-199. For a full discussion of the term 'Christ' in the New Testament, see Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 1-72 and Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity*, trans. Harold Knight and George Ogg (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 136-228.

⁵ This is not to say that the term Christ is not meaningful for them. It undoubtedly carries affective meaning (cf. chapter 9).

was just part of Jesus' name. Clearly whatever significance these interviewees attach to Jesus, they are not attaching the same significance to him that Peter did. They have a different christology.

The term 'Christ' was, of course, only one of a range of interpretative titles given to Jesus by the New Testament writers.⁶ Many other images and titles, borrowed from Judaism, were also applied to him, each with distinctive nuances of meaning. They were all used to indicate the significance of Jesus for faith. The New Testament contains a plethora of christologies co-existing together. 'The romantic image of a nascent Christian church, unanimous in its affirmations concerning Jesus Christ, has obscured the fact that internal conflict is inherent within the tradition concerning Jesus.'⁷ There is considerable diversity among the New Testament writers concerning the identity and significance of Jesus and there is no single view that can be described as the orthodox New Testament position.

But during the patristic period things changed and dogmas were put in place concerning the person of Jesus Christ. Classical christology was born. The multiplicity of christological statements found within the New Testament were brought together and unified into an integrated scheme which was accepted as normative by the majority of the Christian churches in both east and west. The christological dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon are the classic expressions of the church's teaching about the person of Jesus. They are the touchstone for all orthodox christology and the doctrinal norms against which ordinary christology must be tested. Doctrine attempts to describe or prescribe the beliefs of a community. Doctrines are not to be understood as mere opinion therefore, but as 'communally authoritative teachings regarded as essential to

⁶ On the New Testament christological titles, see Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (London: SCM Press, 1959) and the references cited in n4.

⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 3. For an overview of the various New Testament christologies, see Christopher M. Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) and Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999). See also Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

the identity of the Christian community.⁸ The word dogma is generally understood to have a narrower sense than doctrine. All dogmas are doctrines, but not all doctrines have reached the status of dogma. Dogmas are those doctrines which are declared by the church 'to be revealed truth either as part of the universal teaching, or through a solemn doctrinal judgement.'⁹ The christological doctrines of Nicea and Chalcedon are in this sense accepted as dogmas. They arose out of the community of faith as it sought to make sense of, and give order and structure to, its experience of and encounter with God through Jesus Christ.

The complicated history of the genesis of the christological dogmas and the transition from biblical pluralism to confessional unity in christology lies beyond the scope of this piece of work.¹⁰ For our present purposes it is only necessary to note the key developments which took place during this period. (Further details will be added as and when necessary in dialogue with the data.) To some extent what happened in the first few centuries after the New Testament is that a certain christological pattern, namely incarnationism, and a certain christological title, namely Son of God, came to prominence and eventually prevailed in the history of the church. A key idea in the development of classical christology was the idea of the Logos (or Word) and the related idea of incarnation. The concept of the Logos enabled the decisive move to be made back in time, shifting the emphasis from the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth to the pre-existent divine Son. Behind the human career of Jesus lay a divine pre-existence, the Logos. In classical christology, the Logos came to be thought of as a separate divine person or hypostasis, the Son of God or God the Son.

⁸ McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 11-12.

⁹ Ibid., 9. Cf. Alister E. McGrath, 'Doctrine and Dogma', in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 112-119. There are in fact a variety of approaches to the nature of doctrine. For a grammatical/rule-based account of doctrine, see below, pp. 221-222.

¹⁰ For a full account of the complex development of the christological dogmas and ancient creeds, see, from a vast literature, Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM Press, 1991); J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 3rd ed. 1972); J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 4th ed. 1968); Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology*, trans. Conn O'Donovan (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: 1 - The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975).

In 325 the Council of Nicea affirmed that Jesus was *homoousios*, 'of the same substance' or 'of the same being', with the Father, and in 451 the Council of Chalcedon went on to affirm two complete natures - a divine nature *homoousios* with the Father and a human nature *homoousios* with humanity - both united in the one person Jesus Christ. Chalcedon left the paradox of the human and divine in one person intact and did not lay down a particular interpretation of exactly how the two natures related to each other. These christological dogmas affirm two key beliefs, namely that the one Lord Jesus Christ is both God and man, truly God and truly human. The Chalcedonian formula can be said to act as a rule of christological speech. Jesus is one person who is properly spoken of both as God and as a human being. If one is to speak with the orthodox church, one must talk about him in two ways - as both God and man.

The christological dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon are intimately related to the doctrine of the incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity. These doctrines are arguably the central and foundational doctrines of Christianity itself. One of the problems with using the doctrine of the incarnation as a christological norm is that the meaning of the word incarnation in relation to the figure of Jesus Christ can be variously understood. For the purposes of this present study, I will assume the following understanding, commonly accepted as the traditional understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation - that God the Son was incarnate in the particular individual Jesus of Nazareth, so that Jesus of Nazareth is 'unique in the precise sense that, while being fully man, it is true of him and of him alone, that he is also fully God, the Second Person of the co-equal Trinity.'¹¹ Incarnation, on this understanding, involves an ontological identity 'between the personhood of Jesus of Nazareth and the Second Person of the Godhead.'¹² Jesus in some literal sense 'is' God. As Brian Hebblethwaite, a staunch upholder of this understanding of incarnation, puts it:

¹¹ This is Maurice Wiles' definition of the 'traditional doctrine of the incarnation', which he gave in 'Christianity without Incarnation?', in John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 1, and stands by in 'A Survey of Issues in the *Myth* Debate', in Michael Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 12 (n4). However, the assumption that there is such a thing as 'the traditional doctrine of the incarnation' has not gone unchallenged. See Stephen Sykes, 'The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church', in Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation and Myth*, 115-127.

¹² On the interaction of 'the two natures' in Jesus of Nazareth and 'anhypostasis', see Peter C. Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 248.

The doctrine [of the Incarnation] expresses, so far as human words permit, the central belief of Christians that God himself without ceasing to be God has come among us, not just in but *as* a particular man, at a particular time and place. The human life lived and the death died have been held quite literally to *be* the human life and death of God himself in one of the modes of his own eternal being. Jesus Christ, it has been firmly held, was truly God as well as truly man.¹³

The doctrine of the incarnation is often shortened and simplified to the doctrine that Jesus is God. It is this latter doctrine that I primarily use to test the christological orthodoxy of the sample. The Amsterdam Confession of the World Council of Churches states that the World Council consists of those 'Churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.' Similarly, the Athanasian creed (dating from the fifth century) explicitly states that 'the right faith is that we should believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is equally both God and man.'¹⁴ The main question to be asked of the sample is whether they believe and confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour? Do they adhere to the church's teaching about Jesus - that he is both God and man and Saviour of us all?

The doctrine that Jesus is God is commonly used as a way of determining whether a person is orthodox and therefore 'really Christian' or not. It acts as the shibboleth for distinguishing orthodoxy from heresy. But, as James Mackey points out, whenever the blunt statement 'Jesus is God' is made in the literature of the early Christian centuries, it 'must surely be understood in the context of the elaborate explanations of that conviction to which that same literature devotes a considerable amount of its space', so that the statement Jesus is God has to be interpreted and explained if it is not to be misleading.¹⁵ The simple formula Jesus = God fails to represent what Christian tradition has claimed and few academic theologians would accept the formula without qualification. But it has proved itself adequate for our present purposes, in that the

¹³ Brian Hebblethwaite, 'Incarnation - The Essence of Christianity?' in Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1-2.

¹⁴ These documents, along with others of 'historic christology', are cited in Bernard L. Ramm, *An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic and Historic* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 10-14.

¹⁵ James P. Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 212.

question, 'Do you consider Jesus to be God?' has helped uncover the doctrinal stances adopted by the interviewees in respect of christology. But what about soteriology?

Although it was soteriological concerns that drove developments in classical christology, the church has never formulated a conciliar definition of salvation nor provided a universally accepted conception in the way it did for christology. Salvation has always been understood to be grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but how Jesus serves as its concrete foundation has never been precisely specified. However, from New Testament times to the present day, the Christian tradition has always put the passion and death of Jesus at the centre of the whole process of salvation. It is the cross which has entered history as the primary symbol of Christianity and the cross which is pivotal to any Christian understanding of salvation. It was for this reason that I focussed on the death of Jesus in the interviews.

The main soteriological aim of the interview was to explore what meanings, if any, the interviewees attach to the death of Jesus and the claim that Jesus is saviour. The theology of the cross or atonement theology, like incarnational theology, is highly complex.¹⁶ The 'traditional' theology of the cross (about which there is much debate) is that we are saved or redeemed from sin and death by Jesus, at the cost of his suffering and death, which atoned for or expiated our sins. The idea of atoning for, in the sense of expiating or 'wiping away' sin, originates in the cultic atonement and sacrificial rituals instituted in Leviticus. In these rituals, scapegoats and sacrifices are used to 'atone for' or 'expiate', that is, 'wipe away' or 'cover over' sins and thereby bring forgiveness (see Leviticus, especially chapter 16). In the New Testament, Jesus' death is interpreted in the framework of these rituals. It was the apostle Paul in particular who interpreted Jesus' death in the light of both the ritual of atonement, depicting Jesus as the scapegoat which carries away the sins of the world, and in the ritual of expiatory sacrifice, depicting Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice which dealt with sin once and for all.¹⁷

¹⁶ The literature on atonement theology is also vast. See chapters 6 and 7, plus the bibliography for the works cited in this thesis.

¹⁷ On the interpretation of Jesus' death as a sacrifice, see Frances Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1975). See also, S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Sacrifice and Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For a comprehensive survey of New Testament interpretations of the death of Jesus, see Morna D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the*

The questions for this thesis are: Do the sample adhere to the traditional theology of the cross? Do they consider Jesus' death to be an atonement for human sin?

Some of the many New Testament metaphors associated with the death of Jesus have been expanded into theories of atonement; some of which will be discussed later in relation to the data. Atonement theories attempt to give an account of how exactly reconciliation between God and humanity is accomplished by Jesus through his cross and resurrection. They seek to explain what Jesus' death achieved and how it is salvific.

Every atonement theory depends on two things. First it depends on assumptions about the nature of the human problem, whether that be finitude, death, epistemic distance from God, pride, disobedience, rebellion, guilt, bondage, oppression, injustice, unfulfilled potential, lack of awareness of our true self, or meaninglessness. Second, it depends on a model built from a metaphor of how the cross functions to reconcile us with God by overcoming the human problem.¹⁸

Sallie McFague treats theological models as occupying an intermediate point on the continuum of religious language between primary, imagistic language and secondary conceptual language. She asserts that the atonement theories are all models. Models can be dangerous if one model is absolutized at the expense of others. When this happens, says McFague, models can easily become literalized.¹⁹ It is said that the satisfaction model of atonement has been both absolutized and literalized in much of Western Christianity. Thus Elizabeth Johnson declares that the satisfaction or Anselmian model of atonement 'was never declared a dogma but might just as well have been, so dominant has been its influence in theology, preaching, devotion, and the penitential system of the Church, up to our own day.'²⁰ The questions relevant here are: Do the

Death of Christ (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994). See also, Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), chapters 2-4.

¹⁸ Tyron L. Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 142-143.

¹⁹ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 23-24, 116.

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Jesus and Salvation', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 49 (1994), 5. See also Rosemary R. Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 97-98.

sample adhere to this or any other model of atonement? Can they give an account of how the cross is salvific?

In this opening section I have briefly outlined the christological norms against which ordinary christology will be tested (much more detail will be added later in dialogue with the data), and set out the main questions to be asked (indirectly) of the interviewees. Now I want to say something about the current state of christology in the academy.

The state of christology

Right belief is and always has been important for Christianity. Of all the major world religions Christianity is the only one that has developed confessional formulas; there is nothing strictly parallel to the creeds in either Judaism or Islam or in the eastern faiths such as Hinduism or Buddhism.²¹ The reason for this is, in part, to be found in the context within which Christianity developed. In the struggle to establish its own distinctive identity over and against both Judaism, out of which it emerged, and the pagan thought with which it was coming into contact, orthodoxy, understood as right belief, became increasingly important. Since it was essentially beliefs held about Jesus which differentiated the Christian communities from the Jewish ones, it was hardly surprising that christology became the focus of intense doctrinal activity.²² For Christianity, truth claims, especially about Jesus, have always been of the utmost importance.

The christological dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon were intended to establish the correct teaching about Jesus and bring uniformity of belief, thereby ending the endless disputes and wrangles which threatened to break up the church. They remained the norms of belief for more than a thousand years. It was not until the rise of the Enlightenment that the credibility of classical christology was widely challenged on a

²¹ Doctrine Commission, Church of England, *Christian Believing: The Nature of the Christian Faith and its Expression in Holy Scripture and Creeds* (London: SPCK, 1976), 32.

²² According to G. W. H. Lampe ('The Origins of the Creeds', in *Christian Believing*, 53), it was beliefs rather than practice which primarily distinguished Christianity from Judaism since practice, for example non-observance of the Law, was consequential upon the particular beliefs held about Jesus.

number of fronts.²³ Even during the upheaval of the Reformation the classical christology had not been an issue of dispute. Reformers like Luther and Calvin wanted to have changes in the church, but not in the church's teaching about Jesus. Only in the eighteenth century did the structure of christology really begin to shift. Perhaps the greatest challenge came from the rise of historical consciousness and the application of the historical-critical method to the gospels. Before the rise of the historical-critical study of the gospels, belief in Jesus as God the Son incarnate was assumed to rest securely on Jesus' own claims to deity. But historical research began to show that Jesus did not think of himself in this way.²⁴ The publication in 1977 of the book *The Myth of God Incarnate* brought this type of research into more popular awareness. John Hick, the editor of *The Myth*, writes:

The main historical thesis of the book - that Jesus himself did not teach that he was God incarnate and that this momentous idea is a creation of the church - was of course in no way new. It had long been familiar and accepted in scholarly Christian circles on both sides of the Atlantic. What was new, in Britain, was that members of the theological establishment were now saying it publicly and concluding that the incarnation doctrine, instead of continuing to be regarded as sacrosanct, should be openly reconsidered.²⁵

For Hick, classical christology has given way under the pressure of historical criticism (coupled with the new global consciousness of religious pluralism). He argues that the traditional understanding of Jesus of Nazareth as God the Son, come down from heaven to live a human life and save us by his atoning death, is erroneous and should be

²³ For a discussion of modern (Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment) critiques of classical christology, see Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 173-335; McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 309-336; and the literature cited below, p. 105(n18).

²⁴ See, for example, David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (London: SCM Press, 1973). Strauss (1808-1874) raised, in a radical way, historical questions concerning the life of Jesus and was the first scholar to introduce the category of 'myth' into New Testament studies. For an appraisal of Strauss' important work and influence, see James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 173-180. See also Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, trans. Brian Cozens (London: SCM Press, 1972), chapter 19. For an overview of the impact of historical study on the interpretation of the New Testament, see Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1988). See also, Don Cupitt, 'The Impact of Biblical Criticism', in *The Debate About Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 54-88.

²⁵ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 2.

abandoned in favour of a non-traditional Christianity, which sees Jesus as the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence.²⁶ But this has not been a universal response. For many others, historical criticism is not regarded as having fatally undermined classical christology. They continue to affirm an orthodox christology, but no longer defend it by reference to the claims made by Jesus himself.²⁷

Postmodernity has also brought its own particular challenges to classical christology. Peter Hodgson writes, 'Today the traditional models for interpreting Jesus as the Christ have come under severe attack. This is because the traditional models are perceived as ethnocentric, patriarchal, misogynist, anti-Judaic, exclusivist and triumphalist.'²⁸ Indeed few areas in theology have been as volatile over recent decades as christology. Every area of challenge has generated a multitude of new christologies. Inculturated or contextual christologies now abound. These particular christologies seek to express the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ in the categories of thought from the culture to which they respond, so that Jesus is becoming African, Asian, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Sri Lankan, and so on. Work on 'cross-cultural analysis of what these many faces of Jesus Christ so presented might mean for how christology has been understood heretofore, or for facing the challenges to traditional formulations of christology with which the churches are now confronted' has hardly begun.²⁹ Liberation christology is also inculturated, but is more specific in that it responds to the concrete negativities of an historical context. It interprets Jesus from the perspective of the social and cultural situation of poverty and oppression, and its distinctive feature is the stress placed on the social, political and economic aspects of salvation. It challenges traditional soteriological rather than christological understandings of Jesus.³⁰ Feminist christology

²⁶ Ibid., esp. 1-14.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, 27-39.

²⁸ Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit*, 234. For Hodgson's summary of postmodern challenges to christology, see 236-243.

²⁹ From the forward by Robert J. Schreiter in Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001), xi. Küster offers a phenomenological review of different christologies from around the world and also asks what these different christologies have in common and where they differ, and what they mean for ecumenism. See also, Robert J. Schreiter (ed.), *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991) and R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993).

³⁰ Perhaps the best example of Latin American liberation christology is Jon Sobrino's *Jesus the Liberator*:

challenges classical christology by exposing the patriarchal structures that have shaped the Christian tradition. Arguing that androcentrism has controlled the interpretation of Jesus, feminist christology feels forced to question how a male saviour figure can offer salvation for women.³¹ Another significant area of challenge has come from the current 'close encounter' of the various religious traditions. Religious pluralism has forced a rethinking of the traditional Christian claims about Jesus and the absoluteness of Christianity (cf. see below, pp. 170-177). Pluralism now reigns within christology as it did in the New Testament. Some of these new christologies will be used in later chapters to help interpret the data.

In the patristic period, failure to comply with the official teaching would have resulted in excommunication. Thankfully, in the church today there is more freedom of interpretation and heretics are no longer burnt at the stake. But those who do challenge the church's official christological teaching can still expect a frosty, if not hostile, reception. The christology of the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, for example, was not well received by the magisterium, and the publication of *The Myth* 'immediately set off the biggest theological controversy in Britain since *Honest to God* fifteen years earlier.'³² To mount a challenge to classical christology is to attack the very foundation on which official Christianity has been built, it is no wonder then, that christologies which threaten or challenge classical christology are not gratefully received. Also, because doctrines have a social function - in that they hold the community together and give it a public identity - any 'tampering with or changing the beliefs that express the faith of a person or community can only run into deep and fierce resistance.'³³

So great store continues to be set by classical christology despite all the challenges to it.

A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993) and his *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978). Whilst politically radical, Sobrino's christology is theologically conservative. He remains a staunch upholder of Chalcedonian christology.

³¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether's book *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1983) is a classic in this field.

³² Michael Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation and Myth*, vii. For an account of the furore following publication of *The Myth*, see also, Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 1-3. On the 'inadequacy' of Küng's christology, see Gerard O'Collins, SJ, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 227-229.

³³ Roger Haight SJ, *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2nd ed. 2001), 35.

Throughout most of Christian history the christological dogmas and the doctrine of the Trinity have been 'the unquestioned - and unquestionable - touchstone of truly orthodox faith and teaching', and they remain so today.³⁴ Classical christology is adhered to still and is the official teaching of almost all denominations of the church. It would in fact be extremely difficult for any official church pronouncement to explicitly question the christological dogmas. But in academic theological circles, as we have seen, the ancient dogmas are regarded by many as no longer tenable and classical christology is being reconstructed with varying degrees of radicality. Some (such as Macquarrie) wish to remain true to the so-called 'governing intention' of Chalcedon: thus 'orthodox reconstruction' gives high regard, if not normative status, to the guidelines of Nicea and Chalcedon. Others, however, like Hick, propose abandonment of Chalcedon altogether and wholesale reform. This empirical study explores the world beyond the academy, and seeks to find out whether classical christology is intact in the pew. Do ordinary believers still adhere to the ancient dogmas or is classical christology under attack there as well?

As already mentioned, the Christian tradition, with its notion of doctrinal orthodoxy, has stressed right belief more than have other religious traditions, and theology, which has often been centred upon matters to do with doctrine, has likewise been stressed more in Christianity than elsewhere. It is 'a very Christian assumption that *belief* is central to religion, an assumption that does not hold good for most other religions.'³⁵ But while beliefs are an indispensable component of religion, they are not its whole. Religion is a way of life and not simply a set of ideas and beliefs, although the religious practice of a community, including its worship and ethics, presupposes distinctive beliefs. Religion is multi-dimensional. Frank Whaling's model of religion has eight elements 'that are separable for the purpose of analysis but which form a continuum in the experience of the people belonging to the tradition concerned.' It is his contention that every religious tradition has eight elements: religious community, ritual, ethics, social and political involvement, scripture and myth, concepts or doctrines, aesthetics and spirituality - 'and that they have them with different weights and according to

³⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 58.

³⁵ David N. Gellner, 'Anthropological Approaches', in Peter Connolly (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 13.

different senses of which are the most important.³⁶ It may be that for ordinary believers doctrine is not the most important element. We shall see.

Christological dogma is what the church says we need to believe about Jesus. H. M. Kuitert writes, 'We mustn't exaggerate its importance. Doctrine is a wafer-thin layer, a meagre residue, that certainly tells us what people *needed* to think, but hardly what they really thought, what they really desired, and where their passions really went, as believers. For that we must go to the history books which tell us about daily life as it was lived by the Greeks, Romans, Longobards, Alemans, Franks, Saxons and so on.'³⁷ Clearly doctrine is not everything. It does not begin to exhaust the meaning of Jesus Christ for the believer. In the history of Christian theology and Western culture generally there have been innumerable interpretations of Jesus, for 'alongside the dogma of Christ there has always been the image of Christ.'³⁸ As Albert Schweitzer remarked, 'Each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live.'³⁹

Kuitert describes the different interpretations of Jesus, beginning with the evangelists themselves down to the present day, as 'reception history' or 'the history of assimilation.'⁴⁰ The reception history of Jesus can be charted. In a nutshell, it is what people have made of Jesus down the ages. Any study of the reception history of Jesus

³⁶ Frank Whaling, 'Theological Approaches', in Connolly (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 233-235. Cf. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (London: HarperCollins, 1996). Smart distinguishes six dimensions of religion, namely the doctrinal, ritual, mythic, experiential, ethical, social and material dimensions. See also Jeff Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1994), 116-119, for a comprehensive overview of models of religion based on a dimensional analysis of religion.

³⁷ H. M. Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1999), 119.

³⁸ Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 5.

³⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 3rd ed. 1954), 4.

⁴⁰ Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, 119. For a description of 'a few telling moments' from the reception history, see 104-119. For an overview of the different images of Jesus created by each successive epoch, from Jesus as rabbi in the first century to liberator in the twentieth, see Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*. Pelikan stresses the impact of Jesus on sociocultural history. For a review of Jesus in the historical framework of the theological and mystical traditions of the West, see Gerard S. Sloyan, *The Jesus Tradition: Images of Jesus in the West* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1986). See also Glenn F. Chestnut, *Images of Christ. An Introduction to Christology* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The Seabury Press, 1984) and Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Collins, 1977), 126-144.

shows how deeply the meaning of Jesus for human beings has changed when he is interpreted in different epochs and cultures. It is said that each age of history has characteristically depicted Jesus in accordance with its own character, so that each image of Jesus is a key to understanding the spirit and value of that age.⁴¹ The reason for this is that every understanding and confession of Jesus grows out of a particular situation and both reflects and speaks to particular needs and aspirations. Christology is a 'never-ending story' because 'every religious need that arises seeks material from christology to express itself, and the more quickly the needs follow one another, the more rapidly we have a new Jesus . . . This fanning out can go on endlessly.'⁴² As long as people continue to find in Jesus an answer to their religious needs, whatever those might be, christology will continue to grow and develop. It is therefore vital that the soteriological question, 'How does Jesus help you?' is asked of ordinary believers, as well as the christological question, 'Who is Jesus?' Finding out what Jesus *means* to people is arguably more important than finding out who they think he is.

Learning christology

A believer's christology is clearly a complex reality. Michael Cook prefers to speak of every believer having a 'a faith-image of Jesus, i.e., an image that arises out of and so assumes a relationship of faith.' It is important to note that the word image, as it is used here, is not to be equated with visual representation or mental picture. Image refers to the product of the 'constructive imagination', that is 'our capacity to construct our world.'⁴³ The images or 'worlds' created by the constructive imagination are characteristically 'dynamic rather than static.' They 'develop and operate hermeneutically' and 'are never fully articulated and clearly thematized.' Finally, they are 'loaded with affect' and so involve the whole person, heart as well as mind.⁴⁴ (See chapters 9 and 10.)

⁴¹ Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 2.

⁴² Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, 117.

⁴³ Michael L. Cook SJ, *Christology as Narrative Quest* (Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 1997), 7, 9-10.

⁴⁴ Cook's use of image draws on the work of Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 2nd ed. 1999), 102-105.

A believer's christology is also largely learned. The capacity to be religious may be hard-wired into the brain, but the form of religion is not. Religious beliefs, affects and practices are all learned. As Austin Farrer puts it, 'How did religion get into our heads? It was taught to us, was it not?'⁴⁵ Or as Jeff Astley writes, 'Christianity is for us, necessarily, a learned faith: our Christ is a learned Christ, our God is a learned God.'⁴⁶ Christology is learned primarily, but not exclusively, from the tradition. The way of learning about 'the Christian thing,' says David Kelsey, 'always goes through some tradition, that is, through a complex of beliefs, truth claims, practices of worship, stories, symbols, images, metaphors, moral principles, self-examination, meditation, critical reflection, and the like.'⁴⁷ And Lucien Richard writes, 'The Christ-event is mediated through the particular historical form that the Christian church is. Thus, the church as tradition is the way for the organisation of human experience as Christian.'⁴⁸ Believers are socialised into a religious tradition or culture and their christology is shaped, but not fully determined, by that tradition.

It is important, therefore, to say something about the particular tradition to which the interviewees belong. All of the sample, at the time of the interviews, were regular members of one of three Anglican churches in a rural benefice in North Yorkshire. The style of Anglicanism in all three churches is best described as 'middle-of-the-road', with liturgical services being the order of the day. Each church also has a monthly family service. At the church with a sizable evangelical membership, this service is very informal/lively ('*happy-clappy*' was how one of the interviewees described it). Nearly all of the sample were brought up in Anglican or Methodist Christianity as children. Most, but not all, stopped going to church in teenage years or early adult life and only resumed the practice later on in adult life, usually as a result of moving to the area and

⁴⁵ Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (London: A. & C. Black, 1967), 3.

⁴⁶ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 20.

⁴⁷ David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 109.

⁴⁸ Lucien Richard, 'Theology and Belonging: Christian Identity and the Doing of Theology', in Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (eds), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing Fowler Wright; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 147.

wanting to be part of the local community. Five of the sample have been socialised into evangelical Christianity and, as we shall see, this makes a considerable difference to their christology.

Some would say that the community of faith 'shapes, forms, and structures an individual's faith not only by its belief system but also and principally by its action which is the more vital expression of its faith.'⁴⁹ Thus what the community does as well as what it says helps define the shape of ordinary christology. Indeed all Christian activities, 'from behaviour in the pews prior to a service, through ritual, music and church architecture, to reading church noticeboards and budget decisions may be said to serve as a medium of implicit Christian learning.'⁵⁰ Much Christian learning is implicit, unconscious, informal and unstructured. It occurs via the 'hidden curriculum' of the tradition, that is, 'a set of experiences through which people learn very effectively, but which are not explicitly labelled as *learning* experiences, and which normally are not consciously intended as such.' And the hidden curriculum of worship, it has been said, 'is arguably the most important medium of implicit Christian learning.'⁵¹ For Anglicans, liturgy is said to be the primary medium of Christian learning, and in the liturgy 'the story of the incarnation is repeatedly rehearsed and implied.'⁵² Jesus comes packaged in the church's teaching. As Kuitert puts it, it is 'an already legitimated, already named, already clothed Jesus (clothed in concepts)', that is handed down.⁵³

It is through the liturgy that Anglicans learn how to think, feel and act Christianly. In this context, learning to become and be Christian is a whole person activity. A person's christology, similarly, is not just a matter of cognition, but of affect also. It involves the heart as well as the mind, with an affective ('feeling') dimension as well as a cognitive ('thinking') dimension. In Cook's words, already quoted, christology is 'loaded with affect'. When we take into account the dimension of practice, christology may truly be

⁴⁹ Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, 33.

⁵⁰ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid. Cf. Jeff Astley, 'The Role of Worship in Christian Learning', in Astley, Francis and Crowder (eds), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation*, 244-251.

⁵² See Sykes, 'The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church', 119.

⁵³ Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, 119. On the dangers of elevating one story about Jesus 'to the status of THE story about Jesus,' see Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1985), 140-143. Cf. see below, p. 259.

said to be multidimensional, involving ideas/concepts, feelings/experiences and actions. It is a cognitive, affective and conative ('lifestyle') affair. Learning christology cannot therefore be a cognitive matter only; there must be affective and conative learning here too. In other words, learning christology is not just a matter of learning *beliefs-that* about Jesus. It also involves learning those affects that properly accompany the *beliefs-that*. Dean Martin argues that, 'without such things as fear, contrition, and increasing love of God', the concept of God has not been fully understood, and that 'God is genuinely known only when God's identity is established in a manner that includes one's passions.'⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards placed considerable stress on the affective dimension of religion, claiming that 'true religion in great part consists in the affections' and 'he that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion.'⁵⁵ *Belief-in* Jesus encompasses both *beliefs-that* about Jesus and affective states such as trust in Jesus and other pro-attitudes towards Jesus.⁵⁶ Learning to feel these accompanying attitudes and emotions, and learning to behave in a manner appropriate to the beliefs and affects that have been learned through worship, is part and parcel of learning christology. Unless a believer learns to positively value Jesus, consider him worthy of worship and desire to follow and obey him, then he or she cannot be said to have fully learned a christology.

Having said this, the focus in this study will be on the cognitive dimension of christology, partly because the affective and conative dimensions of christology are much harder to measure. What does it mean to 'follow', 'obey', 'trust' or 'honour' Jesus? There are few objective criteria for measuring religious commitment, or the extent to which beliefs are embraced and expressed in action. It is easy enough to observe overt behaviour, but more difficult to be clear about the extent to which such behaviour is motivated by or expresses a person's christology, without discussing it with the subject. The interviews did generate some affective and conative data, but this was incidental rather than major. It does not follow from this that the affective and conative

⁵⁴ Dean M. Martin, 'Learning to Become a Christian', in Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Christian Education: A Reader on the Aims, Principles and Philosophy of Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1994), 190.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Select Works, Volume III: Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (London: Banner of Truth, 1961), 27, 30.

⁵⁶ See H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 447-54. Cf. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 29 and the rest of chapter 2 on 'Learning Religion'.

dimensions of christology are less important; as we shall see, they are arguably the more important aspects of ordinary christology (cf. see below, pp. 211-215).

A believer's christological thinking, feeling, and acting may be learned primarily from the tradition, particularly from the liturgy, but it is not learned exclusively from there. It is learned from other sources too. Sources mentioned by the sample included other people (parents, teachers, clergy, other Christians), significant events (doing the Emmaus course, the birth of a child, going on pilgrimage), books and films, television and radio programmes, art and sacred music. Clearly, a multitude of factors can and do shape a believer's christology. Several of the sample (all women) mentioned Franco Zeffirelli's classic film *Jesus of Nazareth*, when speaking about Jesus' death. It is possible that a believer may not have read or heard read the passion narratives as recorded in the gospels, so that their own narrative of Jesus' death is based primarily on secondary sources, such as film. Film (unlike the New Testament?) is a powerful and accessible medium: the film is '*really captivating*', whereas the New Testament is '*something I ought to spend more time reading*'.⁵⁷ Film can reach where the scriptural word might not.

One factor which has *not* influenced or shaped the christology of the sample is academic theological study. As was indicated at the outset, none of the sample have received any formal academic theological education, with one exception. One of the sample had undertaken a course of academic theological study as part of his lay-reader training, but whether he learned much theology is questionable, if learning is defined as a change in a person brought about by experience. Consider this extract from his interview.⁵⁸

A I am just interested to know if, in any way whatsoever, doing the bits of theology that you have done on the lay-reader course has had any impact at all on the way that you think about God and Jesus?

⁵⁷ Interviewee comments are always printed in italics in this text.

⁵⁸ Longer interview extracts are also always printed in italics. A stands for Ann (the interviewer) and X stands for the interviewee. (To prevent this interviewee from being identified in subsequent chapters, I have not used his pseudonym here.) The notation, ... , denotes a pause in speech. The notation, [...], (used in later chapters) denotes an omission of some of the interview text. All interview extracts are in quotation marks, apart from passages of continuous dialogue such as this one.

X They frustrate me more than anything. No, I mean doing stuff like the filioque, I couldn't care less. It leaves me completely cold. It doesn't bother me at all whether it was this or it was that. I don't know if it has changed my view of God. No, no I don't think so.

A For some people doing theology is a kind of life-transforming event.

X No. I wouldn't say it was that. I suppose the way I was looking at it was, I've got to get through this and I hope it is not going to change me too much. You know, in the sense that it was going to...my worry was that it might take away rather than build up.

So academic theological study does not necessarily impact on a person's christology. It is worth noting here that twenty of the sample had attended an Emmaus course and of these twenty people, thirteen are housegroup members. (Neither of these contexts is 'academic theological study'.) It may be that more Christian learning, including christological learning, goes on in housegroups than in any other context. Here the Bible is read and studied, often in some depth. Some of the housegroup members, the evangelicals mainly, try to read the Bible daily; but the remainder of the sample rarely, if ever, read the Bible for themselves, still less study it. They hear scripture read in church; that is all. This may not be untypical. The results from a survey of Bible reading practice among regular Anglican worshippers have shown that, in the sample surveyed, the majority of Anglicans do not have the habit of reading the Bible, evangelical Anglicans excepted.⁵⁹

Christological doctrine and christological learning are both complex subjects. In this opening and introductory chapter I have done little more than set the scene for the rest of the thesis. The detail will come later in the analytic chapters, after the methodological issues have been discussed. It is to this task that I now turn.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Fisher, Jeff Astley and Carolyn Wilcox, 'A Survey of Bible Reading Practice and Attitudes to the Bible among Anglican Congregations', in Jeff Astley and David Day (eds), *The Contours of Christian Education* (Great Wakering, Essex: McCrimmons, 1992), 382-393. For a summary of various survey results on Bible reading practice, see Andrew Village, 'Biblical Interpretation among Church of England Lay People' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 2003), 26, 31.

Chapter 2

STUDYING ORDINARY CHRISTOLOGY

Empirical theological research

Studying ordinary christology requires both empirical and theological work, which locates this study in the discipline or field of practical theology. Practical theology is variously defined, but its focus is on the practice of the Christian faith within the church and in relation to wider society.¹ The extent to which practical theology incorporates empirical research varies considerably. Some models of practical theology pay little serious attention to empirical research, despite the emphasis on practice and experience in practical theology. But the empirical perspective in practical theology has 'come more and more to the forefront since the empirical shift in practical theology in the 1960s.'² Increasingly practical theologians have sought to integrate empirical methods into theology. Gerben Heitink is one such; he writes, 'A practical theology, which chooses its point of departure in the experience of human beings and in the current state of church and society' must be 'characterized by a methodology that takes empirical data with utter seriousness.' But also, 'If practical theology really wants to be theology, it cannot be content with only an empirical approach, as is customary in religious studies. It must also deal with the normative claims embedded in the Christian faith tradition.' In other words, practical theology must have both an empirical and a theological perspective. Thus Heitink opts for a 'an empirically orientated practical theology' that is rooted in the actual experiences of people and the situation of church and society, uses empirical methods and is set within a hermeneutical framework.³

What I am doing in this study is not dissimilar. I too am engaged in an empirically orientated practical-theological study that takes Christian experience seriously and

¹ For various definitions of practical theology, see Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1991), 47, 7-8 and the rest of the introduction; Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 6; Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 2.

² Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 220.

³ *Ibid.*, 7, 221.

requires both an empirical and a hermeneutical perspective. (I will say more about the hermeneutical perspective later). However, unlike Heitink, I do not primarily understand my practical-theological research as praxis-based or action research.⁴ In action research a situation or process is studied that is deemed to require change. The underlying interest of action research is improvement of the situation toward the desired praxis with the intent of arriving at suggestions for further action or for modifications in existing practice. This is not my underlying concern, although the results of this study do have implications for both Christian mission and Christian education.

A leading exponent in the field of practical-empirical theology is Johannes van der Ven. He too advocates a model which has a hermeneutical foundation and requires empirical methods. The term empirical theology was actually coined by him to highlight the perspective from which he approaches practical theology. Van der Ven argues that theology itself should become empirical, that is, it should incorporate social scientific methods into its own procedures. Theology should 'expand its traditional range of instruments . . . in the direction of an empirical methodology.'⁵ He proposes an *intradisciplinary* model for empirical theological research, in which theology provides an overall framework that incorporates social science methods to further its own work. In this approach, the empirical-theological cycle begins with the development of the theological problem and goal followed by theological induction, theological deduction, empirical-theological testing and theological evaluation.⁶ William Kay and Leslie Francis, on the other hand, opt for an *interdisciplinary* approach to the study of empirical theology.⁷ Their model is based on a rather looser connection between the social sciences and theology. They might start with a sociological or psychological model and apply this to a theological problem or issue, rather than always start with a theological issue or problem to which empirical research is then applied, as in the intradisciplinary approach. Both these approaches to empirical theology could be used to study ordinary christology,

⁴ Ibid., 225. See also chapters 8 and 9.

⁵ Johannes van der Ven, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993), 101.

⁶ For a worked example of an empirical-theological study using van der Ven's method, see Mark J. Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia: An Empirical-Theological Study* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), esp. chapter 2.

⁷ William Kay and Leslie J. Francis, 'The Seamless Robe: Interdisciplinary Enquiry in Religious Education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 7, no.2 (1985), 64-7.

but they are most suited to research aimed at testing theological hypotheses.⁸

There are different types of empirical-theological research.⁹ This study is essentially a descriptive-exploratory one, rather than an hypothesis-testing one, that is, it follows an inductive rather than a deductive method. All empirical research, of whatever type, is 'a conscious process of comparing and evaluating' and therefore 'contains inductive as well as deductive moments, and the inductive and the deductive methods in research therefore never exclude each other but rather make room for each other.'¹⁰ According to Heitink, in its simplest form a practical-theological study consists of the following elements: description, interpretation, explanation, and action. The basic hermeneutical path that my research follows is very similar: that is, description - analysis - theological reflection - (limited) suggestions for action. My formula, like Heitink's, grossly simplifies what is a highly complex process. The different elements in the formula 'call for each other in a reciprocal way' and show the need to interrelate the theological, empirical and hermeneutical dimensions.¹¹ Each phase of the study presents aspects that touch on theology as well as on the social sciences and hermeneutical theory. An empirically orientated practical-theological study of this kind can be theological, empirical and hermeneutical at the same time: the empirical work is intimately related to the theological work and hermeneutical issues.

Certainly this study has required three perspectives - a theological, empirical and hermeneutical perspective. These three perspectives need one another and complement one another, as an analysis of the various elements in the empirical-theological cycle will illustrate. I will begin by looking at description, but first it would be useful to know what research has already been done in this area.

A survey of the literature on empirical-theological research shows that ordinary

⁸ Mark Cartledge provides a succinct summary of the various approaches to the relationship between theology and the social sciences in his *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 11-16.

⁹ For a description of the different types of empirical-theological research, see Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 228-231.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233. For a more detailed account of induction and deduction, see van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 115-118.

¹¹ The account given here is a modified version of that given by Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 228.

christology is not a topic that has been extensively researched. Some anecdotal evidence exists, but there appears to be little serious empirical-theological research into the ordinary christology of ordinary believers. Sociological and anthropological perspectives on religious believing (including christological believing) provide substantive insights, some of which I draw on in this study, but these perspectives do not offer the kind of in-depth *theological* analysis and critique that, in my view, the study of ordinary christology requires. Thus, the sociological/anthropological approach to the study of religion usually gives a much more general account of religious belief, as one element among many that go to make up religion. The concerns of this approach are always much wider. Mine is more specific: I am concerned with describing and critiquing the theology of ordinary believers, which is not what sociologists or anthropologists do (cf. see below, pp. 42-43). It would seem that ordinary christology is an area ripe for theological research.

Descriptive research: a hermeneutical-phenomenological approach

Descriptive research aims to give as full a description as possible of the topic under study on the basis of the empirical data; it usually characterizes the first phase of an empirical-theological research project. In this section I propose to discuss some of the theoretical issues underlying the task of description. The account of the empirical procedures will follow.

One major research tradition that may be classified as descriptive research is phenomenology. The phenomenological research tradition seeks to describe the phenomena under study in as accurate a fashion as is possible. The outcome of an effective phenomenological investigation is a 'thick' description of the life-world or experiences of the individual or group being studied.¹² The goal of phenomenology is often described as seeking the 'essence' of the phenomena. Understanding the 'essence' of a phenomenon comes through empathic indwelling of the phenomenon (*Verstehen*). In order to achieve *Verstehen*, the process of *epoche* or 'bracketing out' must be employed.

¹² The term 'thick description' was introduced into the social sciences by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (who took it from the philosopher, Gilbert Ryle). It is used by social scientists to denote a multidimensional, nuanced and complex account of a situation in its context. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), chapter 1.

This process involves setting aside personal biases, values and prejudgements about the phenomenon under investigation in order to see the phenomenon as the research participant sees it.¹³

The 'purely descriptive' approach marks out phenomenology as a distinctive discipline, but in doing so makes it vulnerable to the charge of 'hermeneutical naivety', since description is never neutral, value-free or 'pure'.¹⁴ 'All descriptions are for some purpose and the nature of the purpose will crucially shape the character of the description.'¹⁵ For the practical theologian Don Browning, description is the first movement of both theology and theological education. In his view, theology must begin with 'descriptive theology', that is, with a description of 'the contemporary theory-laden practices that give rise to the practical questions that generate all theological reflection.' This descriptive task 'is a multidimensional hermeneutic enterprise or dialogue.' Browning emphasises the hermeneutical nature of the descriptive task; to describe is to interpret. Description is always hermeneutical, involving an interpretive dialogue or conversation between the researcher and the subjects being researched. 'Description takes place within a dialogue or conversation.' On this account, the researcher brings her pre-understandings into the dialogue 'with the practices and meanings of the subjects', rather than setting them aside, as in the phenomenological tradition. Descriptive research is a hermeneutic conversation between the presuppositions of the researcher and the practices and meanings of her research subjects. Proponents of the hermeneutic view of descriptive research believe that detachment is impossible; 'both researcher and subjects are influenced and changed by the research itself.'¹⁶ Even listening is a hermeneutic act. As Browning puts it,

When we listen, we do not simply receive information passively. We listen in order to describe, and the description comes from a particular perspective. We hear, listen, and empathize out of a particular social and historical dialogue. Listening is

¹³ For a full account of the phenomenological research tradition, see Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1994). See also Clive Erricker, 'Phenomenological Approaches', in Connolly (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 73-104.

¹⁴ Erriker, 'Phenomenological Approaches', 82.

¹⁵ Martin Hammersley, *Reading Ethnographic Research: A Critical Guide* (London: Longman, 1998), 70.

¹⁶ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 47-48, 64.

the first part of conversation and dialogue. Listening is never perfectly neutral, objective and internal to what the other person or group is saying. The listener's attempt to get deeply into the internal frame of reference of the other is transitional and partial. We understand the other largely in analogy to our own experiences, although even here, as in all experience, new elements from the other's experience occasionally break through our fore-concepts.¹⁷

No description, be it anthropological or sociological or theological, is ever a simple reflection of the phenomenon 'as it is'. Rather, every description is 'the product of complex processes of understanding, as well as of social interaction.'¹⁸ Browning's thought is heavily influenced here by the hermeneutical philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer.¹⁹ Gadamer proposed that the fundamental structure of all human understanding be described under the model of 'conversation.'²⁰ The significance of this model of human understanding as conversation or dialogue becomes clear when viewed against the background of the thought of two of Gadamer's predecessors, Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl. Dilthey thought that human understanding is achieved through an act of empathy. In order to understand past historical epochs, for example, historians must empty themselves and attempt an imaginative identification with the experience of those they are trying to understand. Husserl thought that we understand meanings through an objective act of description that involves bracketing out all our personal prejudices and commitments through the process of *epoche*. His work provides the basis of the phenomenological approach.

But Gadamer, following Heidegger, argued that the kind of objectivity and self-emptying required by Dilthey and Husserl was not only impossible to achieve, but was actually unhelpful in promoting good understanding and adequate praxis. He said that understanding was like a dialogue or conversation where we actually *use* our prejudices and prejudgements in the understanding process. In contrast to Dilthey and Husserl, therefore, Gadamer does not want to eliminate all biases or prejudgements from

¹⁷ Ibid., 286.

¹⁸ Hammersley, *Reading Ethnographic Research*, 26.

¹⁹ See Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 37-38.

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 330.

understanding. Rather Gadamer says that they must be used positively; for we can understand only in contrast or relation to our biases and prejudgements. Our prejudgements should not dominate our understanding, but they should be used positively for the contrasting light they can throw on what is being studied. As Gadamer writes, 'This kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.'²¹

Describing someone else's theology is thus a hermeneutical process, involving an interpretive dialogue or conversation between the theological pre-understandings of the researcher and those of her interviewees. The researcher must - and can only - bring her theological pre-understandings into the dialogue and use them positively, not expunge them. Indeed, if her theological pre-understandings were wholly bracketed out and set to one side then she would not be able to understand the other person's theology at all. Her theological presuppositions are essential for understanding the theology of the other person. They provide her with the reference point from which she can view the theology of the other and they open up the meaning of the other person's theology to her. Her theology is the lens through which she views the theology of others. This hermeneutical approach recognises that the researcher's own theology is a conversation partner in descriptive theological research; and that the researcher's own horizon of understanding, the perspective from which she sees things, always enter into the interpretive process and shapes the resultant description.

The point is this: even in describing your theology I am implicitly engaged in a conversation between my theology and yours, at least to some extent. My perspective influences what comes to my attention as I listen to you talk about, and see you practise, your faith; indeed it influences what it is that I am capable of

²¹ Ibid., 238.

seeing and hearing, and what I take seriously in what you say.²²

Whilst preunderstandings are necessary for interpretation, however, they must not be allowed to dominate or to distort the process. After all the aim is to give a description of the interviewees' theology, not the researcher's! But the hermeneutic model of a conversation shows that any description of another person's theology will always be at least partly dependent on the theological preunderstandings of the researcher. In Gadamer's phrase, descriptive theology involves a 'fusion of horizons' between the researcher's own theology and that of her interviewees. Browning writes, 'Cognitive distance and objectivity are important. But distance and objectivity are always relative and incomplete submoments within a larger historically situated dialogue between the person or group doing the description and the situations described.'²³ The personal, religious and cultural history of the researcher, including her theological commitments and preoccupations, are all relevant to what she sees and hears in her conversations with her research subjects. In describing their theology, she must therefore not omit to describe her own. (This is what I will do in the next section.)

Van der Ven's method for empirical theology is also set in a hermeneutical frame of reference. He acknowledges that 'empirical facts are meaningful only when they are placed within a hermeneutic context of theological concepts and theories and evaluated from within that context.'²⁴ Heitink, similarly, recognises that practical theology must include the hermeneutical perspective. In his view 'the hermeneutical theory occupies the most important place': 'We are always faced with a theological content that can only be understood hermeneutically.'²⁵ Any account of ordinary theology must appeal to some sort of hermeneutical framework. It cannot appeal to a 'purely descriptivist' approach in which the researcher seeks to bracket out her own understanding in order to identify the viewpoint of another.

But the criticisms against the phenomenological approach may sometimes be overplayed.

²² Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 109.

²³ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 64.

²⁴ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 153.

²⁵ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 200, 223.

Heidegger's conception of phenomenology included interpretation and hermeneutics. Douglas Davies, in his phenomenological study of Mormonism, defines phenomenology as 'a descriptive means of interpretation' and acknowledges that the subjectivity of the researcher cannot be avoided. Every phenomenological study is 'uniquely that of the scholar concerned . . . more like a work of art than an experiment in science. It is an attempted description.'²⁶ So the difference between the phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to empirical research may turn out to be 'a difference of degree rather than kind.'²⁷ The aim of both approaches is surely the same - to give as full, rounded and accurate account as possible of the phenomenon under study. The researcher of ordinary theology must attempt to be 'completely open, receptive and naive' in listening to and hearing her research participants describe their theology, while at the same time keeping her 'theological wits' about her because she needs them.²⁸

As we have seen, the ideal of 'complete objectivity' is unattainable, since an inescapable hermeneutical circle exists between the researcher and the phenomenon under study. But perhaps the researcher should strive for it, as if it was, trying to give as objective a view of the phenomenon as possible, while at the same time acknowledging its fundamentally personal and subjective character. In a word, the researcher must try to be as 'scientific' as possible. She must consider as many aspects of the phenomenon she is studying as she can, and make all the evidence she collects and the methods she uses available for scrutiny by others, and she must be sensitive to her own assumptions and the effects they are likely to have on her conclusions. In the account which follows of my research procedures, particular attention will therefore be paid to the way in which the theoretical considerations mentioned above have played out in the research situation. But first I must say something about my own theological standpoint, and personal and religious history.

Anything to declare?

I am a white, middle-class, middle-aged English female, who is already shaped by what I

²⁶ Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 14-15.

²⁷ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 114.

²⁸ Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 22. Moustakas' comments are made in respect of a phenomenological investigation. The phrase 'theological wits' is borrowed from Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 102.

aim to interpret, having been a life-long churchgoer. Like every Christian, I have a christology. I am an insider, researching an aspect of the religious tradition to which I belong and to which I feel bound.²⁹ I was brought up as a Roman Catholic, but am now an Anglican. This change of tradition came about as a result of becoming involved in evangelical-charismatic Anglicanism while at university. Evangelicalism taught me to embrace the faith and be embraced by it and for that I will always be grateful, but its theology became increasingly problematic. In my mid-30s I embarked on an academic course of theological study for the first time in order to explore some of the theological issues that were bothering me, which included christological issues such as atonement and exclusivism. This research project has arisen out of an on-going existential concern with christological questions and I should admit that, in part, its focus included that of resolving these concerns. Both atonement and exclusivism - key loci of debate for Christian apologetics - are addressed in this thesis. My interest in the phenomenon under study is thus not disinterested; the study is a heuristic as well as a hermeneutical one. Heuristic enquiry begins with a question or problem 'that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives.'³⁰ This enquiry forms part of my own personal search to understand the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ for my own and others' faith and life. In one sense, then, it is as much a self-enquiry as it is an enquiry into the christological beliefs and believing of others.

Now a christological quest can be approached in various ways. After having undertaken a module in christology as part of a taught MA, I was intrigued to know how ordinary believers interpreted Jesus. What did they make of him? The module had focused on what academic theologians thought about Jesus, not on what ordinary believers thought about him. I was curious to know something of what christology in practice might actually look like. What significance and meaning did ordinary believers attach to Jesus? Studying ordinary christology has helped me to resolve some of my own christological questions. It has helped me to become a self-confessed liberal. I openly declare it, acknowledging that this shift in perspective, from the evangelicalism of my 20s to the

²⁹ On the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider, see James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (London: SCM, 1987), 88-89.

³⁰ Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 17.

liberalism of my 40s, has been partly shaped by and has partly shaped the present work. Hence, this study is inevitably influenced, but hopefully not distorted, by my own liberal theological predilections. I have had to work particularly hard not to let my own interests adversely affect the way in which I describe and critique the christology of the small number of evangelicals in the sample.

Another interest which I must declare is my relationship to the interviewees. The researcher of ordinary christology has several methodological choices to make: one of which concerns the choice of research participants. Whose ordinary christology should she study? In 1995 my husband became the incumbent of three Anglican parishes in rural North Yorkshire. I opted to conduct research interviews with members of these three congregations. Martin Hammersley calls the possible effects of the personal and social characteristics of the researcher on the research participants 'personal reactivity' (also called 'interview bias').³¹ Participants' responses will be influenced by their perception of the researcher. Factors such as age, gender, social class and professional identity of the researcher (or participants' perceptions of these) may affect what people do and say during a research interview. There was potential for personal reactivity in this case, as a result of the 'vicar's wife' factor, to be a major source of error in the interviewees' accounts.

Intuitively, I did not think this would be the case. Gaining access to christological worlds requires research participants to disclose personally sensitive material and my hunch was that an already established relationship of mutual confidence and trust would help rather than hinder the research process. But this hunch needed to be tested out both in the literature, and on the ground with the prospective interviewees, before I could proceed.

Anonymity is part of this issue. Bill Gillham, writing for all fields of human science inquiry, states that 'anonymity is sometimes assumed to encourage people to disclose facts, experiences, feelings or attitudes that they would not disclose to another person. There is no good evidence in support of this assumption and, if anything, the evidence

³¹ Hammersley, *Reading Ethnographic Research*, 85-87. Cf. Kenneth D. Bailey, *Methods of Social Research* (New York: The Free Press, 4th ed. 1994), 175.

tends the other way.³² Similarly counselling and psychotherapy research does not require anonymity since 'it takes time to establish the kinds of relationships with informants that will yield high quality descriptive accounts of their experience.' The quality of the data is dependent 'on the level of rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewee.'³³ Congregational studies also provide evidence in support of the view that an insider, even one with perceived 'authority' or 'status', can gain access to reliable and informative data.³⁴

But the most convincing support comes from my research participants themselves.

Hannah's response was not uncommon. She says,

'I don't know how you could meet a stranger and talk as we have talked this morning. I couldn't talk to a stranger as I have talked to you.'

'If I was talking to a stranger, I would feel that it was more of an inquisition than a chat and I would feel that this person who didn't know me was taking a liberty with my privacy, assuming that I was prepared to answer his questions without making any effort to know me as a person. That's how I would look at it.'

But the more important issue is whether interviewees would be honest with the vicar's wife. I trust that the data presented in the following chapters will show that they were. At the end of the interview I asked many of the participants if they had found it to be a problem: all said no. According to Hammersley, what is at issue is whether personal reactivity has affected the data 'in respects that are relevant to the claims made.'³⁵ The evidence points, in this instance, to personal reactivity enhancing rather than distorting the data. It is worth adding here that I had not talked to any of the research participants about their faith (except for two of the evangelicals) prior to the interview.

Choosing an empirical research method

Reference has already been made to the research tool, i.e., the interview. This choice must now be justified. The researcher of ordinary christology has to decide which of the social-scientific method or methods she is going to use to carry out her empirical

³² Bill Gillham, *The Research Interview* (London: Continuum, 2000), 15.

³³ John McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research* (London: Sage, 1994), 78-79.

³⁴ See Hopewell, *Congregation*, 88-93.

³⁵ Hammersley, *Reading Ethnographic Research*, 86.

research. Empirical research can be divided into two categories: quantitative and qualitative research; both of these approaches can be used to study ordinary christology and the strengths and weaknesses of each approach have been well rehearsed.³⁶

Empirical theological research has been carried out using both quantitative and/or qualitative research methods, and van der Ven's empirical theology relies on both methods. Choosing a research strategy depends partly on the purpose of the research. Since the purpose of this research was to obtain as 'thick' a description as possible of ordinary believers' christological beliefs and believing, a qualitative approach was adopted. A small-scale qualitative approach necessarily sacrifices the 'hard' data made available by a large-scale quantitative study, but it gains in 'digging below the surface and revealing the texture of religious feeling and experience which surveys miss altogether.'³⁷ Empirical theological research through quantitative methods is generally considered to be unsuitable 'if one wants to penetrate to deeper levels of consciousness.'³⁸ It is widely acknowledged that qualitative methods offer the best chance of acquiring depth insights into the character and shape of a person's religious beliefs and believing. James Hopewell writes, 'What expresses the faith of a congregation is not numerical data but rather the stories that the numbers only grossly approximate.'³⁹

But qualitative research is not without its problems as we shall see. It inevitably draws on small samples only and is highly selective. Such research is also frequently criticised on the grounds that the researchers 'merely find what they knew already.' The charge is that the researcher 'has done little more than gather information to support her pre-existing biases and prejudices.'⁴⁰ This is partly why Browning insists on the researcher giving some signals about her cultural and religious history in order to show how personal and

³⁶ For a summary of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, and their respective strengths and weaknesses, see Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 222; McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, chapters 4-6; Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 97-100.

³⁷ Geoffrey Ahern and Grace Davie, *Inner City God: The Nature of Belief in the Inner City* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 12.

³⁸ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 232. Cf. Bernice Martin, 'Beyond Measurement: The Non-Quantifiable Religious Dimension in Social Life', in Paul Avis (ed.), *Public Faith? The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2003), 2-3.

³⁹ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 88. Cf. Robert Towler, *Homo Religiosus* (London: Constable, 1974), 158; Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in Everyday English Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 33-34.

⁴⁰ McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, 98.

historical factors have shaped her research findings. Awareness by the researcher of the ideological nature of description reduces the chances of the data being distorted, as does methodological transparency.

A variety of qualitative research tools are available. My choice was partly pragmatic. 'In real world research you have to use the methods that are *possible*.'⁴¹ The in-depth interview was the tool I felt most competent to use. It is in fact one of the most widely used research tools for obtaining qualitative data.⁴² The qualitative research interview provides a first-person in-depth account of what the phenomenon under study means to the participant. Interviews undoubtedly come into their own when the subject of the research is the life-world of the interviewee and his/her relation to it. David Hay and Kate Hunt prefer to call the research interview a 'research conversation' rather than an in-depth interview, because they 'were interested primarily in understanding what people had to say rather than testing a hypothesis.'⁴³ The term 'research conversation' has the added advantage of signalling that the research interview is set in a dialogical and hermeneutical framework which 'recognises the irreducible significance of the interpreter.'⁴⁴

It is worth noting here the 'curious fact that people are, in general, far more willing to devote an hour and a half to an interview (even of no benefit to themselves) than to give fifteen minutes to the completion of a questionnaire.' It has also been observed that 'large sections of the population are not comfortable with *any* kind of written response. And people, as a whole, find it much easier to talk than to write, even if the writing doesn't amount to much.'⁴⁵ Several of my interviewees expressed concern about filling in a questionnaire for exactly this reason. Others expressed more sophisticated concerns, suggesting that a questionnaire, even an open-ended one, would not be able to capture the complexity of their believing in the way that the interview had. A face-to-face

⁴¹ Gillham, *The Research Interview*, 5.

⁴² For an overview of the different methods that have been used in gathering qualitative data, see McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, 79-89.

⁴³ David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church: A Report of the Findings of the Adult Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 2000), 9.

⁴⁴ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 112.

⁴⁵ Gillham, *The Research Interview*, 15,17.

interview allows for meanings to be clarified by both the researcher and the interviewee, but with questionnaires the interviewee can only respond to what is on the page and the data show that people understand the meaning of religious language and phrases in different ways. They may understand the same question in different ways or alternatively they may give the same reply to a particular question but mean different things by it.

The qualitative research interview

First some theoretical considerations: In empirical theological research the theological (and hermeneutical) perspective is operational from the outset. As we have seen, the interviewer does not come to the interview theologically empty-handed. She comes with her own theological presuppositions and theological perspective which she needs if she is to hear her interviewees theology as *theology*. She also comes with a specific theological aim(s) in mind, having selected a particular theological theme for investigation. Selection operates at every stage of the research process, and both interviewer and interviewee select. All description, be it the interviewees' description of their own christology, or the interviewer's description of the interviewees' description of their christology, involves selection and therefore subjectivity. The interviewer is looking and listening with 'theological' eyes and ears both during the interview and afterwards as the data is analysed for aspects of ordinary christology, selecting what is significant at least partly on the basis of what she takes to be significant. 'We notice and select "significant" themes and concepts from *our* theological standpoint, at least to some extent.'⁴⁶ The theological researcher is thus not an innocent listener. She is continually listening out for theology and exploring theology. Theology is her focus and it is this focus that distinguishes her approach from that of the sociologist or anthropologist. Theological listening and theological exploration characterises the interview stage of the research process.

As has been said, the researcher's aim in the interview is not to impose her own christological beliefs or ideas on her research subjects or to evaluate their beliefs against

⁴⁶ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 110.

her own, rather it is to hear them put into speech their christological beliefs and perspectives. The aim is to explore and understand their christological world. Obviously nothing as complex as a person's christology can be entirely captured in words, either by the person themselves or by the researcher. Maybe much of christology is actually unsayable. Every individual believer has their own conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings about Jesus which one interview cannot hope to capture. But through the judicious use of questions, probes and prompts in a conversational setting, it is not impossible to gain some insight into another's christological world. The procedure for doing so will now be outlined.

The research sample was not self-selecting; I did not ask for volunteers. The research participants were purposefully selected to provide a representative sample (across ages, educational backgrounds and occupations) from the adult research population of around 80-90 churchgoers (the total from the three churches). Thirty people⁴⁷ (2:1 female:male) were approached, none of whom refused to be interviewed, although several of the women did express concern, prior to the interview, that they would have very little to say. It is well documented that even people with a formal religious commitment are reluctant to talk about their spiritual lives.⁴⁸ Every interviewee was told in advance what the aim of the research was and permission was sought to tape-record the interview and to quote from it in the final report under a pseudonym. Issues of confidentiality were also discussed. It was made clear that interviews were private and confidential, in the sense that I would not be discussing the contents of the interview with anyone other than my supervisor. To protect the confidentiality of the interviewees, I have not identified the interviewees by either name or occupation. A summary of age and gender details is provided in the appendix. The interviews generally lasted between sixty to ninety

⁴⁷ A. N. Oppenheim states that the number of in-depth interviews conducted in a research project is typically thirty or forty. See Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement* (London: Pinter, 1992), 68. For examples of published studies based on thirty interviews, see Gerard Zuidberg, *The God of the Pastor: The Spirituality of Roman Catholic Pastors in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) and Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). For examples based on less than thirty, see Sharan B. Merriam *et al.*, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2002). After approximately twenty-five interviews my experience was that saturation was reached (i.e., no new themes or patterns were emerging from the data) justifying not extending the sample beyond thirty.

⁴⁸ Cf. Hunt and Hay, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church*, 7; Hopewell, *Congregation*, 90.

minutes.

There are different approaches to structuring qualitative research interviews.⁴⁹ Since there were certain themes that I wanted to explore with the research participants (as outlined in chapter 1), I adopted a semi-structured approach. In the semi-structured (also called the focused or guided) interview, the interviewer selects in advance the various themes into which she intends to inquire. The themes I selected were subject to modification and refinement as the research progressed, as were the questions I used to explore the themes. It is a feature of many examples of qualitative research that the research questions are allowed to grow and change as the research advances. Proponents of 'grounded theory' qualitative research argue that the researcher should be allowed to revise and adapt the research question as the data collection progresses. Margot Ely writes,

For most of us, the questions shift, specify and change from the very beginning in a cyclical process as the [data] grow, are thought about, analysed, and provide further direction for the study. This is certainly different from positivistic research in which questions are posed at the start and do not change.⁵⁰

In the semi-structured interview the questions are open-ended. Open-ended questions allow respondents to answer in their own words, whereas closed-end questions require respondents to choose from a limited number of fixed alternatives. Open-ended questions make it possible for research subjects 'to organize their own descriptions, emphasizing what they themselves find important.'⁵¹ Robert Bellah argues that the research interview (he calls it the 'active interview') has advantages over the survey questionnaire based on fixed questions, because the latter produces data that take on the aura of 'natural facts'

⁴⁹ On the qualitative research interview, see Bailey, *Methods of Social Research*, chapter 8; McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, 79-84, Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*, chapter 5; Steinar Kvale, 'The Qualitative Research Interview: A Phenomenological and a Hermeneutical Mode of Understanding', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 14, no. 2 (1983), 171-196; Gillham, *The Research Interview*.

⁵⁰ Margot Ely *et al.*, *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles Within Circles* (London: Falmer Press, 1991), 31.

⁵¹ Kvale, 'The Qualitative Research Interview', 173. Cf. Bailey, *Methods of Social Research*, 118-123, on open and closed questions.

rather than meanings taking shape within an ongoing historical conversation.⁵² The semi-structured interview allows questions to be tailored to suit the needs of the situation, with probes, or follow-up questions, being used to achieve as full and complete an exploration of a theme as possible.⁵³

In ordinary theology research, the interview is essentially a theological discussion with people 'not given to that sort of talk.'⁵⁴ So to encourage the discussion I usually began with an open question inviting people to share their thoughts, feelings, beliefs about Jesus, or else I invited them to talk about their churchgoing as a way in to exploring their christology. According to Gillham, 'In interviewing you start off with a question, the opening shot; where it goes from there may be unpredictable but you have to follow, controlling the direction.'⁵⁵ For a novice interviewer this can be disconcerting. But learning how to follow the respondents' lead, structuring the interview into shape and giving it direction, does become easier with practice and as the interviewer becomes increasingly familiar with the likely range of discourses to be encountered. 'Expert interviewers always have a structure, which they use flexibly according to what emerges.'⁵⁶ The interview conversation, however, must always be controlled and managed by the interviewer. Without the structure provided by the interviewer, 'the interview could degenerate into a worthless exercise in which questions are asked at random and neither the interviewer nor the respondent knows what the interview is supposed to achieve.'⁵⁷

Ethical considerations also have to be taken into account when interviewing. 'The basic ethical principle governing data collection is that no harm should come to the respondents as a result of their participation in the research.'⁵⁸ The data is 'thin' in various places precisely because ethical concerns always have to take precedence over the pursuit for rich data. The interviewer must be non-judgemental, affirmative and

⁵² Robert N. Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 305.

⁵³ On the use of probes, see Bailey, *Methods of Social Research*, 189-190.

⁵⁴ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 90.

⁵⁵ Gillham, *The Research Interview*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁷ Bailey, *Methods of Social Research*, 200.

⁵⁸ Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*, 83.

respectful at all times. Interviewing, in these circumstances, takes on some aspects of the character of a pastoral activity. Ottmar Fuchs describes the qualitative-empirical theological encounter as a pastoral encounter, arguing that the depth quality of the data depends to a significant degree on the pastoral quality of the empirical research. The research interview requires 'pastoral-theological qualities' if interviewees are to feel sufficiently secure to bring up their experiences and conflicts about their religious beliefs in an open and honest fashion.⁵⁹

The interviews I conducted were not perfect. Fieldwork never is. But every research conversation, without exception, has yielded a surprising richness of data, with doubts and uncertainties, as well as heartfelt convictions, being readily expressed. One aspect of the qualitative research interview is that it can be a positive experience for the interviewee.⁶⁰ Several of my interviewees reported that it was. Hopewell comments that 'so accustomed are members [of congregations] to being told what they *should* believe that to be asked what they in fact *do* believe may prompt unprecedented communication.'⁶¹ Most of the interviewees seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk about and explore their beliefs and generously engaged in the process, generating a wealth of rich, personal and detailed data for analysis. The willingness with which the interviewees engaged in the research conversation suggests that the 'vicar's wife' factor was not in fact a factor, in the sense of adversely affecting the quality of the data. What seems to matter most is that the interviewer is a good listener, the sort of person people will talk to. I hope that I was.

Data analysis

'Qualitative data are often difficult to handle and report on, and the researcher who adopts this approach will frequently feel swamped by her data.'⁶² This has certainly been my experience. Each interview generated around fifteen to twenty pages of (single-

⁵⁹ Ottmar Fuchs, "Priest-mothers" and "God-mothers": Qualitative Empirical Approaches to Research and the Human Image of God', in Hans-Georg Ziebertz, Friedrich Schweitzer, Hermann Haring and Don Browning (eds), *The Human Image of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 239-247.

⁶⁰ See Kvale, 'The Qualitative Research Interview', 178.

⁶¹ Hopewell, *Congregation*, 91.

⁶² Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 99.

spaced) transcript which then had to be analysed properly. One disadvantage of qualitative research is that it is very time-consuming. Every hour of interview tape generated approximately six hours of transcribing. Analysing the interviews takes even longer. Methodological choices face the researcher at this stage of the research process too, as a range of different strategies can be applied in qualitative data analysis. Phenomenologists, for instance, are 'careful, often dubious, about condensing' interview transcripts. 'They do not, for example, use coding, but assume that through continued readings of the source material and through vigilance over one's presuppositions, one can reach the "*Lebenswelt*" of the informant, capturing the "essence" of an account.'⁶³ Grounded theory research, by contrast, relies on 'a series of well-articulated analytic steps', including extensive coding and categorization, often impossible without the use of computer-aided techniques.⁶⁴

It is clear that qualitative data analysis is a complex and often idiosyncratic business. As John McLeod observes, it is reasonable to claim 'no two researchers approach the task of qualitative data analysis in quite the same way.'⁶⁵ According to Clark Moustakas, every method in human science research is open ended. He writes, 'Each research project holds its own integrity and establishes its own methods and procedures' which facilitate the flow of the investigation and the data collection.⁶⁶ Certainly, there are varying degrees of reflection and transparency about methodological issues in qualitative research. Some researchers prefer 'intuitive, relaxed voyages through their data', whilst others opt for 'thoroughness and explicitness', insisting that the reliability and validity of qualitatively derived findings depends on explicit, systematic methods 'that are credible, dependable, and replicable in *qualitative* terms.'⁶⁷

Various stages are said to recur during any type of qualitative analysis, namely, immersion - categorisation - data reduction - interpretation.⁶⁸ My approach to data

⁶³ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2nd ed. 1994), 8. Cf. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 16.

⁶⁴ McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, 93-97. Cf. B. D. Glaser and A. K. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁶ Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 104.

⁶⁷ Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2, 5.

⁶⁸ See McLeod, *Doing Counselling Research*, 89-93; Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 9-

analysis has followed this general pattern. First, every interview was transcribed and then coded - this is the process of categorising qualitative material. The researcher systematically works through the transcript assigning coding categories and identifying themes within the text. At the same time she is immersing herself in the data, trying to enter, in an empathic way, into the christological world of the interviewee. The process of coding is essentially one of data reduction. Data reduction occurs continuously throughout the life of the project until the final report is written up. It is a form of analysis 'that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organises data in such a way that "final" conclusions can be drawn and verified.'⁶⁹ The data were analysed as they were gathered, enriching the quality of the data from subsequent interviews. All the while the coded data were being scrutinized and interrogated, sifted and sorted through, to identify repeating phrases, patterns and themes, as well as differences and commonalities. The researcher is constantly analysing and interpreting and taking the findings out into the next wave of data collection. Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman draw attention to the cyclical nature of the analytic process. Their model for qualitative analysis consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. These three streams of interpretive activity, together with the activity of data collection itself, form an interactive cyclical process. 'The researcher steadily moves among these four "nodes" during data collection and then shuttles among reduction, display, and conclusion drawing/verification for the remainder of the study.' Thus qualitative data analysis is 'a continuous, iterative enterprise.'⁷⁰ It is, of course, also a complex hermeneutical one. Hay and Hunt describe the research method as 'a spiral, with the texts being revisited on numerous occasions and themes emerging and developing as the process continued.'⁷¹ It must be noted here that assessing the validity, that is, the 'truthfulness', of my conclusions/interpretations, by asking the interviewees to comment on them, was not really possible as the analysis was conducted at a theological level they would not readily recognise.⁷²

12.

⁶⁹ Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷¹ Hay and Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church*, 10.

⁷² On the vexed question of validity in qualitative research, see Merriam, *Qualitative Research in Practice*, chapter 2.

Theological analysis

I would agree with Geoffrey Ahern that 'trying to identify explicit and implicit models from the total context of what was said has been not far short of a methodological nightmare.'⁷³ But identifying patterns and processes of christological believing is not the end of the study for the researcher of ordinary christology. She must also offer a theological critique of ordinary christology as well as a description and analysis of it. This final stage of the research project, which includes writing up, is by far the most demanding and stressful part of the whole study. It involves a great deal of theological work and involves a shift in emphasis from description and analysis to theological reflection and critique.

Studying ordinary theology must involve more than a description of religious beliefs if it is to avoid the charge of being 'mere sociology.'⁷⁴ To count as a theological activity, ordinary theology must critique as well as describe religious beliefs, thereby differentiating it from socioreligious research. The aim of this study must therefore be not only to describe ordinary christology, but to critique it. Ordinary christology must be subject to careful theological analysis and critique in the same way that the theology of professional theologians is. Thus, according to Jeff Astley, ordinary theology must be subject to an analysis and critique of 'the language and forms of argument that people use when speaking of God and religion' and 'it must also embrace the evaluation of theological beliefs from the standpoint, and using the resources, of the normative theological criteria derived from Christian scripture, doctrine and ethics.'⁷⁵ This is a demanding task indeed, involving as it does both philosophical and theological work. Similarly, for Browning, descriptive theology, as the first movement in what he calls a fundamental practical theology, must later be related to the second and third movements, namely the normative texts of historical theology and the critical and philosophical questions of systematic theology. And there must be a critical hermeneutical dialogue

⁷³ Geoffrey Ahern, *The Triune God in Hackney and Enfield: 30 Trinitarian Christians and Secularisation* (London: Centre for Ecumenical Studies, 1984), 15.

⁷⁴ See Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 108.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

between all three movements.⁷⁶

So the student of ordinary christology must attempt to test the christological beliefs of her sample against doctrinal norms and ask questions about how far ordinary christology is faithful or unfaithful to 'the Christian thing.' Are their christological construals 'true'?⁷⁷ In order to do this she must bring ordinary christology into a critical conversation with doctrinal christology and academic christology. The literature here is enormous. Academic christology encompasses doctrinal christology and includes numerous other subdisciplines, such as New Testament christology, patristic christology, the history of christology and contemporary christology. If she is also to critique the language and language use of ordinary believers when they speak of Jesus, then the philosophy of religious language must become a conversation partner too. A tall order indeed!

The analytic chapters which follow are best viewed as an offering - an attempt by a philosophical and theological learner to describe and evaluate the ordinary christologies of a group of ordinary believers. The critical conversation is necessarily limited, not least by the selected reading of the researcher. The study of ordinary theology is nothing if not challenging, requiring at least some level of competence in both theology and social science research methods. But before the ordinary christologies of the sample are described, analysed and critiqued, attention must be drawn to some other methodological problems surrounding the study of ordinary christology.

Some methodological problems

With hindsight I can now appreciate how theological demanding the interview was. I was asking quite searching questions about the identity and function of Jesus Christ to interviewees who had had no formal theological training and who, more importantly, had not often spoken about or even thought about christological questions before. Michael Hornsby-Smith reports that, 'Not infrequently ordinary Catholics, in our interviews with

⁷⁶ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 47-54.

⁷⁷ Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, 206-7.

them, gave the impression that they were confronting questions about their religion to which they had never previously given any thought.⁷⁸ Such a situation is considered problematic by Robert Towler, who argues that in this situation, answers to questions are often misinterpreted as 'people's ideas' when in fact they are no more than 'the spontaneous formation of religious ideas.' He illustrates how the response to the question, 'Do you believe in any sort of after-life?', may actually be a response to a different question, namely, 'When you stop to consider it, even though you have never done so before, do you believe in any sort of after-life?' He suggests that responses, therefore, 'should be interpreted as reactions to stimuli, and treated accordingly, not naively accepted as rationally thought-out answers to simple questions.' He draws on the work of Jean Piaget to illustrate how responses to questions may not be ideas that have previously been thought-out, but are ideas spontaneously formed in response to a particular stimulus.⁷⁹ The same point is made by Martin Stringer with regard to Victor Turner's reliance on the ritual specialist Muchona. He writes, 'It also becomes clear that a large amount of what is being said by Muchona is being made up on the spot, simple because the questions, and the ideas that they generated, had never occurred to him before.'⁸⁰

But there is counter evidence to suggest that asking people about a subject for the first time 'often evokes a deep, but hitherto unarticulated conviction that they *already* hold, rather than some superficial non-answer that masquerades as an answer. Many people will find themselves, whether in public discussion or private reflection, saying in effect, "Now that I think about it, I realize that I do believe *a* and *b*, and I don't believe *c* and *d*."⁸¹ Beliefs can be held without being expressed and questions can help bring previously unarticulated beliefs to expression 'provided they were both long-standing and available to consciousness.'⁸² A belief may be thought of as a mental state of which we become aware, or a disposition to say, do, feel and think something. So through the

⁷⁸ Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and Transformations of Religious Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 110.

⁷⁹ Towler, *Homo Religiosus*, 159-160.

⁸⁰ Martin D. Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship: The Ethnography of Worship in Four Christian Congregations in Manchester* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999), 64.

⁸¹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 103.

⁸² Edward Bailey, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos; Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1997), 52.

interview people may come to discover what they have believed but not 'thought' (occurently and explicitly). Hay and Hunt report that the research conversation 'forced [interviewees] to look at their own lives in a different way, many discovering what they actually believed as a result.'⁸³

Similarly, the research interviews I carried out forced many people to stop and consider what it was that they actually believed about Jesus. Their christological beliefs were thus coming to expression for the first time. People were discovering their beliefs as they said them. Before her interview Jill said, *'I might not have much to say to you. You don't often formulate things like that until someone asks you'* and, tellingly, *'I don't know what I think until I say it.'* Others, like Richard, talked about the interview provoking them into thought and helping them *'to look deeper and just confirm what you believe.'* There is ample evidence to suggest that some people, at least, came to discover what they believed about certain christological themes through the interview process. Sometimes there would be an evolution of thought during the interview, with beliefs being modified or changed. This is an acknowledged feature of the qualitative research interview. Steinar Kvale writes, 'During the interview the interviewee may himself have discovered new aspects by the themes he is describing, and he may suddenly see relations which he has not been conscious of earlier.'⁸⁴ And, of course, the process of being interviewed may produce new insight and awareness for the interviewer, as it does for the interviewee.

But how can we be sure that what is being brought into speech for the first time during the interview process is an accurate verbalisation of a hitherto unarticulated belief, and not a belief that is just being made up on the spot (and, perhaps, will soon dissipate)? Towler suggests that questions should be so phrased that they allow for a variety of *negative* responses.⁸⁵ Edward Bailey addresses this problem by telling the interviewees at the start 'that the purpose was to discover what they already felt and thought, and not to

⁸³ Hay and Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church*, 10. Cf. 15-16.

⁸⁴ Kvale, 'The Qualitative Research Interview', 177. Cf. Bailey, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*, 53.

⁸⁵ Towler, *Homo Religiosus*, 159-50.

think up answers to questions on which they had no views.⁸⁶ Following Bailey's lead, I encouraged interviewees at the start of their interview to decline to answer questions on which they had no views; they duly obliged. Thus they would quite happily admit to having no opinion about something and frequently did so. Phrases such as *'I've not thought about it before'*, *'I don't know'*, *'I haven't really thought this out'*, litter the interviews, especially of the women. Perhaps women are more honest? Or it could be that the questions being asked demanded analytic or abstract thought, which is a style of thinking preferred by men rather than women. There is a gender and/or psychological type issue here which requires further empirical investigation.⁸⁷

What is clear is that people were more than willing to say that they had not thought about certain questions before, suggesting that already-existing beliefs were coming to expression. The idea that people 'make up' christological beliefs in an interview seems less likely. There is a risk, of course, that respondents might feel constrained to give the 'right' answer, to reply in terms of the accepted orthodoxy, while what they actually believe is not what they profess to believe. But this is unlikely, given that the data show that most people do not actually know what the 'right' or orthodox answer is. They willingly, if hesitantly, share their beliefs, unaware that the beliefs they hold are often unorthodox. There is no evidence in the data to suggest that the interviewees tried to be anything other than open and honest. Tom sums up the general attitude when he says, *'I mean there is no point agreeing to talk to you if I don't tell you what I really think'*, again offering an answer to the criticism that the interviewees would not be straightforward with the vicar's wife.

The problem discussed above is one aspect of the larger practical problem associated with empirical studies, namely 'the hoary problem of how the observer is to avoid imposing his own frame of reference, or his own way of thinking about a topic, on his subjects.'⁸⁸ Whilst the interview is open, enabling interviewees the space and time to speak about their own christological beliefs and understanding, it is structured by the

⁸⁶ Edward Bailey, *Implicit Religion: An Introduction* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1998), 46.

⁸⁷ On this issue, see Nicola Mary Slee, 'The Patterns and Processes of Women's Faith Development: A Qualitative Study' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999), 126-7. Cf. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 77-82.

⁸⁸ Towler, *Homo Religiosus*, 158.

theological questions which the interviewer asks. And these questions are her questions. It is her theological agenda that sets the framework for the discussion, not the interviewees. Callum Brown draws attention to this dynamic in oral history interviews. He writes,

The interviewer poses questions, setting the agenda and, most importantly, providing the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks within which informants are invited to respond. This is literally a process of 'putting words into the mouth' of the interviewee, a process which can simplify or alter the vocabulary of the interviewee.⁸⁹

There is a danger that the subject under study becomes reduced to the preset categories of the researcher and that the respondent alters replies to fit in with these categories. Brown says that this should not be looked upon merely as a problem, but as an opportunity. The disjunctions between interviewers' questions and the interviewees' answers provide clues about the two modes of understanding the subject. The transcript discloses as much about the 'discursive domain' of the interviewer as of the interviewee.⁹⁰ The transcripts from this study show that my 'discursive domain', unlike that of the interviewees, is shaped by the categories of thought of academic christology. I come to the research conversation with academic christological concerns in mind. To give an illustration: the identity of Jesus is a key academic christological concern. It was one of my concerns. But disjunctions between my questions about Jesus' identity and the interviewees' answers reveal that this topic is not of key concern to ordinary believers. Academic christology is concerned to understand how Jesus relates to God, or how Jesus can be both human and divine; again, however, this concern is not shared by (most) ordinary theologians. They have beliefs about Jesus, but are not concerned or interested in exploring the theoretical/metaphysical implications of these beliefs.

In general, the questions which concern academic theologians do not usually concern ordinary ones. This is not a criticism; it is an observation. One of the difficulties is that

⁸⁹ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 117.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

most people have 'little time for the intellectualizations of doctrine . . . that are so beloved of the religious professionals; they respond only very poorly to abstract concepts and verbal formulations.'⁹¹ This particular characteristic of ordinary christology will be discussed further in chapter 9. My point here is merely to draw attention to the fact that disjunctions and negative responses can both be vitally important sources of information. Although the methodological problems mentioned here are important, they should not be made too much of. The semi-structured interview provides ample opportunity for interviewees to put their own stamp on the interview and most did, making it quite clear where their christological priorities lay and what was important to them.

But it has to be acknowledged that understanding what people meant was not always easy. It is inevitable that people use the language and vocabulary of the tradition to express their christological beliefs. They have learnt an idiom and they use it, sometimes repeating set phrases from the tradition. But what do they mean by this? What inferences can legitimately be made from the observation that some respondents do little more than repeat received information and are unable to elaborate on a particular theme?

Understanding the meaning attached to the language and verbal categories that people use to express their religious beliefs and attitudes is notoriously difficult. The language of faith is capable of different interpretations. One of the aims of the student of ordinary christology must be to uncover, as best she can, the 'depth grammar' of peoples' speech. The depth grammar of a word or sentence is its real significance, as shown in its usage; the 'surface grammar', by contrast, is its appearance, which can often mislead us.⁹² It is important, therefore, that any criticism of what people say be directed to its depth grammar (what people actually mean), and not to its surface grammar (what people might appear to mean), 'or to the (usually second-hand) interpretations and glosses on what they mean that they have picked up and now repeat, but do not really believe (as their practice reveals).'⁹³

This advice is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's approach to ordinary language.

⁹¹ Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 455.

⁹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), § 664.

⁹³ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 121-122.

Wittgenstein also argued that meaning is grounded in action. We must concentrate not on the words, Wittgenstein insisted, 'but on the occasions on which they are said'; 'our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings.'⁹⁴ In other words, 'Practice gives the words their sense.'⁹⁵ In order to understand the meaning of words, it is best to see how they are actually used. We need to look at what people do with language and what impact it has on their lives to understand its meaning. As Gareth Moore puts it, 'religious language, like all language, gets its meaning from being embedded in what people do.' He argues, therefore, that 'we actually have to *look* at how language about God works, how it is used, if we are to get any real understanding of what it is for God to be a person, an agent.'⁹⁶ Similarly, we must look at how language about Jesus *works*, how it is used, if we are to understand christological beliefs. What this means for an empirical-theological study is that an accurate description of what people are really saying must be based on the evidence of the implications or conclusions that people actually draw from the language they are using.⁹⁷ Hence identifying the implications that people draw from the christological language they use must be one of the key tasks for the student of ordinary christology. I have attempted to do this at various points in the thesis (see especially, pp. 222-229), but the analysis is limited. It was not always possible to question the interviewees in the required depth.

Having addressed the main methodological issues in this chapter, it is time to move on to the analysis and critique of the ordinary christologies operating in the sample. Three main christologies have been identified. I will begin with what I have called functional christology.

⁹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations in Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 2; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), § 229.

⁹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 85.

⁹⁶ Gareth Moore, *Believing in God: A Philosophical Essay* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 131, 102.

⁹⁷ See Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 121.

Chapter 3

FUNCTIONAL CHRISTOLOGY

One of the most surprising and unexpected findings from the data was the discovery that the majority of the sample (around twenty) do not consider Jesus to be God. They do not appear to have learned this doctrine, or the related doctrines of pre-existence and the immanent Trinity. They do not conceptualise Jesus' identity in the belief that he was both God and man. They can be said to affirm a doctrine of the incarnation understood as the incarnation of God's creative, revelatory and salvific power in the person of Jesus Christ; but not a doctrine of the incarnation understood as the incarnation of God the Son, Second Person of the Trinity. This group has a functional rather than an ontological christology. In this chapter I will present each strand of the evidence in turn with a view to building up a doctrinal picture of how this group views the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Absence of a doctrine of pre-existence

In response to a question about pre-existence, along the lines of, 'Would you think of Jesus in any way existing before his birth?', the responses were always negative.¹

Eleanor

A *Would you think of Jesus existing before he was born or...*

E *Oh crikey. I don't know. I think I just thought he was born, because that was what God wanted for the world.*

Diane

A *The other thing around this is...um...would you think of Jesus existing in any sense...um...before he was born?*

D *I must admit, I never have thought that. I accept that, you know, the coming of Christ at Christmas, is when Jesus was born.*

¹ I am fully aware that the wording of this question can be criticised. Strictly speaking it is not Jesus who pre-existed but the Word/Logos (see below, p. 90). But many academic theologians use this language and the experience of talking to ordinary believers shows that too fine a distinction would be confusing for interviewees.

Marion

A Do you think of Jesus as, like, existing before his earthly life?

M No, not really. I think that he was born.

However, the data on pre-existence was often ambiguous. Pre-existence could not be entirely ruled out on the basis of this evidence alone because this group would also use phrases that might appear to imply pre-existence, talking about Jesus being sent by God or coming from God. If God sent forth his Son, must not that Son have already been in existence? But many scholars argue that talk of God sending someone does not in itself imply any form of pre-existence of the one sent, otherwise we would have to ascribe pre-existence to John the Baptist and the prophets in the Old Testament, who were also 'sent' by God. 'Sending' texts and language may imply pre-existence, but they can be read otherwise.² Macquarrie writes, 'God's metaphorical "sending" of his metaphorical "son" can be understood in ways that do not imply pre-existence, once we accept that the language is metaphorical and not literal.'³ Drawing on the work of various New Testament scholars, he argues that nearly all the biblical texts which seem to entail a doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus do not in fact do so. Rather, they can be understood without invoking the notion of a pre-existent divine being. But this does not entail dispensing entirely with all thoughts of pre-existence. The texts are perfectly compatible with, and probably demand, the idea that Jesus pre-existed in the mind and purpose of God. Jesus pre-exists, if at all, as an idea in the mind and purpose of God.⁴ This kind of pre-existence is implied in the following statements.

Eleanor

'...that was what God wanted for the world.'

Tom

'God chose to put Jesus on this earth.'

² See, for example, James P. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (London: SCM Press, 1983), chapter 6, esp. 56; Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 55-59, 388-392; Gerald O'Collins SJ, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 128. See also Karl-Josef Küshel's comprehensive study of pre-existence christology, *Born Before All Time?: The Dispute Over Christ's Origin*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

³ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-57, 388-392.

Hilary

'[Jesus] was part of God's plan.'

According to Macquarrie, this is the only kind of pre-existence that one should look for. He writes, 'If one wants to go beyond this and claim that Jesus Christ had prior to his birth a conscious, personal pre-existence in "heaven", this is not only mythological but is, I believe, destructive of his true humanity.'⁵

That this group have no sense of pre-existence, other than in the sense outlined above, and must therefore be using the language of 'sending' and 'coming down' metaphorically is confirmed by the responses they give to other questions about the creed and the Trinity. At no point is there ever any suggestion of a second divine 'person' or hypostasis distinct from God the Father and from the historical Jesus before Jesus was born. They do not draw this implication. The depth grammar of their language here is metaphorical. The majority of this group never seem to self-consciously acknowledge that they are using the language of 'sending' metaphorically. They just use it, like they do their mother tongue, and do not stop to consider its status. But the metaphor of 'sending' seems to express their conviction that the person and work of Jesus are completely the work of God's initiative; it acknowledges that 'All this is from God'. James Mackey argues that we have no option but to use this kind of language if we wish to speak, as it were, from God's side of any person, thing or event in our perceptible world of time and space.⁶

That this group have no belief in any more metaphysical notion of pre-existence is further confirmed by their responses to questions about the Trinity.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, 63-64. See also, John Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ: A Study of Pattern in Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 3-4.

Absence of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity

If Jesus is not thought by these respondents to pre-exist his birth, they would be unlikely to have a doctrine of the immanent Trinity. This is what we find: this group are economic trinitarians. They do not have a doctrine about God being three in essence. No one was unfamiliar with the word Trinity, however. They recognised it and gave similar responses to questions about it: either they named three 'things', namely God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit; and/or they said it is 'three-in-one'.

Hilary

'If someone said to me in terms of your belief, what is the Trinity, I would say it is God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus. So I understand what it means, but I don't think it is...it is not something I would use in my vocabulary...It is just not a term that I would use.'

Suzanne

'It's the three things isn't it? Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. I don't think of it a lot. Am I right with those three things?'

Marion

'It's not something that I have delved into a great deal. I'm not that knowledgeable about it really [pause]. We say Father, Son, Holy Spirit don't we?'

Rose

'I just think...Trinity...three-in-one...or whatever [laugh]. No, I don't know. I haven't thought about that. I'm not sure [pause]. Perhaps I don't think enough about it.'

These kind of comments were repeated many times over. The word 'Trinity' is seen as a technical term: part of the church's, not the individual's vocabulary. It appears to have little relevance to the ordinary believer other than as a trigger for naming three 'things', namely God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Threeness was what the word Trinity most seemed to convey and there was a general assumption that three 'things' should be named. Geoffrey Ahern says that 'it is linguistically understandable that [the word Trinity] should suggest threeness more than three-in-oneness.'⁷ That threeness should be associated with the Christian God is to be expected since the Christian God is named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This threefold naming pervades both liturgy and hymnody and is deeply rooted in Christian consciousness; but the ability to name God in this way can hardly be thought of as constituting a doctrine of the Trinity. What this

⁷ Ahern, *The Triune God in Hackney and Enfield*, 16.

group have is a story, which has a trinitarian structure, rather than a doctrine about an eternally triune God. They know that the Christian story of God has three 'characters' in it - God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit and that these three are intimately connected with one another. They also know that the story unfolds in a certain way: first there is God the Father, then the Son, and then at the Son's 'departure', the Spirit comes. The principal character in the story is God the Father, because he sends both the Son and the Spirit. Trinity is the three-fold name for these three 'characters'.

The results from my study concur with those of Ahern. He reports that only a few of his sample (5-10 out of the 30) seemed to have a fairly explicit idea that the Godhead is triune in essence.

Not very many directly identified the threeness of the concept Trinity as the triune Godhead. The threeness appears usually to have been located somewhere 'outside' the 'inmost' Godhead. This is to use the spatial metaphor that implicitly seems to have lurked. The threeness was very often perceived as in some way at a remove, or askew, from the final transcendence of 'God'.⁸

This particular group in my study, similarly, do not ascribe trinitarian identity to the Godhead itself. Indeed, Godhead is not a word they would use. They talk only of God, together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. God is one in essence, not triune and this one God makes himself known through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The threeness is associated with the activity of the one God in relation to the world. What we have here, in doctrinal terms, is economic trinitarianism. This, of course, is not an analysis that this group would adopt for themselves. They do not have the language to make such a statement.

The New Testament itself may be said to bear witness to economic trinitarianism. Certainly, it does not have an explicit doctrine of God as Trinity. As the report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England states,

⁸ Ibid.

Even Paul's familiar grace in 2 Cor. 13.14 is not trinitarian in this stricter sense: 'the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' clearly indicates that 'God' here means the Father alone, despite the close (but theologically unclarified) juxtaposition of Son and Spirit.⁹

Similarly, much of the liturgy is 'economic' in shape, as in the Greeting, the Prayer of Preparation and the Prayers of Penitence.¹⁰ Even the Nicene creed 'does not have an explicit doctrine of the Trinity spelled out systematically: the three "characters" in the story are described and implicitly related to one another, but the word Trinity is not used, and there is no exposition of the doctrine of God as Three-in-One.'¹¹ The creed states the essential components of the doctrine of the Trinity, but does not spell it out conceptually.

When this group speak of *God* they mean the Father only. The word *God* doubles up for Father, so that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two words. To speak of *God* is to speak of the Father.

Marion

'God is God. He is my Father when I want to talk to him.'

Maureen

'...the Father...well that is obviously God himself.'

Elizabeth

'...the Holy Spirit, Jesus and God being, you know, God the Father.'

Jürgen Moltmann complains that most Christians in the West, whether they be Catholics or Protestants, are really only 'monotheists' where the experience and practice of their faith is concerned.¹² Karl Rahner has similarly remarked that 'Christians, for all their orthodox profession of faith in the Trinity, are almost just

⁹ Church of England Doctrine Commission, *We Believe in God* (London: Church House Publishing, 1987), 105.

¹⁰ See *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 167-169.

¹¹ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 5, 56.

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), 1. See also, Church of England, *We Believe in God*, 104-105.

“monotheist” in their actual religious existence.’¹³ If this is the case, it is not surprising that many, if asked to describe ‘God’, give a description of the Father only. To be a Christian monotheist is to think of God as one in essence rather than triune. The concept that God is eternally triune is not a concept that this present group seem at all familiar with. They have not learned or assimilated this doctrine, so that their thinking about God cannot have been shaped or informed by it. Suzanne, for example, said that the idea of a triune Godhead ‘*does not fit my picture at all*’, ‘*is beyond my understanding*’, ‘*a bit startrekky*’; and she adds that she liked things ‘*very simple*’.

Friedrich Schleiermacher also understood Christianity as a monotheistic mode of belief. He saw the church’s doctrine of the Trinity as secondary, because (as Moltmann describes his position) it is ‘a mere web of different statements about the Christian self-consciousness; it does not alter Christianity’s monotheism at all. Consequently it is enough to talk about the one God, by talking about one’s own Christian self-consciousness. The doctrine of the Trinity is superfluous.’¹⁴ Certainly, for this present group, the doctrine of the Trinity appears to be superfluous. They manage perfectly well without it and have no obvious need for it. Moltmann criticises Schleiermacher’s view, claiming that failure to hold to the church’s doctrine of the Trinity results in ‘abstract monotheism.’¹⁵ But we may argue that for the Christian the threefold naming of God mitigates against any descent into abstract monotheism. The word God may denote the Father, but it connotes Jesus and the Holy Spirit. To think of the Father is to think of the Son and/or the Spirit as well. This threefold naming ensures a dynamic and relational, not a static and monadic, view of God. But the threefold naming need not, and from the data obviously does not, necessitate a doctrine of an eternally triune Godhead in which ‘there are united three “persons” (“hypostases”), who are distinguishable only by number and relation to one another, and inseparable in their activity.’¹⁶

It is therefore axiomatic for this group both that God is one *and* that threeness in some

¹³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 79.

¹⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 3. Cf. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, ‘The Divine Trinity’, in *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 738-751.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 3.

¹⁶ Church of England, *We Believe in God*, 105.

way applies to this one God; but they do not concern themselves with what can be inferred about God's own immanent, eternal being from the threefold pattern of God's activity in relation to the world. They do not abstract from the story of God's action to God's being. This is what academic theologians do. Ordinary theologians are content with story and tend not to engage in speculative thinking (see below, pp. 201-204). This group have learned the basic 'rules' which govern the use of the trinitarian nomenclature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so that they know, for example, that there is something wholly inappropriate in saying that 'God the Father died on the cross', even if they cannot give a coherent explanation of the reason. But competence in operating the basic 'rules' of trinitarian discourse, is not the same as acknowledging God as Trinity.¹⁷

What impact, if any, does the absence of a belief in God as eternally triune have on the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ? If God is God, then who is Jesus?

Jesus is not God

Out of this group of twenty, who I have distinguished as possessing a functional christology, seventeen were unwilling to make the bald statement 'Jesus is God.'¹⁸ Various reasons were given, but all hinged on the simple logic that God is God, and therefore Jesus cannot be God. In response to a question about whether the interviewee considered Jesus of Nazareth to be God in any way, the responses were always negative: some expressed incredulity at the suggestion, while others were more hesitant and qualified their denial. Examples from the range of responses are given below.

Eleanor

A But...would you look on [Jesus] as being God?

E No. Because God isn't a person. God's just...no I mean God isn't a person.

¹⁷ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁸ The three exceptions all had modalist tendencies. See below, pp. 74-76.

Richard

A So...to confirm...you wouldn't look on [Jesus] as God?

R No. I look at him and believe that he embodies God and God lives through him. God is a...God is not another being...It's a spirit. It's a...it's a power.

Bruce

A And you wouldn't look on the historical Jesus as God in any way?

B Well how...how...how could he be if he was the Son of God...unless you have got multiple gods. Do you see what I mean?

If you have one God, which is what we sort of profess, then if he is the Son of God, he can't be God otherwise you have multiple gods. If Jesus is a God and God is a God, then you have got two gods. That's the way I sort of see it. If you say that Jesus is God, then you have got the problem then of two gods.

Marion

A So...you wouldn't necessarily say [Jesus] was God?

M No. I don't think of Jesus as God. Oh no. I think God is God and Jesus is his Son or whatever and he's a different person. I certainly don't believe that Jesus and God are the same. Should I?

I mean I think he was God's Son, but I don't see Jesus as God. To me he was a person who lived in that period of time and lived a very, you know, good life and um...a big example to everybody around. But no, I don't think...I think God...well who is God, where does he come from? I don't know, but God is God. I mean he created this earth. He may have created other earths. We don't know that [laugh]...But I don't see Jesus as God. No. To me he is a separate person.

Diane

'I have never actually thought of him as being God, but he is part of God.'

Edward

'God exists in different forms if you will. And I think Jesus was one form of God, but I wouldn't say Jesus was God.'

The New Testament itself (and the liturgy) is also very hesitant about saying Jesus is God. Jesus is scarcely ever called 'God' in a direct straightforward way in the New Testament and every instance in the New Testament in which it is said that Jesus is called God is strenuously debated by scholars. Rudolf Bultmann holds this view. 'Neither in the Synoptic gospels', he wrote, 'nor in the Pauline epistles, is Jesus called God; nor do we find him so called in the Acts of the Apostles or in the Apocalypse.'

Bultmann insists that the only clear case in which Jesus is called God is the confession of Thomas (John 20:28) and he judges that to be an existential, even an emotional or an exclamatory utterance, not a metaphysical or ontological one.¹⁹ John V. Taylor similarly argues that the New Testament writers instinctively avoided naming Jesus as God. He too cites the exclamation of Thomas, 'My Lord and my God', as the only real exception, but claims that this is 'an impulsive avowal of personal adoration rather than a theological statement.'²⁰ Other scholars, however, do not take such a negative view of the matter. Raymond Brown, for instance, claims that 'in three clear instances and in five instances that have a certain probability, Jesus is called God in the New Testament.'²¹ But it is generally agreed that such an apparently central Christian affirmation as 'Jesus is God' is only minimally attested to in the New Testament.²²

This group always identify Jesus through the appellation Son of God and claim that he is the one and only unique Son of God. Now, for the academic theologian, such a claim raises various questions, such as, 'What does it mean to say God has a Son?', and 'In what way(s) is Jesus unique?' Such questions, on the whole, do not concern ordinary theologians. This helps to make writing up how such people view the identity of the historical Jesus so problematic, as they do not present with fully-worked out christologies.²³ Rather what is given are snatches, glimpses into their thinking about the identity of this person who is affirmed as being the one and only unique Son of God. Although none of this group consider Jesus to be God, there is a deep assumption that there is *some sort* of identity between Jesus and God, an assumption which is expressed in various ways. The data are complex, as various models were employed in the struggle to articulate the relationship between Jesus and God and some of the interviewees adopted more than one model. Edward sums up the difficulties of many when he says, *'There is clearly some connectivity between the two of them, but I'm*

¹⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, 'The Christological Confession of the World Council of Churches', in *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 275-276. See also 277-290.

²⁰ John V. Taylor, *The Christlike God* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 287(n24).

²¹ Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus, God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 28-9. See also Arthur W. Wainwright, 'Jesus Christ is God', in Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962), 53-74 and Cullman, 'The Designation of Jesus as "God"', in *The Christology of the New Testament*, 306-314.

²² This issue is discussed further in the next chapter. See below, p. 81-82.

²³ But then neither do all the New Testament writers. Macquarrie suggests that Mark's christology, for example, is not well developed or coherent (*Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 81).

not...I'm struggling to define exactly what that is.'

Perhaps the best way to begin is at the beginning with the conception of Jesus. This event is highly significant for the majority of this group, as it marks not only the point in time when God created Jesus, but also when Jesus' life as the Son of God began.

Virginal-conception christology

Outside the two gospels of Matthew and Luke, the virgin birth is simply not known anywhere else in the New Testament. 'In the letters of Paul, the earliest documents of the New Testament, there is no more than a terse mention, without any names, of the birth of Jesus "from a woman" (Gal. 4.4) but not "from a virgin"', and the earliest Gospel, that of Mark, has no birth narratives but begins immediately with John the Baptist and Jesus' public life and teaching. This leads, according to Hans Küng, to the momentous conclusion that the virgin birth cannot be regarded as original or central to the Christian message.²⁴ Yet this belief was incorporated into the fabric of orthodox Christian faith; it has the status of a dogma of the church and is affirmed in the Nicene creed. Adherence to the doctrine of the virgin birth is, not unnaturally, therefore, seen by many today as a test of orthodoxy. It is something that you have to believe. Around fifteen of this group take this position.²⁵

Elizabeth

'Well I think there are certain things you just have to believe if you are a Christian. You've got to believe it and I think that that's an instance that you do. I mean it is chronicled in the Bible. The Angel Gabriel coming down and telling Mary and I think that you have just got to accept it...I think it is central to the whole story.'

The virgin birth (more accurately, the virginal conception) is seen as central by most of this group, because this was the point in time when God created Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Many talk about Jesus as God's creation, using phrases such

²⁴ Hans Küng, *Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1993), 43-45. Macquarrie also questions whether the birth narratives make any worthwhile contribution to christology (*Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 392-394).

²⁵ Three of this fifteen admit to finding the virgin birth a very difficult belief to accept, but insist that it has to be believed.

as, 'God produced Jesus', 'God created Jesus', 'Jesus was God's creation'. The birth narratives tell the story of how Jesus, God's Son, was created and born. His was 'a special creation', because he was not created in the same way as we are. Jesus was conceived without male procreation, through the action of the Holy Spirit. What we have here is a 'virginal-conception christology.'²⁶ Jesus' existence as the Son of God is regarded as starting at his conception/birth.²⁷ It affirms that already at the moment of his birth Jesus was God's special Son, born through a special act of God, and that here lies the difference between Jesus and other human beings, who could also be called sons and daughters of God.²⁸ Several talk about the virgin birth marking Jesus out as somebody who was different or special. Edward, for example, says that '[Jesus] was created by God' and 'his creation came about via a different means from everybody else's creation', and that 'clearly Jesus was...was different from his conception. Right from the beginning.'

The infancy narratives convey the claim that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' conception makes that conception a virginal conception, and makes the one conceived God's Son. In the story the Holy Spirit is cast in the role of the male parent, but there is never any suggestion that the Holy Spirit actually acts as the male principle in the conception of Jesus. That would make the birth of Jesus too much like that of some semi-divine beings who were conceived, in other mythologies, by the mating of a god with a human female.²⁹ The conception of Jesus takes place, by contrast, 'without any intercourse between God and human beings, in a completely unerotic, spiritualized context.'³⁰ There was never any suggestion in the interviews that those who believed in the virgin birth believed in a physical divine Sonship of any kind, but probing on this was difficult. Many talked about Jesus being God's Son because God created him, and the kind of creation they seemed to have in mind was of an *ex nihilo* kind.

²⁶ Hans Schwarz, *Christology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 236-240.

²⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg writes that, according to the legend of Jesus' virgin birth, 'Jesus first became God's Son through Mary's conception.' See Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 1968), 143.

²⁸ Schwarz, *Christology*, 240.

²⁹ Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 276; Küng, *Credo*, 43.

³⁰ Küng, *Credo*, 43.

Marion

M Well, he was God's Son, wasn't he? And I suppose if God created the world in all its majesty, then creating a child from...in a virgin...would be dead-simple to God wouldn't it, after all the other things he had created, if you look at it like that.

A So you would definitely tend to think of God as creating Jesus and...

M Yes. The same as he created the world.

A You said he was God's Son...

M Well, I suppose it would be a son wouldn't it, if he created him. He's not Joseph's son, because he didn't create him.

Suzanne

'I mean, God created Jesus didn't he, so the virgin birth is possible isn't it? And he made the earth, so everything is possible.'

James Mackey is instructive here. He asks, if we do not wish to think of the Holy Spirit acting as the male principle in the conception of Jesus, then just what do we understand the role of the Holy Spirit to be in the conception of Jesus and of Jesus' subsequent divine sonship? He hazards a guess that the Spirit of God must have supplied what was necessary to the embryonic Jesus by an act such as creation out of nothing. Jesus is God's Son as a result of this act, just as Adam, who is called 'the son of God' by Luke in his genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:38), was created by God out of nothing (or out of 'dust') and not derived in the normal way from parents. This explanation would mean that the term Son of God is being put to some unique usage in the Lukan text, which has little in common with its meaning in other christological contexts where it primarily refers to God's salvific activity in Jesus.³¹ Many in this group, similarly, seem to put Son of God to this kind of use. Jesus is God's Son because God created him. *'He's not Joseph's son, because he didn't create him.'* *'He's God's Son because he was born of God.'* Filial language is appropriate language because Jesus *'was created by God for us in the form of a man.'* As Suzanne puts it, *'I think of him as his Son, because he was created to be like us.'*

The birth narratives affirm that God is at work in bringing Jesus into the world as his

³¹ Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 272-280, esp. 274-276.

own Son. They convey the sense that Jesus derives from God; that he is 'of God' in a way that no-one else is. Jesus thus has a unique status. Only he is the Son of God, created through a special act of God, and for many this is the crux of the Christian faith. As Diane put it, *'The whole Christian faith is pinned on that isn't it really? If you don't believe that you are not really a Christian.'* A few of this group, however, understand the term Son of God in its more usual biblical sense: as serving the christological purpose of pointing to the unique filial relationship between Jesus and God.³²

Bruce

'[Son of] signifies a very special relationship. A very special person.'

Edward

'[Son of] is just a phrase...I think it is simply a matter of somebody trying to put into words that relationship.'

Not all those who adopt a functional christology are so wedded to the doctrine of the virgin birth. Three of this group of twenty are willing to accept that it could have happened, but for them it is not crucial.

Bruce

'I think it is actually possible. I just don't find it a big issue to be honest.'

'And I suppose at the end of the day it is a good start to the story really. It helps the story.'

'It is like the star and the three wise men. It is all part of saying here is somebody special.'

Two others firmly reject the idea of a virgin birth.

Valerie

'I don't believe she was a virgin. To me, it's all about having a gift from God, having a baby. So that's my reading of it. It is a gift.'

'It's not important. The important thing was that God provided somebody on earth in human shape...um...to make us understand him better. Whether he came from a virgin...actually I would be horrified to think that he came from a virgin. I would much prefer it to be a normal birth. It is a normal baby, created in the normal way, which I think is a fine example of one of God's gifts. I don't think it is a problem.'

³² Academic theology, unlike ordinary theology, constantly debates the meaning of the christological title 'Son of God'. See, for example, Küng, *Credo*, 56-59; Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 42-43; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 12-64.

Valerie goes on to talk about Jesus becoming God's Son later in his life, as did Percy, the other member of this group who did not believe in the virgin birth. Valerie says:

'[Jesus] was given such a gift that he became that mouth-piece that God had intended...Quite how that miracle happened, I can't explain...But somehow or other, he was significantly special so that he could actually become that Son of God on earth. And I can't explain how.'

This last christology can be classified as adoptionist. Adoptionism is said to be the earliest and most primitive form of christology.³³ Its basic thesis is that Jesus was a man who because of his obedience to God was adopted as God's Son or Messiah. This adoption may have taken place some time during the ministry of Jesus (as in the extract above) or, more usually, it is declared to have taken place at the resurrection.

Adoptionism has no doctrine of pre-existence or divine initiative in the birth of Jesus. Jesus 'lives an obedient life and is then made God's special person, his Messiah.'³⁴

One question which arises from the data in this section is, in what way(s) was Jesus '*significantly special*' or '*of God*'?

Spirit christology

All of the present group asserted that Jesus was either 'of God' or that he enjoyed a unique filial relationship with God. The most frequently cited reason people gave for Jesus being '*of God*' or '*more special than anyone else*' was that Jesus was full of divine power, this was what marked him out. Here are just a few examples which could be repeated many times over.

Suzanne

'[Jesus] had the power of God to be able to do the things he had to do.'

Diane

'[When we look on Jesus] we are seeing somebody human, but we know that God is there as well.'

'You don't really sort of see him as his own. You know there is a greater power. A

³³ See Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, esp. 5-18.

³⁴ Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 28.

power as great...behind Jesus.'

Eleanor

'[Jesus was] an ordinary human being but with extra gifts. He alone had God's power.'

Elizabeth

'He was part human but he had an extra dimension you see because he was the Son of God and he could do things that ordinary humans couldn't do.'

Tom

'If [God] chose to put Jesus on this earth, then he had to give evidence to the people that he is the Son of God. He had to give him power to do the miracles, otherwise he is no different to Joe Bloggs, you know.'

Hilary

'He was able to perform miracles and nobody else has been able to do that ever.'

The majority of this group lay a heavy stress on the supernatural qualities ascribed to Jesus and draw attention to the miracles (both nature miracles and healing miracles) as evidence that Jesus was who he claimed to be, namely the Son of God. This kind of christology is reminiscent of that found in Mark's gospel. Mark regards Jesus as a man, but no ordinary man, since he was filled with supernatural powers. Mark's Jesus is 'a superman or even a divine man' and can be classified as a spirit christology.³⁵ Macquarrie is critical of this kind of *theios aner* christology, which he says 'still lingers in some quarters today', arguing that it is 'the wrong kind of christology' because it 'demeans Christ by turning him into a wonder-worker.'³⁶ If we consider that 'God as Spirit refers to God . . . at work, as active, and as power, energy, or force that accomplishes something', then it does not seem unreasonable to classify most of this group as having a spirit christology of sorts, albeit of a somewhat rudimentary and unformed kind.³⁷ God as Spirit, as power, is active and at work within Jesus. This is both implicitly and, sometimes, explicitly stated.

Hilary

'[Jesus was] imbued with divine powers. A very strong sense of the Holy Spirit. The ability to perform miracles. The ability to lead as well.'

³⁵ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 78-81. See also, Morna D. Hooker, *The Message of Mark* (London: Epworth Press, 1983), esp. chapters 1 and 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

³⁷ Roger Haight SJ, *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), 447.

Jill

'I do feel that God poured himself into Jesus for us.'
 'Jesus was set apart and sent specifically, filled with God.'
 'Jesus is full of God.'

Richard

'[Jesus] embodies God and God lives through him.'

Many implied that God's Spirit as power at work within Jesus was not confined to the miraculous, but manifested itself through his whole life, his teachings and his actions. In his talking and action, suffering and death, in his whole person, Jesus proclaimed, manifested and revealed God's will and word. Many modern writers have developed spirit christologies, believing them to be simpler and more intelligible than the classical christology. They are christologies of God's presence in Jesus.³⁸ Such christologies raise questions about whether God's presence in Jesus was different in degree or kind and what it might mean to say 'Jesus is divine'. The data from this group raise both of these issues.

Jesus is divine?

None of this group confess the divinity of Jesus in the precise form that considers him Son of God incarnate and as such equal with the Father. It is often assumed that when people say Jesus is divine, they are saying that Jesus is God, but the data from this study clearly indicate that this is a false assumption to make. When this group acknowledge the divinity of Jesus they are not confessing him to be God.³⁹ Several people were actually very hesitant and uncertain about applying the word 'divine' to Jesus at all. They were not sure what such a designation might mean. Consider this extract from Hannah's interview. She asks:

³⁸ See, for example, Geoffrey Lampe, *God as Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977). Haight also proposes a spirit christology and favours talking about Jesus as symbol of God. See his *Dynamics of Theology*, 135-139 and *Jesus Symbol of God*, 12-15.

³⁹ Ahern, in analysing his data, seemingly fails to acknowledge this point. His groupings only make sense if the assumption is made that when people say 'Jesus is divine' they mean 'Jesus is God' and the data from this study has clearly shown that this is a false assumption to make. See Ahern, *The Triune God in Hackney and Enfield*, 14-19.

'How do you read divine? [long pause]. Well I don't know how they...I mean are they going...do they mean the divine is God or do they mean divine as a divine quality?'

She opts for the latter sense, saying that she can agree with the statement Jesus is divine if by that Jesus is understood to possess the divine qualities, such as love, forgiveness, tolerance, understanding. She says that Jesus possesses these qualities to a much greater extent than anyone else. Others say that Jesus is divine because he was perfect or because he was God's Son. Hick argues that the word divine is being used adjectivally in these instances. When they say that Jesus *is* divine, they are using the *is* of predication and not the *is* of identification.⁴⁰ Hick says that theologically, this treats divinity adjectivally, 'and suggests that the quality of divinity is something which may be present in varying degrees in different human beings, Jesus Christ being marked off from the rest of mankind in that he possessed this quality in a greater degree than other men.'⁴¹ This can only result in a *degree christology*. On this view, incarnation, understood as the embodiment in a human life of a certain quality of divinity, is something that is capable of degrees and approximations, so that Jesus is different in degree not kind from the rest of humanity.⁴² There are examples of this kind of thinking in the data. Jill thinks that there is more of God in Jesus than anyone else, and that Jesus is 'a closer relation' to God than anyone else. Richard says that Jesus is divine, because 'he embodies all the qualities of God in much more detail' than anyone else.

There has been much discussion as to whether Jesus should properly be called unique in degree or kind.⁴³ John Robinson argues that whether Jesus had 'more of everything' than the rest of humanity is not the issue. When the New Testament writers make their claims for the uniqueness of Jesus, by speaking of him as God's only Son, 'it is not his moral qualities they are exalting, but his unrepeatable relationship to the Father.'⁴⁴

Edward makes the same point when he says:

⁴⁰ John Hick, *God and The Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 154-157, esp. 155. See also Don Cupitt's discussion of this issue, 'Jesus and the Meaning of God', in Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation and Myth*, 36.

⁴¹ Hick, *God and The Universe of Faiths*, 156.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴³ John Robinson finds himself tempted to ask at this point, 'Is the difference of kind itself a difference of degree or a difference of kind?' See John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 209(n123).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

'I think I would have difficulty in making a comparison by saying there was more of God in Jesus than anyone else, in the sense that I don't regard those relationships as comparable. To say that there is more of God in Jesus than in other people, you are comparing the two relationships and I don't feel they are comparable. I suppose a lot of people have relationships with God of different sorts. But I suppose I just regard Jesus' relationship with God as in a different category somehow.'

The data demonstrate that a range of ways of understanding the divinity of Jesus are operating, as indeed is the case with academic theologians. Geoffrey Lampe and Roger Haight, for example, who both put forward spirit christologies, disagree about what it means to say that Jesus is divine. Lampe acknowledges Jesus as divine, 'adverbially' rather than substantively;⁴⁵ whereas Haight argues that the presence of God in Jesus should be construed as more than a thin functional or adverbial presence, but is truly an ontological presence because where God acts, God is.⁴⁶ Undoubtedly the divinity of Jesus can be construed in various ways and all statements to the effect that Jesus is divine need to be weighed very carefully, and their depth grammar uncovered, if false conclusions are not to be drawn.

Functional christology

This group talk about the relationship between Jesus and God using relational, revelational and functional language. They talk about what Jesus does and what function he performs: he reveals God in the world and he acts for God in the world. They use language related to action and doing rather than being, speaking about Jesus as '*God's mouth-piece*', '*God's messenger*', '*God's spokesperson*', '*God's representative*', '*God's helper*', '*God's assistant*.' Jesus is God's agent, not God.

Eleanor

'He was specially sent. A sort of messenger.'

⁴⁵ G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ', in S.W. Sykes and J.P. Clayton (eds), *Christ, Faith and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 124. Lampe writes, 'Spirit christology cannot affirm that Jesus is "substantially" God An interpretation of the union of Jesus with God in terms of his total possession by God's Spirit makes it possible, rather, to acknowledge him to be God "adverbially".'

⁴⁶ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 455.

Lesley

'He came to do God's work on earth.'

Richard

'He's assisting in the conveyance of the meaning of God.'

Suzanne

'Jesus is God's way of reaching out to the world.'

Valerie

'[Jesus] appeared on earth to act and speak God's will.'

Jesus is functionally related to God if not functionally identical with God in the New Testament.⁴⁷ Paul Fiddes writes, 'the three earliest gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke) and earliest letters of St. Paul understand the sonship of Jesus as a "functional" oneness with God: Jesus is one with the Father in action and relationship acting for God and being totally obedient to him.' Jesus was 'one' with the Father in function, since God revealed himself through this man and acted through him, and in this sense he was indeed 'Immanuel - God with us.' As the agent of the Father, 'all his actions and teaching were inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God, the dynamic power of God himself reaching out and affecting people.'⁴⁸ Morna Hooker-Stacey argues that New Testament christology is essentially theocentric. It is God who reconciles men and women to himself through his Son. The initiative lies with God and the Son is his agent: God is the origin, Christ the agent.⁴⁹ According to Robert Kysar, agency christology in the New Testament declares that God took the initiative to send a personal agent to perform a revelatory and saving function. He takes the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke to be essentially expressions of a form of agency christology. He writes:

In this case, the agent is more than just a man. His being is shaped by God's special action in one way or another. Still, whether the nature of the agent is that of a specially chosen person or an extra-human being, his function is to be an

⁴⁷ See Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 213.

⁴⁸ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 53-54.

⁴⁹ Morna Hooker-Stacey, 'Disputed Questions in Biblical Studies: 2. Jesus and Christology', *The Expository Times* 112, no. 9 (2001), 298-302.

agent, a representative, or, if you will, a diplomat.⁵⁰

This group all assert a functional and/or revelational and/or relational identity between Jesus and God: Jesus reveals God, he represents God, he functions as God, he is God to and for them. Robinson talks about Jesus being 'a man who in all that he says and does as man is the personal representative of God: he stands in God's place, he *is* God to us and for us.'⁵¹ Or as Frances Young puts it, 'He is "as-if-God" for me.'⁵² And among more ordinary theologians, we may cite Valerie who talked about Jesus '*acting as God*' and performing '*a role for...as God on earth.*' She went on to say, '*I think [Jesus was] almost the same as God.*' Or as Lesley put it, '*it's all like Jesus is God and it is all the same thing.*'

Many modern christologies opt for a functional over against an ontological christology. Whatever their differences may be, functional christologies all claim that Jesus was functionally equivalent to God. This can be worked out in various ways, but they all share the same essential thrust: Jesus is not God, he is God's agent or representative. But Macquarrie and others argue that even the simplest of christological affirmations, such as 'Jesus is God's agent', have ontological implications. Every functional statement about Jesus conceals 'ontological mysteries.'⁵³ He contends that ontology cannot be avoided in christology. Robinson, however, insists that the functional way of representing reality is 'an equally serious way' and is sufficient for christology. He says: 'The issue is not where [Jesus] comes from or what he is made of The issue is whether in seeing him men see the Father, whether, in mercy and judgement, he *functions* as God, whether he *is* God to and for them.'⁵⁴ This issue will be mentioned again at the end of the chapter. All I want to say here is that some kind of ontological identity between Jesus and God was implied in many of the statements made by this group, but this was never couched in terms of the incarnation of God the Son. Instead, various vivid pictorial models were used to envisage the link between Jesus and God.

⁵⁰ Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel*, 28-29.

⁵¹ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 113-114.

⁵² Frances Young, 'A Cloud of Witnesses', in Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 39 (original in italics).

⁵³ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 81. See also 7-9.

⁵⁴ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 184. See also 182-185.

Elizabeth

'Jesus is more really an offshoot in a way.'

Suzanne

'[Jesus is] Part of God. A limb. Reaching out. Sort of an arm of God I suppose.'

Edward

'Jesus is an aspect of God. One limb of God if you like.'

Some of the early church fathers used the same kind of imagery to talk about the immanent activities of God. Thus Irenaeus wrote about the Word and the Spirit as the two hands of God, both being instruments of the divine activity. For Tertullian, God in his transcendence was invisible, the Logos which proceeds from God was able to make God visible. The Logos was like a ray projected from the sun, an offshoot which could mediate the transcendent.⁵⁵ The use of such imagery by the interviewees suggests that they too, like Irenaeus and Tertullian, want to assert that it is truly God (the Word, the Logos) present and active in Jesus.⁵⁶ As we saw earlier, Haight would argue that this is an ontological presence because where God acts, God is.

One must not forget that the interviewees' reflections and thoughts about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth are made in the context of belief in his resurrection and ascension (as are those of the New Testament and traditional theology). Jesus is exalted by God and raised into the glory of the Father. Or, as Küng puts it, 'this crucified one . . . has entered into the true, eternal life of God. He is alive - however that is to be explained.'⁵⁷ The resurrection raises Jesus to the realm of God's own transcendence, so that Jesus and God become inseparable after this. In traditional pictorial language, Jesus is now 'at the right hand of the Father.' The story puts Jesus with God, so that now, as those who live after the story and by the story, Christians cannot help but put Jesus with God. Putting Jesus with God is what they do in their imaginations. '*Jesus and God can't be separated.*' '*Jesus and God are in the same team.*' '*Jesus and God go together.*' '*When*

⁵⁵ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 37, 39.

⁵⁶ Hick uses the image of an amoeba and its pseudopodium to illustrate how we might say that Jesus was 'wholly God', but not 'the whole of God'. For a full discussion of how Hick utilises these ideas to conceptualise the Chalcedonian claim that Jesus was numerically identical with God, see Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, chapter 11, esp. 159-160.

⁵⁷ Küng, *Credo*, 56.

I think about God I'm thinking about Jesus too. K ung suggests that with statements of faith, such as belief in the virgin birth, or the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, 'many people do not so much have definitions of belief as pictures of belief in mind.'⁵⁸ Their theology is pictorial rather than conceptual. This characteristic of ordinary christology will be discussed further in chapter 9.

Arianism all over again?

I wish here to make some final remarks on the adequacy or otherwise of the christology of this group. The orthodox doctrine states that there is no inferiority within the Godhead. The Son is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit. Any christology which considers Jesus to be God's Son created by the Father to be his agent in the world may be classified as subordinationist and effectively Arian (i.e. as unorthodox). The language of creating implies inferiority. The Father who creates is greater than the Son who is created; the Father alone really counts as God and the Son is subordinate ('in second place') to God. Hierarchical and subordinationist thinking can easily arise as a natural product of classical theism. According to this doctrine, God means 'a person without a body (i.e., a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything (omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship.'⁵⁹ Variations of this theism are still alive today in the piety of most Western Christians. To believe in God is to believe in theism: God as the sovereign monarch.⁶⁰

Both hierarchical and subordinationist thinking is widespread amongst this group. Several people talked about God being '*the ultimate*', '*the boss*', '*the ruler of the universe.*'

⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 44.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Bruce

'I do see it as, sort of, God being at the top and Jesus being at the right hand-side or just below, however you want to describe it.'

'I would see [Jesus] as something slightly less than God.'

Eleanor

'I think, I think of God as being the ultimate benefactor. Oh, that sounds awful. I didn't mean that. But as the ultimate. Jesus was just like you and me, but just interpreting his word. I mean, go straight to the top. Why bother with the middle-man? [laugh].'

Elizabeth

'God is Almighty. He put Jesus there and it's all from God; the whole creation; everything from God.'

God is the source of all, including the Son. The Son is derivative of the Father. There are obvious links here with Arianism, although it would be a mistake to label this group as Arian, since Arius, when he talked about the 'creation' of the Son, was talking about inner divine processes within the Godhead and the 'creation' of a pre-existent Son in eternity. This sample, however, when they talk about the creation of the Son, talk about a creation in time, in history. Having said this, there are obvious affinities between the two ways of thinking. Arius was concerned to emphasize the total transcendence of God; God is the one and only source of all created things; nothing exists which does not ultimately derive from God. The Son therefore is created; a creature deriving from the will of the Father, albeit the first and greatest of all the creatures. He is 'divine', but his divinity is of a lesser kind than that of the One, the true God, who alone is unoriginate. The Son is 'divine', one might say, but not God, as God is God. Arius wanted to safeguard his monotheism 'by insisting, on the one hand, that the one God had no equal and, on the other, that the divinity of Jesus was of a separate and totally subordinate kind, the divinity, by some kind of participation, of one who was *par excellence* in the image of God.'⁶¹ This group are not thoroughgoing Arians, however, because they claim (at least some of them do) that it is truly God present in Jesus, not a pre-existent divine being distinct from God and less than God.⁶² It is perhaps legitimate to say that they are

⁶¹ Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 229-230.

⁶² See the discussion on Arianism in Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 210-240, esp. 232-235. Cf. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 45-47 and Maurice Wiles, 'In Defence of Arius', in *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 28-37.

effectively Arian.⁶³ Certainly many will say that Jesus is both human and divine rather than that Jesus is both God and man and, according to Hick, this sort of language gives rise to an Arian rather than a Chalcedonian christology.⁶⁴ It is worth noting here that in the rural popular religion of Latin America, 'while Jesus is seen as divine and not really of human estate, he is not considered quite the same as God.'⁶⁵ This is a view with which this group would seem to concur.

Modalist tendencies

The doctrine of the Trinity enables 'full divinity' to be asserted for the three Persons without at the same time compromising the oneness of God. The paradox of the doctrine can be dissolved by making two possible mistakes: 'one is to collapse the three Persons into one by making Father, Son and Holy Spirit simply characteristics or attributes of one Person; the other is to emphasize the distinct reality of the three Persons to the point of excluding the oneness of God - i.e., of making three distinct gods of the three Persons.'⁶⁶ Lapsing into tritheism is not a danger for Christian 'monotheists'. The danger for them is that the 'full divinity' of the Son and the Spirit is denied through subordinationism/Arianism, or else that the Son and the Spirit are considered to be different ways or modes of self-revelation of the one and only God, i.e. there is a lapse into modalism. It is these modalist tendencies that concern us here.

Nicholas Lash writes, 'In so far as the scheme of one drama with three acts is allowed to shape the sense of our relationship to Father, Son and Spirit, it draws us back towards some version of the oldest of all families of trinitarian heresies, known as "modalism"'. Modalism preserves monotheism through its insistence that the Son and the Spirit are different manifestations of the one God: the one God is revealed as Father, as Son and as Spirit. 'For the modalist, the three ways we know God are of the nature of

⁶³ Young says that, 'Much popular Christianity is effectively Arian or Eutychian rather than Chalcedonian' (*The Making of the Creeds*, 76).

⁶⁴ For the philosophical argument underpinning this claim, see Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 155-164.

⁶⁵ Robert J. Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1985), 128.

⁶⁶ Richard M. Hogan, *Dissent from the Creed: Heresies Past and Present* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001), 29.

appearances, transitory forms, "beneath" which the divine nature, unaffected stands.' Christian orthodoxy, on the other hand, states that 'the distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit are distinctions truly drawn of *God*, and not merely of the way that God appears to us to be, or of the way that - for some brief span of time - he was.'⁶⁷ As we have seen, Moltmann argues that in the West there has always been a tendency in Christian thought to subordinate the doctrine of the triune God to the doctrine of the One God. He writes, 'Ever since Hegel in particular, the Christian Trinity has tended to be represented in terms belonging to the general concept of the absolute subject: *one subject - three modes of being*.' He goes on to say that the concept of God as absolute subject can never satisfactorily accommodate the doctrine of the Trinity because 'the unity of the absolute subject is stressed to such a degree that the trinitarian Persons disintegrate into mere aspects of the one subject.'⁶⁸ There are examples of this kind of modalist thinking within this group.

Jan, for example, starts off from the premise that '*obviously God is one*.' She gives a more sophisticated response to the trigger of 'Trinity' saying '*we are told that the whole Godhead is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost*.' She then says, '*here you are speaking to me and you are a theology student and you haven't ceased to be a mother, a wife. You are still all those things, but this is the thing that you are doing now. So it is possible to hold different things in tension and other aspects come to the fore*.' From this passage alone it might be supposed that Jan holds a doctrine of the triune God, but the rest of the data does not support such a view. She has no concept of the pre-existent Son and is completely confused by the idea that God the Son became incarnate. It is God, the absolute subject, who becomes incarnate, who exists in the 'mode of being' of God the Son. Rahner comments that 'the average Christian' who professes faith in the incarnation does not go any further in his understanding of the doctrine than this. He draws no more from the doctrine of the incarnation than that God became man.⁶⁹ This appears to be Jan's position. Just as I am one individual, who plays different roles, so God is one individual able to perform different roles. God the Father,

⁶⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 30-31.

⁶⁸ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 17-18.

⁶⁹ Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV*, 79-80.

God the Son and God the Holy Ghost are different roles that the One God plays; in other words they are different aspects of the One God. Many other comments were made by members of this group which lend themselves to a modalist interpretation. All emphasise the oneness of God and tend to dissolve the distinctions - i.e., there is a distinct tendency towards 'monotheism'.

Lesley

'How do you separate it all out? It's one thing really isn't it?'

'It's one thing.'

'[God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are] facets of the one thing.'

Percy

'I don't see any separatism, distinction between them at all. And it never occurs to me to do that. One way or the other. What do they call it? Monotheism. There it is. One God. That's all there is.'

Richard

'I see the Trinity as being one entity as opposed to three separate discrete parts.'

'I see them all...perhaps it is just me...I can't sort of split them into three separate areas. I find that a little bit too prescriptive really. I'd rather keep it simple, for want of a better word, in my own mind.'

'I see the Godhead as being just one...one sort of God who embodies himself in lots of different ways.'

Edward

'God exists in different forms if you will. Jesus was one form of God.'

'[Jesus] was a manifestation of God.'

'[Jesus] was one aspect of God.'

Moltmann is highly critical of Christian 'monotheism' and its accompanying modalism, claiming that they threaten faith in Christ. 'Christ must either recede into the series of the prophets, giving way to the One God, or he must disappear into the One God as one of his manifestations.'⁷⁰ Several of this group talked about Jesus 'dissolving back into God' or 'not really existing anymore.' But it does not follow from this that their faith in Christ was any less. Indeed, some of the despised Christian 'monotheists' were, from my perspective, the most inspiring interviewees of all.

⁷⁰ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 131.

Assumptions of orthodoxy

This group will typically say that the Nicene creed 'sums up what I believe.' 'It's putting it in a nutshell really.' 'I can agree with it all. This is what I believe.' They will say that they 'totally and utterly' believe in the creed, but what they actually believe in is not Nicene orthodoxy. Graeme Smith claims that versions of Arianism and Pelagianism are commonplace inside the churches. 'Jesus might be called divine, but he is often thought of as a super-special creature. He is not really man, in any recognisable sense, nor is he God (the Father).' He writes that 'these beliefs are held illicitly. Church members recognise that they are theological contraband, so it takes some time to discover them.'⁷¹ But this is not the case here. This particular group of believers do *not* realise that the beliefs they hold concerning the identity of Jesus fall short of Nicene orthodoxy. They think they are orthodox, that what they believe is what the church teaches. We shall have cause in chapter 9 to discuss in more detail how this group are interpreting the language of the Nicene creed. Now I want to say something about the supposed 'falling short' of functional christologies.

There are those who would say that functional christologies should be rejected as inadequate versions of Christianity. Klaas Runia, for example, surveys and evaluates the functional christologies of many leading Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars in his book *The Present-Day Christological Debate* and finds them wanting, claiming that they do not say enough. To refuse to go beyond such general affirmations as 'God was in Christ' or 'Jesus is the decisive and definitive revelation of God' is, in his view, to say less than Nicea.⁷² Gerald O'Collins is similarly dismissive of what he calls 'soft' or 'neo-Arian' christologies. To say that Jesus is God's revealer, embodiment or representative is, in his view, to claim too little. How could Jesus be the supreme revelation of God, he asks, without himself being equal with God? He insists that Jesus cannot function for us as God without actually being God. Only an ontological christology will do.⁷³

⁷¹ Graeme Smith, 'If You Can't Beat 'em...', *The Church Times*, 8 March 2002, 15.

⁷² Klaas Runia, *The Present-Day Christological Debate* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1984), esp. 92-115.

⁷³ O'Collins, *Christology*, 224-229.

But many modern writers do prefer to talk about Jesus in functional rather than ontological categories. The liberal tradition that springs from Schleiermacher, who speaks of incarnation primarily as the presence of God or God's activity in Jesus Christ, has sought hard to find a functional equivalent of Nicea and Chalcedon. What counts as a functional or 'an allowable equivalent' for the christological statements of the Nicene creed or the Chalcedonian Definition is hotly contested.⁷⁴ According to the liberal theologian Maurice Wiles, 'there must be some ontological truth corresponding to the central characteristic of the structure of the myth' of the incarnation. He suggests that the profound inner union of the divine and the human at the heart of the human personality may be the ontological reality at the centre of this myth, rather than an identity between the personhood of Jesus and the Second Person of the Godhead.⁷⁵ But he acknowledges that identifying such ontological truths is not at all easy. 'For one thing if the ontological truth were one that could be expressed with full clarity and precision there would be less need for the myth.'⁷⁶ About Jesus he is prepared to say,

He was not just one who had taught about God; he was not just one who had lived a life of perfect human response to God. He had lived a life that embodied and expressed God's character and action in the world The impact not merely of his teaching but of his whole person communicated the presence and the power of God with an unprecedented sense of directness and finality.⁷⁷

Many of this group make these kind of claims for Jesus. Some academic theologians would say that Wiles, in his own language, is reproducing the essentials of the traditional christological teaching.⁷⁸ Others would strongly disagree.⁷⁹ Debating this point any further lies beyond the scope of this thesis. All I wish to say here is that many modern forms of christology do interpret the incarnation 'in the language of will,

⁷⁴ Leslie Houlden, 'The Creed of Experience', in Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 132.

⁷⁵ Maurice Wiles, 'Myth in Theology', in Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 161. For a critique of Wiles' view, see Sykes, 'The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church', 115-127, esp. 116.

⁷⁶ Wiles, 'Myth in Theology', 161.

⁷⁷ Maurice Wiles, *Explorations in Theology 4* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 24.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 8. Macquarrie thinks that the claims Wiles makes for Jesus Christ may fairly be called ontological claims and that these claims do not assert any less than the traditional language asserted.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation*, esp. chapter 1.

purpose, spirit, activity, presence, grace or initial aims of God', and these are accepted by many as 'allowable equivalents' for the Nicene and Chalcedonian language.⁸⁰ They are not considered to 'fall short' of orthodoxy. To say that 'God was in Christ' or 'Jesus is God's revealer, embodiment or representative' is not to say too little. All of this present group of interviewees are at least saying this much. They are effectively liberals in their christology without realising it. If christological orthodoxy has to be confessed only in terms of a recognition that Jesus is the pre-existent Son of God incarnate, and as such ontologically equal to the Father, then none of this group can be considered to be orthodox. But once it is accepted that christological orthodoxy can be confessed apart from substantialist categories, in functional 'equivalents', then the orthodoxy of this group can be affirmed.

What is clear from this group is that most people in the sample have learned monotheistic rather than trinitarian Christianity. They have learned the 'common sense' version of Christianity. Harvey Whitehouse observes that much 'popular religious thinking will err in the direction of simpler, more "naturalised" concepts (often to the great annoyance of religious experts and authorities).'⁸¹ Clearly, a 'functional' Jesus and a 'unitary' God are easier to understand. They also appear to be sufficient for the religious needs of this group: they have no soteriological need for Jesus to be God. Why would they need Jesus to be God when they have a perfectly acceptable God already?

But before we turn our attention to the soteriologies of this group, the other christologies operating in the sample must first be analysed.

⁸⁰ See Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 56.

⁸¹ Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004).

Chapter 4

ONTOLOGICAL CHRISTOLOGY

Jesus is God

Around six¹ of the sample hold the doctrine that Jesus is God. They all use the ontological language of orthodoxy, rather than adopting any species of functional language, and claim that '*Jesus is God*', '*Jesus is fully God*', '*Jesus was God*', '*Jesus is both God and man*.' Such confessions are regarded by this group as synonymous with being a Christian. '*You have to believe that Jesus is God to be a Christian*.' But if adherence to this doctrine is used as the normative criterion for what counts as Christian, then over two thirds of the sample cannot be classified as Christian. The data also call into question the commonly held descriptive assumption that Christians are people who believe that Jesus is God, since so few of the sample actually do. Why is it that these six have learnt the orthodox position whereas the functionalists have not?

It turns out that Charles, the only non-evangelical of this group, has read some academic theology books and the suggestion is that he has learnt his orthodoxy from there.² The five evangelicals in the sample make up the rest of this group. They seem to have learnt their orthodoxy during the socialisation process into evangelical Christianity. They have been explicitly taught '*classic evangelical thinking*', that is, '*the concept that Christ died on the cross for my sins and the fact that Jesus was not just a man, but he was also God*.' The data from the functionalists show that without such explicit teaching people do not learn these christological beliefs; they do not, for example, learn them from

¹ This figure could be increased to nine, if the three with modalist tendencies who can make the statement 'Jesus is God' were included. But since these three do not have a doctrine of the triune God or of pre-existence they are included with the functional group rather than this group. They could be said to have a *hybrid christology*, falling between both groups.

² Some might say that reading an academic theology book counts as receiving some academic theological education, and therefore Charles cannot be classified as an ordinary theologian. But by my definition (see above, p. 1) he is an ordinary theologian, because he has not studied theology as an academic subject or received any formal theological education. My definition may need revising, but this is not an issue I want to pursue in this thesis. On the problems of defining ordinary theology, see Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 55-58.

worship.³ Evangelical christology, whilst acknowledging the dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon as normative, appeals primarily to the New Testament, and particularly the gospel of John, as the basis for its christology.⁴ In practice, the creed is largely ignored by evangelical Christians. It is the Bible that provides the doctrine about Jesus. Evangelicals are explicitly taught that the Bible says Jesus is God and that Jesus claimed to be God. They are ‘inheritors of an *interpretive* tradition’ which exerts a powerful influence on how the Bible is read.⁵

As we saw in the last chapter, there are certain passages in the New Testament that can be interpreted as saying ‘Jesus is God’. There are also other passages, most notably in the gospel of John, where Jesus appears to claim to be God, as in the ‘I am’ sayings and other statements such as ‘I and the Father are one’ (John 10:30), ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). The data imply that the functionalists interpret these passages in the same way as they do the *homoousion* phrase, that is, as indicating a relational and revelational not an ontological identity between Jesus and God. James Barr offers them support, in writing, ‘When Jesus says in John 10:30 that he and the Father are “one”, he does so in the context of numerous other sayings which make it clear the this “one” does not betoken congruence or identity.’⁶ But the evangelicals read this passage as if it does signify ontological identity: *‘Jesus says he is God in the “I am” passages in John.’*

In the synoptic gospels, however, far from going about ‘claiming’ to be God, Jesus is reluctant even to accept the more limited titles of ‘Son of God’ or ‘Christ’.⁷ In Mark’s gospel, Jesus expressly denies that he is ‘good’ since that is a quality that belongs to God alone. ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:18). This only makes sense, says Barr, ‘if Jesus is *not* “claiming to be God”.’ He goes on to

³ This issue is discussed further in chapter 9.

⁴ For an overview of evangelical christology and evangelical writers on christology, see Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 70-74.

⁵ See Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 73, and the rest of chapter 3.

⁶ James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 57.

⁷ On the differences between the christology of John and that of the synoptics, see Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament*, 150-151; Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels*, 240-243; Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 97-101.

argue that if the idea that 'Jesus is God' is present in the New Testament it is very definitely a minor rather than a major emphasis. It is characteristic of the dominant presentation of Jesus by the main New Testament sources 'that Jesus is not presented as divine or as God, and does not so present himself.' The evangelical and fundamentalist understanding of Jesus, 'which insists on the definition of him as being God, is actually based on a highly selective and rather thin (or possibly non-existent) line of New Testament evidence and ignores the main line.'⁸ The functionalists take the main line and the evangelicals the thin one. Of course, it does not follow from this that the evangelicals are thereby simply 'wrong', but it does mean that their view of Jesus 'depends on a selection and ordering of the biblical evidence, and a selection and ordering that actually takes its lead from a minority trend and suppresses the suggestions that arise from the majority trend.'⁹ The heretics in the classic formative periods of christology 'contended to the last that orthodoxy was a misrepresentation of the given of Scripture.'¹⁰ What is clear is that the evangelicals and the functionalists see Jesus differently. The evangelicals see Jesus as God and think he claimed to be God, whereas the functionalists see Jesus as the Son of God and do not think he claimed to be God.

A couple of the evangelicals used the C. S. Lewis apologetic, which argues that someone claiming to be God must be either mad or bad or God; and since Jesus was evidently not mad or bad he must have been God.¹¹ This popular form of apologetic, still used in the Alpha and Emmaus courses, is ruled out by historical-critical research. As was mentioned in chapter 1, up until the modern period, belief in Jesus as God incarnate was assumed to rest securely upon Jesus' own explicit teaching in the gospels, especially the gospel of John, but now 'there is scarcely a single competent New Testament scholar who is prepared to defend the view that the four instances of the absolute use of "I am" in John, or indeed most of the other uses, can be historically

⁸ Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism*, 55-56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2nd ed. 1998), 15. See 15-17 for the problems associated with making scripture the given in christology.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana Books, 1955), 52-53.

attributed to Jesus.¹² The scholarly consensus on John seems to be that a writer some sixty or more years later, expressing the theology that had developed in his particular Christian community, placed these famous words on Jesus' lips. The 'I am' sayings are the voice of the community not the voice of Jesus.¹³ Even those scholars who themselves affirm an orthodox christology acknowledge that any claim for Jesus' deity cannot be defended by reference to the claims of Jesus himself. Chalcedonian christology must be defended on other grounds, if it is to be defended at all.¹⁴ But the evangelicals, like most of the sample, are unfamiliar with the results of historical criticism of the gospels. Their belief that Jesus is God is based on a pre-critical reading of the text.¹⁵

Evangelical christology insists on using ontological instead of functional language, and rejects functional christologies. 'Any interpretation of incarnation which uses the language of will, purpose, spirit, activity, presence, grace or initial aims instead of substance is regarded as heretical.'¹⁶ For evangelicals, the formula 'Jesus is God' acts as the shibboleth for distinguishing orthodoxy from liberalism. Thus, the evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock writes:

All such [liberal] christologies have something in common. They seek a functional equivalent of Chalcedon by finding in the human life of Jesus a unique divine presence, a normative divine revelation, a decisive saving action. But none of them wishes to say that Jesus is God in the ontological sense that orthodoxy has demanded. They will go only as far as functional categories.¹⁷

¹² Adrian Thatcher, *Truly a Person, Truly God: A Post-Mythical View of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1990), 77.

¹³ On the authorship of John, see W. G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament*, trans. John E. Steely (London: SCM Press, 1974), 259-261 and C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1965), 105-114. See also Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament*, 152-156.

¹⁴ Hick cites a number of scholars who affirm an orthodox christology, but who accept that Jesus did not claim divinity for himself. See the references cited in Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 27-28.

¹⁵ Some evangelical theologians will embrace the historical-critical method, others spurn it. For a robust rejection of the historical-critical method by one evangelical theologian, see Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990).

¹⁶ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 72.

¹⁷ Clark H. Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue* (Grand

Evangelical/orthodox christology, on the other hand, maintains that 'Jesus was not just radically unique but *metaphysically different* from all other human beings.'¹⁸ Here the 'is' of identity rather than the 'is' of predication is being used: Jesus is identical with God, one and the same as, 'of the same substance.' Anything less than an ontological, numerical identity will not do.¹⁹

All of this group have a doctrine (of sorts) of the immanent Trinity, of pre-existence and of the incarnation of God the Son. These three doctrines are organically related to one another and indeed presuppose one another. I shall look first of all at what this group have to say about God as Trinity.

Tritheistic tendencies

All of this group have a doctrine of the immanent Trinity in that they consider God to be triune in Godself. They use the term Godhead and talk about the Godhead being '*a three-in-one God.*' Just as the doctrine of the incarnation is abbreviated and simplified, so is the doctrine of the Trinity. The classic summary statement of the doctrine is 'three Persons in one God.' This doctrine is unquestionably one of the most perplexing aspects of Christian theology and requires careful discussion if it is not to be misleading. But discussions of the doctrine never progressed beyond variations of the classic summary statement. This is hardly surprising. Expressing belief in the Trinity in words is not easy and various pitfalls await anyone who tries. Nearly everyone in this group said that they did not understand the doctrine of the Trinity.

Peter

'I would certainly say I believe that God was...that Jesus was part of God from the beginning, from all time, not just from you know 2000 years ago when he was born as a man.'

'In a sense the three aspects of God, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are there even at the beginning of Genesis.'

Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), 145.

¹⁸ Stephen T. Davis, 'Jesus Christ: Saviour or Guru?', in Stephen T. Davis (ed.), *Encountering Jesus: A Debate on Christology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 74.

¹⁹ For references on the 'is' of identification, see above, p. 67(n40).

'I wouldn't pretend that I fully understand how you get three-in-one and all the illustrations and what have you.'

Paul

'It's one God...separated into three somehow.'

'I don't understand the dynamics of a three-in-one God. But that is where my faith kicks in, because I know that that is what it is. I know that God is a three-in-one, but...I just have to put my trust in that...and my faith, you know, takes over.'

'I've always struggled with there being three entities in one. I don't understand how it works. But I know, I know that's how it is. So that's it.'

Charles

'Well, as I understand it, God is composed of three parts, like ancient Gaul. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost and they are all one. Yet there are three divisions so to speak, so Jesus Christ is God; full stop.'

Dorothy

'It's one God...separated into three.'

'They are all different parts of the Godhead.'

The word God has two referents here: it can be used to refer to God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity, and it can be used to refer to the triune Godhead. However, listening to immanent trinitarians speak reveals that they rarely use the word God to refer to the triune Godhead unless they are being asked a specific question about the Trinity. Like the functionalists, when they use the word God they use it to refer to God the Father. The two most important trinitarian heresies, as we saw in the last chapter, are modalism and tritheism. Charles is the only one of this group who tends towards modalist thinking, talking about Jesus being *'a manifestation of God.'* The rest veer unmistakably towards tritheism. They tend to emphasize the distinct and separate realities of the three Persons rather than the oneness of God. Those who exhibit tritheistic tendencies all use 'person' language to talk about the triune God. They make a point of saying that they think of each of the three 'figures' as 'persons' and not just *'a nebulous sort of...it.'* Such thinking stands in direct contrast to many of the sample, who make a point of disavowing all 'person' talk, saying that they *'do not like to think of God as a person.'* They prefer instead to think of God as *'a power', 'a force', 'a spirit.'*

The doctrine of the Trinity is classically expressed using 'person' terminology, but this terminology is suspected today of contributing to a tritheistic perception of the

Godhead, however unconsciously entertained. The ancient term *persona* meant something quite different from 'person' in modern English, where the word commonly means a separate centre of personality.²⁰ Using the term 'person' today, we are inclined to think of *a* person, which leads, Lash suspects, 'to the idea that God is in some way three people. Which God, of course, is not.'²¹ Haight, similarly, complains that the use of the word 'person' almost inevitably communicates to current western culture an understanding of God as three autonomous persons. 'The classic doctrine thus communicates to many a tritheism which is simply meaningless to their lives.'²² Both Lash and Haight advocate ceasing to use the word 'person' in trinitarian theology. The difficulties are highlighted by Peter.

P I suppose...the idea that [Jesus] is with God in heaven and it talks about him interceding for the saints and that kind of thing. And I mean it still describes him as a separate from...separate from...I mean there is still a distinction between Jesus as God and God as God. And I can't explain that.

A OK. I'm following you so far, but are you telling me that I have now got two gods in heaven?

P And the third one that is working in believers as well. The Spirit. To me it is the same problem as you had before. You've got three distinct aspects of God and yet as Christians we claim to be monotheistic. And so...yeah. Good question. Good question. I don't have an answer [laugh].

The data imply that although God is formally acknowledged as one, in practice these believers live with a picture of three autonomous persons, three gods in their imagination. According to Marcus Borg, 'popular notions of the Trinity commonly imagine God as a committee of three somewhat separate divine beings.'²³ The classical formula functions, as it always has, as a saving mechanism for monotheism. By asserting a distinction of coequal Persons within the One God of monotheism, the doctrine enables a meaning to be given to the claim that Jesus is God. It is 'a very bold, ingenious and highly-original solution' to the problem of how Jesus can be declared to

²⁰ On the meaning of the term *persona* and *prosopon* in patristic thought, see G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 157-162 and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 112-115.

²¹ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 31.

²² Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, 171.

²³ Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 154.

be God without ending up with multiple Gods.²⁴ Whether the doctrine of the Trinity makes any difference to this group's experience and practice of faith is unclear. Moltmann complains that for most Christians, 'Whether God is one or triune evidently makes as little difference to the doctrine of faith as it does to ethics.'²⁵

Incarnational christology

This group have a different version of the Christian story to that of the functionalists and a different conceptual scheme. Here, behind the human career of Jesus lies a divine pre-existence. All have a doctrine of Jesus personally pre-existing his earthly life as a distinct divine figure or hypostasis alongside God the Father. They all talk about Jesus being with God at the beginning of creation and of Jesus coming down to earth to live a human life. They have a three-stage, descent-ascent, incarnational christology. Jesus is thought of as Son of God, not merely from his resurrection, or baptism or virginal conception, but from eternity.

Peter

'I would believe that [Jesus] pre-existed.'

'Um...I mean the way that I have understood it in the past...I mean even the first verse of the Bible talks about the Spirit of God hovering over the earth and God said...and the way that that is a picture of...you know there was God the Father there, there is the Spirit and there is the spoken Word which is Jesus. Um...so you know, in a sense the three aspects of God, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are there even at the beginning of Genesis.'

'We talk about Jesus as being the Word of God, which is an aspect of God isn't it? Um...and so is was that particular aspect of God that became flesh.'

Pat

'And I mean John's gospel...in the beginning was the Word...so Jesus was there at the beginning when the world was created.'

Dorothy

'Jesus was there from the beginning of creation.'

Susan

'Jesus made the decision to lay down his life...before he came to earth when he was in God's presence.'

²⁴ Cupitt, 'Jesus and the Meaning of "God",' 37.

²⁵ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 1.

Several identify Jesus with the Word and talk about the Word or Jesus becoming flesh. The functionalists do not make this connection, as these two contrasting extracts from functionalists illustrate.

Rose

A *[Incarnation] comes in at the carol service, at the very end. St. John unfolds the mystery of the Incarnation. You get that reading, do you remember it, about the Word becoming flesh?*

R *Yes. Yes, I do remember the thing [laugh]. Yes, you don't think...[pause]*

A *But you wouldn't...you wouldn't be able to say particularly what that is about or...*

R *No. No. I think...no. No, I don't understand.*

Suzanne

A *So like at Christmas, at the carol service, at the end, when you have that reading from the beginning of John's Gospel and it is headed 'St. John unfolds the mystery of the Incarnation', does that ring any bells? The Word became flesh?*

S *Oh yes. Right. Well, I missed last year's, so it is over a year since I have been to that.*

A *Would you like to have a look at it? It's there...at the beginning of John. [hands over Bible - Suzanne reads it]*

S *'The Word becoming flesh.' Crikey. So what was your original question?*

Unlike the functionalists, this present group, who I have distinguished as having an ontological christology, have learnt to interpret the Word, in John's Prologue, as referring to a pre-existent Jesus. Pre-existence is also assumed in other passages. But, according to James Dunn, 'Only with the Fourth Gospel can we speak of a full blown conception of Christ's personal pre-existence and a clear doctrine of incarnation.'²⁶ Like other scholars, Dunn believes that the other passages in the New Testament which allegedly refer to the existence of a pre-existent divine being do not in fact do so and

²⁶ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 258 (original in italics). Cf. Kysar writes, 'The prologue of the Fourth Gospel is the fullest and clearest statement of incarnational christology in the New Testament' (*John, the Maverick Gospel*, 29).

warns strongly against reading the later doctrines of the church into the New Testament. He argues, for example, that the Christ-hymn in Philippians (Phil.2:6-7) does not teach the pre-existence of Jesus. He believes that the words of the Philippians' passage are only interpreted in this way because the reader brings to them the background of long cherished popular Christian beliefs, whereas the passage should be understood against a different background.²⁷ Several of the evangelicals interpret the Philippians passage as the story of a heavenly being who lays aside his pre-existent glory to become man. Their interpretive tradition specifies this reading. It is a tradition in which one text is interpreted in terms of another and read through selective doctrinal spectacles. The text confirms what is presupposed, namely, in this instance, Jesus' pre-existence.²⁸

All of this group (except Charles) are insistent that the virgin birth '*really happened*' and that '*you have to believe it.*' Interestingly, in those New Testament writings where the notion of pre-existence is said to occur, the concept of virgin birth does not, and vice versa. The two concepts are used by different writers as separate and alternative ways of giving expression to the significance of Jesus. Wolfhart Pannenberg goes so far as to say that the two concepts stand in 'irreconcilable contradiction' to each other. The legend of the virgin birth presupposes that Jesus, God's Son, is brought into existence through Mary's conception. A pre-existence christology, to the contrary, presupposes that the Son of God has existed from eternity.²⁹ Robinson considers Pannenberg's claim to be an exaggeration, however, arguing that the two concepts have been combined and fused so successfully in Christian teaching (as the miraculous insertion into history of the pre-existent Son) that most people are unaware of any contradiction.³⁰ None of this present group talk about God creating Jesus. They talk about the pre-existent Jesus becoming flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary: '*Jesus became planted in Mary's womb*', '*Jesus became flesh.*' Jesus does not become God's Son at conception/birth. Rather, for this group, the virginal conception is the point in time when the pre-existent Jesus becomes incarnate and the mystery of the incarnation takes place. The two concepts of pre-existence and virgin birth have been harmonised so successfully that the

²⁷ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 114.

²⁸ Cf. Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73-126.

²⁹ Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man*, 143.

³⁰ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 144-145.

virginal conception is now regarded as an indispensable element in the incarnation process. The suggestion that incarnation could take place without the virginal conception would be completely unacceptable to all the evangelicals: *'Jesus had to come on the earth and that's the way he did.'* But for Charles, the virgin birth is not essential, as it was not for those New Testament writers who are said to speak most of pre-existence. For Charles, the pre-existent Son of God could have become incarnate without a virginal conception. Indeed, such a notion is considered to be not only unnecessary, but biologically impossible. *'I do think when you are on this earth and reproducing you do actually need to obey the scientific rules and I really don't believe in miraculous ways of things occurring differently.'* Charles is unusual in that he has an ontological christology: he believes *'that Jesus Christ was...is God and came onto this earth,'* but he cannot believe in either the virgin birth or a physical resurrection.

Truly human?

The Prologue speaks of the Word pre-existing, the doctrine of the incarnation speaks of the Son of God or God the Son pre-existing, and these interviewees speak primarily of Jesus pre-existing. Are they all saying the same thing? What exactly can be said to pre-exist? A three-stage Word or Son christology is intrinsically ambiguous. By incarnation, the Word or Son becomes Jesus Christ and therefore one could say that the one who is Jesus Christ pre-existed. Yet it is clear that the human nature and bodily existence of Jesus did not pre-exist.³¹ Strictly speaking, what pre-exists prior to the incarnation is the Word or Son and it is a mistake to say that Jesus pre-exists. Jesus and the Word/Son are not identical. As Norman Pittenger puts it, *'It must be clear that in terms of trinitarian theology there can be no pre-existence of the human mind, nature, self, ego of Jesus of Nazareth . . . we must reject out-right any idea of a pre-existence of Jesus and along with this rejection an incredible amount of pious error and confusion.'*³² This group are not aware that they are in 'error and confusion' or that they are talking 'logical nonsense.'³³ According to John Knox, what has usually been meant by pre-existence is

³¹ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 175(n79).

³² Norman W. Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate: A Study of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (London: James Nisbet, 1959), 218-219.

³³ Gordon D. Kaufmann accuses Barth, who says that *'... the man Jesus already was even before He was'*,

that 'Jesus as the particular individual he was had existed before all worlds' or that his existence as a man 'was in some self-conscious way continuous with his earlier existence as a heavenly being.'³⁴ It is along these lines that this group seem to understand pre-existence. Lampe claims that in popular piety it is the Jesus of the gospels whom the imagination of the worshipper pictures as pre-existing in heaven and descending to earth, so that Jesus becomes a kind of invader from outer space.³⁵

Many academic theologians argue that the doctrine of pre-existence places an intolerable strain on the true humanity of Jesus. How can a man who is conscious of having an earlier existence as a heavenly being really be a man? Surely such a claim is not compatible with 'normal human sanity?'³⁶ Knox asserts that there is 'absolutely no way' of having both the pre-existence and the humanity of Jesus and he jettisons the pre-existence in favour of the humanity, arguing that pre-existence distinguishes Jesus' humanity from ours to such an extent that he cannot be thought of as 'a man like other men' and therefore he cannot be thought of as 'a man' at all.³⁷ Others, struggling with the same problem, disagree and are able to find ways of ascribing to Jesus full and genuine humanity while at the same time regarding him as a man unlike other men. The data suggest that some of this group are aware of the threat that pre-existence poses to the humanity of Jesus, but they are not unduly troubled by the issue. They do not have the same need or desire an academic theologian might have to resolve, through rational argument, the tensions or contradictions inherent within the claims being made. Peter can say, 'I would say that [Jesus] knew that he was God, that he wasn't just a man' and, unlike Knox, he does not see this as in any way threatening Jesus' humanity. He does not conclude that Jesus could not have been a man, because he knew that he was God. The question, 'How could Jesus genuinely be a man, if "underneath", as it were, he was really God?' is not a question that these ordinary believers want to pursue or consider worth pursuing.³⁸ They just accept, without too much difficulty it would seem, that

of 'logical nonsense' and 'the theological error of *docetism*'. See Kaufmann, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 205.

³⁴ Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, 61, 106.

³⁵ Lampe, *God as Spirit*, 136.

³⁶ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 151(n17).

³⁷ Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, 144, 63.

³⁸ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 99.

Jesus really was a man, but he was God as well and that his being God in no way undermined his being human. The 'absolute paradox' of the God-man is accepted by faith and the theoretical question of how one person can be both God and man, without his humanity being in any way infringed, rarely arises. This question is irrelevant to their spirituality.

The logical extreme of incarnationist christology is docetism: Jesus becomes a god disguised in human flesh. Docetism denies the humanity of Jesus and has always been deemed by the tradition to be heretical. Jesus did not just 'appear' to be human, he really was human. But many today claim that christological thinking throughout much of Christian history has invariably been weighted on the side of the divinity rather than the humanity of Jesus; and that while the humanity of Jesus was formally, even unambiguously and strongly affirmed, in actual fact it was never taken seriously enough. Many have complained of an unconscious docetism in the churches.³⁹ The gospel of John in particular has, from the beginning, been seen as 'the presentation of a celestial being walking this earth in the clothing of a humanity that is merely a disguise' and is classed by some as a docetic document.⁴⁰ Like the author of the gospel of John, all of this group affirm the humanity of Jesus, but there is the suspicion that, as with John, docetism lurks. Dorothy asserts that Jesus was a man and then adds, '*and yet...I must admit I find it quite hard to actually...I think I think of him more as God than as a man.*' The humanity of Jesus is affirmed as a formal fact, but Jesus is thought of as God rather than a man. His human nature is seen through his divine nature, as illustrated by the following comment.

'OK, when he died on the cross, OK it would have been painful, but then he was God. He was divine, so he probably could have coped with all that.'

Further, what counts as Jesus being God varies within this group, just as what counts as Jesus being divine varies among the functionalists. For example, some consider Jesus to possess the divine attribute of omniscience, others do not. Hick reminds us that

³⁹ See Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 342-343.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 169.

our concepts of God are human constructs, and theologians are free to offer their own definitions of the essential attributes in virtue of which God is God Thus it is, within certain limits, up to us to decide what is to count as Jesus being God (did he, for example, have to be omniscient and omnipotent, or are these not after all essential divine attributes?), and what is to count as his being a man (did he, for example, have to be limited in knowledge and power, or could he be an omniscient and omnipotent man?). Given the relatively open character of our concept of humanity, and still more of deity, it will always be possible to adjust them in relation to each other [. . .].⁴¹

We see this process of adjustment happening with Pat. She continues to believe, as she always has, that Jesus was both God and man, but she now thinks of Jesus as *'very, very human,'* someone who *'struggled with his faith'* like the rest of us. She says, *'You often get this picture that is put across of Jesus being meek and mild and he did everything right. I don't think he was like that any more. He was a human being.'* She no longer thinks of Jesus as perfect or sinless. Such a human being, in her judgement, is not really a human being. Many academic theologians have argued that the doctrine of the sinlessness of Jesus turns him into an unrecognisable human being.⁴² But for most of this group the sinlessness of Jesus is non-negotiable and has to be defended, primarily because they also hold a substitutionary theory of atonement and this theory requires that Jesus be without sin. They do not think of pre-existence or sinlessness as posing a serious threat, and certainly not a fatal blow, to the genuine humanity of Jesus. Neither do they find such a Jesus unattractive or irrelevant. Others in the sample obviously do.

'It really happened'

Many would argue that the idea of pre-existence, the idea that Jesus Christ had prior to his birth a conscious, personal pre-existence in 'heaven', is mythological as well as destructive of Jesus' true humanity and should be discarded because it can lead to all

⁴¹ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 4.

⁴² See Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, 180; Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, 20; Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 396-398.

sorts of misunderstandings (such as those outlined above). The only pre-existence we can begin to understand, says Macquarrie, and the only kind that is compatible with Jesus' true humanity is pre-existence in the mind and purpose of God. Any 'literal conception of pre-existence' must be rejected.⁴³ It is clear that all of this group have a 'literal' not a 'mythic' understanding of pre-existence/incarnation. This assertion requires further unpacking.

To say that the Bible contains myth is no longer controversial. All but the most 'benighted fundamentalists' would accept the creation stories in Genesis as myth.⁴⁴ Even those in this group who insisted that they '*have no doubts*' about the Bible and that they '*believe the whole lot*' were willing to accept that the beginnings of Genesis '*may well be picture language.*' (They were, however, unwilling to accept the mythic status of biblical eschatology, insisting that '*Jesus will reign for a thousand years.*') To assert that there is myth in the New Testament, in the creed and in Christian doctrine is more controversial. Myth is variously defined and can be approached from a variety of perspectives (anthropological, sociological, psychological, cosmological and theological). However, according to Paul Avis, 'it would be widely agreed that myth is a literary genre in which numinous symbols are constellated in narrative form.'⁴⁵ Ninian Smart has defined myth as 'a moving picture of the sacred.'⁴⁶ Myths put together the 'stills' or 'static pictures' of God and God's activities provided by the metaphors and analogies of religious language to produce a 'movie' in which God's activity is presented in story form.⁴⁷ Peter Hodgson can therefore describe myth as 'an idealized form of narrative discourse that may or may not be rooted in actual historical events and that has the purpose of representing in story form the interaction of the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, at the constitutive moments of human and cosmic process: birth and death, struggle and conflict, victory and defeat.'⁴⁸

⁴³ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 390-391. Cf. Mackey, 'The Problem of the Pre-existence of the Son', in *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, 51-65.

⁴⁴ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 133.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 116. For a discussion of myth and mythic realism, see chapters 11 and 14 respectively.

⁴⁶ Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 79.

⁴⁷ Jeff Astley, *Exploring God - Talk: Using Language in Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 47.

⁴⁸ Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit*, 244.

It is now more widely accepted that the doctrine of the incarnation belongs to the genre of myth and that the doctrine, as expressed in the Nicene creed, is set in mythic form. (Because in common use the term myth has become synonymous with falsehood, some would prefer here to use the word 'story' rather than 'myth'.) Avis writes, 'In the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed we have an extremely powerful statement of the Incarnation, a piling of metaphor upon metaphor, symbol upon symbol, culminating in the myth of the Son of God descending from heaven.'⁴⁹ To assert the mythic character of the doctrine of the incarnation is not 'to prejudge the question of its truth and relevance . . . It is merely to settle the preliminary question of genre.'⁵⁰ Avis is insistent that a mythic understanding of incarnation is compatible with 'a full-blooded orthodox faith' and rejects the reductionist conclusions of Hick.⁵¹ While Hick and Avis agree that the doctrine of the incarnation belongs to the genre of myth (or, more broadly, of metaphor), they disagree about the truth of the myth. The truth of the myth for Hick is that 'Jesus embodied, or incarnated, the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God, so that God was able to act through him, and he accordingly embodied a love which is a human reflection of the divine love.'⁵² For Avis, the truth of the myth is the identity of Jesus with God.⁵³

Assessing the truth of the myth is not my present concern, however, which is with the assertion that myths are true, but not literally true. What is meant by 'literal' here? According to the dictionary, the word 'literal' means 'taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or allegory.' To take myth literally is to take it 'at face value', as though it were a statement of scientific or historical fact. 'Exponents of the theory of myth,' writes Avis, 'insist with one voice that myths are always held by their adherents to be "historically" true. It is absolutely integral to the function of myth that the events it describes are believed to have really happened.'⁵⁴ All of this group take the myth of the incarnation as real, as if it were factually true, as if it really

⁴⁹ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 174.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵² Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, ix.

⁵³ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 173-174.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

happened. Jesus, a pre-existent divine person, '*really did*' come down from heaven; it '*really happened*', but '*how he got sucked down into a baby*' is a mystery.

It should be pointed out that when people say that they are speaking literally about God and God's action, very often they are using the word 'literally' merely to stress that they 'really' mean what they are saying about God. There is an important issue here in the philosophy of religious language. Brian Davies writes,

Someone might say, 'God is a mighty fortress'. We then ask, 'Is that really true? Is God made of stone, for example?' The answer will probably be: 'Of course not. I am speaking metaphorically'. . . . But suppose someone now says 'God is alive' or 'God is good'. Again we ask, 'Is that really true? Is he really alive and good? Or are we now using a figure of speech?'.⁵⁵

Davies uses the word 'really' to persuade us of the difference between analogical and, as he sees it, less useful metaphorical discourse. The classic doctrine of analogy undermines the straightforward choice between metaphorical and literal (in the sense of univocal) language. Analogy is taken by Thomists (and by Davies) to be a literal form of speech ('really' true), as distinguished from metaphor (not 'really' true), but it is not univocal (and in that sense not 'literally' true). 'Really' true should not therefore be made equivalent to 'literally' true. Taking cognisance of this analysis involves recognising that people may be speaking analogically when they say Jesus '*really did*' this or that, or that these things '*really happened*'. Their 'literal' speech may in fact be analogical speech. Anthony Harvey says it is arguable that the authors of the Chalcedonian Definition *intended* to say,

'It is as if the Son were of one substance with the Father' (where 'as if' is a way of recognising that a set of assumptions are being made which may not be true other than in an analogical sense) . . . and that it was the exigencies of subsequent

⁵⁵ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 22-23.

dogma which erected it into an expression of ultimate truth.⁵⁶

What is clear is that this group do not recognise the incarnation as myth. The idea that it should be interpreted according to the genre of myth is an anathema. The kenotic hymn of Phillipians 2:6-11 'is a fully fledged myth because of its narrative, spatio-temporal structure,' but my data show that its mythic status is not recognised.⁵⁷

Dorothy

'[Jesus] was the Son of God and yet he chose to be confined to a human body and, for me, that just seems so incredible, that he should...well...just how he did it really...logistically...you know...[laugh].'

'I feel that the pain that Jesus had to go through and the confinement to a body, of the Son of God must have been...well...very humbling for him. I mean...just how...it is hard to describe it. But the whole limitingness of the body, when you have been there from the beginning of creation...I think that is all quite hard to fathom really.'

Knox claims that kenotic christology is 'the perfect story,' but that 'this story cannot be subjected to the kind of critical reflection we ordinarily bring to bear on statements of fact and still seem true.' The story is true, but not 'in the same way narratives of actual incidents may be true, not to speak of scientific or metaphysical propositions.'⁵⁸

Hodgson asserts that today 'mythological thinking at the literal level' is no longer possible and advocates revising the myth of the incarnation in non-mythological terms.⁵⁹ Clearly, this group do not need the myth to be revised, but some in the sample do, as we shall see in the next chapter.

⁵⁶ Anthony Harvey, 'Christian Propositions and Christian Stories', in A. E. Harvey (ed.), *God Incarnate: Story and Belief* (London: SPCK, 1981), 3.

⁵⁷ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 174.

⁵⁸ Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, 96, 98.

⁵⁹ Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit*, 245.

Chapter 5

SCEPTICAL CHRISTOLOGY

Four of the sample have very serious doubts about or deny altogether the divinity of Jesus, whether this be substantively or adjectivally construed. They do not consider Jesus to be God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, incarnate (ontological christology), or God's Son created by God to be God's agent or representative on earth (functional christology). This percentage is very close to that reported by Ahern. Three out of the thirty respondents in his study doubted the divinity of Jesus.¹ Macquarrie writes, 'I do not think that, if we remain Christian, we can ever escape the fundamental paradox, that Jesus Christ is both human and divine' and he goes on to write that if the claim that Jesus is divine is denied, 'then Christianity collapses.'² But for this group, as for many academic theologians, denying the divinity of Jesus does not result in Christianity collapsing in their eyes. They can think of themselves as Christian without having to believe in a divine Jesus.

A problem with miracle

Scepticism and unbelief concerning miracle is, for this group, one cause of the divinity of Jesus being denied. Kathleen, for example, argues that Jesus would only be the Son of God because of the virginal conception, but she '*cannot believe in a virginal conception.*' She '*cannot take that on board at all*' and, therefore, she cannot believe that Jesus is the Son of God. She also doubts many of the other miraculous happenings, including the resurrection, and says she finds it very hard to believe that Jesus could have been divine. (She is prepared to accept some of the healing miracles.) The other three in this group all make similar comments. John talks about people he knows '*being*

¹ Ahern, *The Triune God in Hackney and Enfield*, 17. Julie Hopkins reports that six out of thirty women she interviewed, in a study of student ministers of the Dutch Gereformeerde Kerk, specifically denied that Christ is divine. But she also states that, 'Only five of the thirty women interviewed believed that Jesus is divine, the Son of God or our redeemer.' Unfortunately, she provides no further details (such as the referent of the term Christ, for example) to help explain her data. See Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis* (London: SPCK, 1995), 17.

² John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 17.

put off Christianity' and *'who don't come to church'* because they cannot believe in miracles such as the virgin birth and the physical resurrection. Unlike John, these people consider their admission of unbelief in respect of these miracles to be incompatible with a continued acceptance of the Christian faith. They think that they have to believe in these miracles to be a believing Christian. Many of the wider sample would agree with them. They too assert that *'you have to believe in these miracles if you are a Christian.'* This widespread assumption, that profession of faith depends on belief in miracles and adherence to particular doctrines, deserves further comment.

It is clear that in this scientific age many do find it impossible to believe in miracles. Their worldview, sometimes called the Newtonian worldview or simply the modern worldview, sees the universe as a closed system of cause and effect, operating in accord with natural laws. The resurrection and the virgin birth would disrupt this closed system of nature and therefore *'they can't have happened.'*³ Bultmann famously remarked that, 'It is impossible to use electric light and radio equipment and, when ill, to claim the assistance of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.'⁴ He argued that we should demythologize the New Testament, by translating its mythology (which includes miracles) into the language of existential (personal) decision. He insisted that demythologizing is necessary because the ancient worldview is no longer credible in the light of science and the modern worldview. The mythological language of the New Testament is misleading for the modern reader who simply cannot believe in a three-decker universe of heaven, earth and hell, and in miracles. He argued that the pre-existent Christ, virgin birth, atonement, and an objective resurrection should all be stripped away in order to save the essential message of the gospel for an age to which myth is alien. He wanted to remove barriers to the faith so that secular people could

³ Some might argue that these people are operating with an outdated view of science. For example, quantum science means that people can/should now believe in miracles and they need to be persuaded to do so. Keith Ward argues that problems with miracle arise from a misperception of scientific knowledge and of the personal nature of God. See Ward, *Divine Action* (London: Collins, 1990), esp. chapters 5 and 10. For a survey of various approaches to miracles from biblical times to the present day, by theologians, philosophers and scientists, see Ernst and Marie-Luise Keller, *Miracles in Dispute: A Continuing Debate*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1969).

⁴ Rudolph Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in Hans-Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1962), vol. 1, 5.

make an authentic decision for Christ and pleaded for a presentation of the kerygma divested of its supernaturalistic and mythical trappings, for these are embellishments that do not belong to the original kerygma.⁵

Others argue that the myth is indispensable. Losing the myth would mean losing the narrative as well.⁶ What is required to make the Christian faith credible to the nonbelieving public is not demythologisation but deliteralisation: the myth should be kept but not read literally. It should be read *as myth*, as a symbolic narrative. For Hodgson,

‘Demythologizing’ involves recognising [the] mythical structure, recognising that, in terms of literal descriptive reference, myths are not ‘true’ as they once were thought to be, but recognising that, in terms of metaphorical, symbolic, ‘fictional’ reference, they offer profound and subtle interpretations of basic aspects of human religious experience, interpretations that cannot be duplicated in more abstract, conceptual discourse.⁷

It has been suggested that ‘the task of apologetics, at a fairly sophisticated level, among the intelligensia, would be helped by a sensible deployment of “myth” and at a more popular level, in view of the common association of myth with falsehood, ‘its equivalentents “parable” and “symbolic narrative” should be used.⁸ One of the difficulties with this approach is that in the secular societies of the West people have, it is said, also lost the capacity of symbolic imagination. They cannot read myth except in a naive literalist fashion. Avis complains that ‘one of the greatest stumbling blocks . . . to Christian belief in the modern world is the gross literalism with which those both inside and outside the Church take the Bible and Christian doctrine.’⁹ Some of the sample who cannot believe in miracle effectively demythologize, saying they could ‘*strip away the*

⁵ Ibid., 1-44.

⁶ See, for example, Sykes, ‘The Incarnation as the Foundation of the Church’, 122-124. Sykes argues that some stories cannot be re-written in a non-story form without loss and insists that the story of the incarnation is indispensable.

⁷ Hodgson, *The Winds of the Spirit*, 244.

⁸ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 166-167.

⁹ Ibid., 166.

ornament' or 'do away with the miraculous bits', whereas others say that the miraculous stories 'are symbolic' and should be kept. The capacity for symbolic imagination is clearly not entirely lost, as these extracts from John's interview illustrate. He says:

'Once you start stripping away, you finish up with very little.'
'I like [Christianity] because of its magical side. There are so many aspects that one can look at and it is not what it would be if we stripped away all the additions... We would only be left with the bare bones of the thing which people wouldn't relate to at all. It would have no emotional impact.'
'If you can't take the birth story or the resurrection story, don't let it put you off.'
'What I'm trying to do in my exploring of Christianity... is to ignore the things that... a bit like David Jenkins said... if that offends you ignore it, but do try to find the truth.'

Both demythologisation and deliteralisation enable the difficulties that many people have with miracle to be bypassed. Without this kind of approach, the miraculous happenings will, for many, continue to be a serious barrier to accepting Christian faith. To insist, or at least give the impression, that everyone 'has to believe in the miracles' is, in my view, a mistake. It simply is not necessary to tie up profession of faith with belief in miracles. Doing so only serves to alienate those who might otherwise be attracted to it.¹⁰ Haight argues that when Christian faith is equated with holding certain beliefs, 'beliefs are given the status of faith and masquerade as faith itself.' This is, he says, an all too common and prevalent phenomenon. Faith itself tends to be 'confused with, collapsed into, and mistaken' for holding onto a set of beliefs, so that faith, which is now belief, means assenting to a set of propositions. When assent can no longer be given because a belief no longer appears credible from the point of view of what is known through science or other forms of critical reasoning, then faith itself is threatened or even lost. Equating faith with belief in this way results in many people leaving the church (or never joining it) because they cannot give assent to the set of propositions. What is left, says Haight provocatively, 'is a community of closed, eviscerated and impoverished faith isolated from the world on the basis of archaic beliefs.'¹¹ Philip Richter's and Leslie Francis' study of church leavers has shown that

¹⁰ David Jenkins makes the same point. See David E. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987), chapter 2.

¹¹ Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, 35-37.



loss of faith, due in part to no longer believing in the church's teachings, is one of the main reasons for church leaving.¹²

For the majority of my sample, however, miracles are integral to the substance of their faith. They appeal to the miracles, particularly the resurrection, as confirmation of the divinity of Jesus and the truth of the Christian faith, as generations before them have done. But for this present group, such an appeal would obviously be unconvincing because they do not believe that these miracles occurred (except for some healing miracles). For those who wish to promote the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, considering it to be an indispensable element of the Christian faith, the data suggest that the doctrine must be defended on grounds other than miracle if it is to stand any chance of being accepted by the likes of people in this group. However, it is difficult to imagine any apologetic succeeding here, since none of this group need Jesus to be divine. They neither need nor want a divine redeemer who came into the world to die for the sins of the world. Their words seem to imply that they can manage perfectly well with a non-divine Jesus whose significance resides primarily in his life and teachings.

History challenges dogma

This group's rejection of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus is not based solely on an inability to believe in miracle. All of this group have been influenced in their thinking about Jesus by books they have read on the historical Jesus and Christian origins. The reading they have done has always challenged rather than affirmed the traditional christological teaching. A steady stream of popular books about the historical Jesus have recently been published. One such book is A. N. Wilson's *Jesus*, published in 1992, which all four of this group have read.¹³ These popular writings invariably attract media attention because of the sensationalist claims they make. One of Wilson's central claims is that the man whose birth is celebrated each year at Christmas would have been horrified at the very thought of people worshipping him as the Son of God. The real

¹² Philip Richter and Leslie J. Francis, *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), 27-38 and 136-141.

¹³ A. N. Wilson, *Jesus* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992).

historical Jesus, he claims, has nothing to do with the Christ-figure of Christianity. The layers of dogma and imagery hide the real Jesus who was a simple Galilean holy man who would have been horrified at what is now done in his name. Wilson considers Paul to be the real inventor of 'Christianity' as we know it. Paul took the message of Jesus and distorted it into a pagan-style religion with Jesus as a pagan-style divine figure. The influence of Wilson can possibly be detected in the following comments.

Ben

'I am prepared to accept that [Jesus] got in the way of the powers that be in those days and he paid the price for it. I am very much prepared then to accept that Jesus Christ was martyred. I accept the rolling away of the stone from the tomb and his disappearance. I don't put any more emphasis on that, than that. I then go on over the next few years to regard someone like St. Paul, as being one of the best spin-doctors of the time. I think there is no doubt about that. And I suspect that without him, and like people, I don't say Christianity would have died a death, but it would have struggled to the pre-eminence it gained, certainly in a massive area of the world then and now.'

John

'I think the way that I see it is that Jesus died for his cause and his cause was to open up Judaism and to take it back to its roots.'

'The time was perfect for that to happen in the Jewish faith...people were looking for something else. So I think it was time in a sense for somebody to be highlighted.'

'[Jesus] wasn't actually anti-Jewish, he was just pointing out the weak spots and the need to open up the strict rules because they were getting in the way of faith...so it was a small group and those who were left, his closest, formulated and wrote down stories. Paul, with his great missionary zeal, he went off and planted these seeds in other places and this is what people were looking for.'

'I believe Paul constructed a lot of the writings...and so I think the Trinity really comes from his Greek background.'

According to Wilson, the Gospels may contain glimpses of truth, but they are severely distorted and cannot be trusted as history. Most of Wilson's ideas are, of course, by no means new, and his portrait of Jesus is quite like that of H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768), the German sceptic and founder of the so-called 'Quest for the historical Jesus.'

Reimarus was the first explicitly to approach the question of who Jesus was from a historical-critical viewpoint. He declared that if serious historical questions were asked about Jesus, then the discovery would be made that the church's claims about Jesus were false. Jesus was not a 'divine' figure at all: he was a Jewish revolutionary who died a failure and his disciples invented the idea of the resurrection of Jesus, in order to cover up the embarrassment caused by his death. On this account, the New Testament

portrayal of Jesus is largely a dogmatic invention.¹⁴ Reimarus raised questions which continue to be asked by historians of Jesus today: Who was Jesus really? And is the historical Jesus compatible with the interpretation which the Christian church has put upon him? Was the Jesus of history who the texts and the creeds say he was?

Wilson is a novelist, journalist, and prize-winning writer of biographies, not an academic in the field. N. T. Wright, one of the more conservative scholars of the so-called Third Quest, which began in the early 1980s, rather contemptuously refers to Wilson as one of 'the recent maverick popularizers' whose portrait of Jesus should be resisted 'in the name of serious history.'¹⁵ He argues that Wilson's portrait is a bad one, based partly on a total misreading of what first-century Judaism was actually like, and an out-dated and now almost entirely discredited view of how to read Paul.¹⁶ None of this group reported being disturbed or unsettled by Wilson's portrait of Jesus, and the data suggest that the book helped rather than hindered their faith because it sanctioned doubts that they already had about the traditional christological teaching, doubts brought on, in part, by difficulties with miracle. Linda said, *'[A. N. Wilson's] quite controversial, because people say that once you have read him you sort of lose your faith, but then I would say it has deepened mine.'* She talked about doubting the historicity of much of the gospel writings, *'but...that doesn't make my faith any less, but...I sort of question it.'*

So each member of this group allows historical research (of a certain sort) a place in christology. They have a view of Jesus which has been influenced by Wilson/Reimarus. This view assumes a discrepancy between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the New Testament. By contrast, most Christians, like most of the sample, assume the historical reliability of the gospels. They do not think they have any reason to doubt that the

¹⁴ See Charles H. Talbert (ed.), *Reimarus: Fragments*, trans. Ralph S. Fraser (London: SCM Press, 1971).

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 1992), viii, 18. For a survey of the 200-year-old modern search for the historical Jesus, see Wright's more scholarly work, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), Part I. See also, Thomas P. Rausch SJ, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 2003), 9-22 and James Carleton Paget, 'Quests for the Historical Jesus', in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 138-155. For a detailed survey of the so-called Third Quest, see Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2nd ed. 1997).

¹⁶ Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 37-64.

narratives are anything other than historically accurate records of what Jesus said and did, so that the Jesus of history is indistinguishable from the Jesus of the New Testament. They assume an identity between the individual from the first century and what the texts, and indeed the creeds, claim about him.¹⁷ But this group do not. They think the Jesus of history was a Jewish religious leader, teacher, healer and mystic, not God incarnate or God's Son. However, their certainty on this matter is not absolute. Most want to leave open the possibility that Jesus might have been who the gospels and the creeds proclaim him to be. They want to keep '*an open mind*' on the issue and their denials of the divinity of Jesus are often qualified. For example, at the end of his interview Ben says, '*Jesus may have swooped down and been put on this earth. Who knows, they might be right. It might all be true.*' (This comment illustrates just how misleading the mythological language can be.)

Liberal tendencies

Any theology that attempts to establish the grounds of authority for religious believing on some basis other than scripture and tradition (such as historical scholarship) can be classified as belonging to the liberal tradition. This tradition has its roots in the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Briefly, the Enlightenment was a declaration of independence by the human subject, from every limitation but faithfulness to him/herself. There was a 'turn to the subject' as the grounds of authority for authentic knowledge. Rationalists located the grounds for authority within the mind or intellect of the subject, claiming that authentic knowledge could be gained by reason and reason alone. Empiricists, on the other hand, appealed to experience and the senses as the locus of authority for authentic knowledge. Any appeal to an external or revealed authority (such as scripture or tradition) was viewed with suspicion and Christianity, including classical christology, was subjected to a devastating critique on several fronts by both rationalists and empiricists.¹⁸ Reimarus,

¹⁷ On this theme, see Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 20-21 .

¹⁸ See the references cited above, p. 10(n23). For a general overview of the Enlightenment critique of Christian theology, see also, McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 81-86 and Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson, 'Scripture and Tradition', in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Tasks* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 46-55. For a more detailed account, see

for example, placed reason firmly above revelation and argued that critical reason was supremely qualified to judge Christian beliefs and practices, with a view to eliminating any irrational or superstitious elements. Where Christian truth-claims were in potential or actual conflict with the truth-claims of reason or experience, then the latter were given ultimate authority.

The liberal tradition in theology developed in response to the outlook of the Enlightenment and is characterised by a willingness to subject Christian truth-claims to the bar of reason and experience and to take account of the claims of modern knowledge, whether from the side of history, literary criticism, the natural sciences or, more recently, the human sciences.¹⁹ The liberal approach is best described as an attitude, a mentality, rather than a set of identifiable beliefs; more a matter of style than content. John Habgood characterises the liberal theological attitude in positive terms, as representing 'an openness in the search for truth' which 'entails a positive, but again critical, approach to secular knowledge.'²⁰ Stephen Sykes, on the other hand, defines theological liberalism in more negative terms, saying,

Liberalism in theology is that mood or cast of mind which is prepared to accept that some discovery of reason may count *against* the authority of a traditional affirmation in the body of Christian theology. One is a theological liberal if one allows autonomously functioning reason to supply arguments against traditional beliefs and if one's reformulation of Christian belief provides evidence that one has ceased to believe what has been traditionally believed by Christians.²¹

This suggests some disapproval of the attitude adopted earlier towards miracles, which Habgood would not appear to share. Theological liberalism is commonly perceived to be subversive of Christian faith, serving only to erode the traditional Christian beliefs

Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* and Franklin L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960).

¹⁹ Leslie Houlden, 'Liberalism: Britain', in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 320-325. See also, John Saxbee, *Liberal Evangelism* (London: SPCK, 1994), esp. chapter 2. Theological liberalism has not gone unchallenged. Criticisms have come from postmodern, radical (anti-realist) and postliberal perspectives.

²⁰ John Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal* (London: SPCK, 1988), 2.

²¹ S.W. Sykes, *Christian Theology Today* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1971), 12.

(such as belief in the virgin birth and the physical resurrection). Champions of liberalism dispute this, of course, arguing that far from seeking to water down Christian belief, they have only sought to make it credible in post-Enlightenment contexts. From its outset theological liberalism has been committed to bridging the gap between Christian faith and modern knowledge (à la Bultmann).

None of this group identifies himself or herself as liberals, but they clearly all exhibit liberal theological tendencies. Such tendencies are not, of course, confined to this group. It is possible to be a fairly orthodox believer and exhibit liberal tendencies. Charles, for example, is one of the orthodox believers who remains fully committed to the orthodox christological doctrines, but is unable to accept the miracles of the virgin birth and physical resurrection. Habgood describes himself as a 'conservative liberal' and such a label may be appropriate for Charles as well. Such people want to remain open to the truth-claims of Enlightenment modernism, taking account of scientific advances and historical consciousness, but at the same time want to 'treasure what is given by tradition' and are not prepared to surrender the truth-claims of the traditional orthodox christological formulations.²² By contrast, this group *are* prepared to surrender these truth-claims and are therefore best described as *radical liberals*.

Radical liberal christology

The dominant strand within liberal theology has *not* been to cede the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, but to reinterpret it. Schleiermacher, the founding father of liberal theology, offered a severe critique of Chalcedon and its doctrine of the two natures, but he attempted to reformulate the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus rather than discard it. Many present-day theologians, whose christology is classified as liberal, give high regard, if not normative status, to the guidelines of Nicea and Chalcedon when it comes to constructing their christologies. They do not want to dissolve the paradox of the one person who is both fully human and fully divine and so they seek to find ways of speaking of the divinity of Jesus Christ which do not rely on 'obscurantist metaphysics'

²² Habgood, *Confessions of a Conservative Liberal*, 2-3.

and the language of substance or being.²³ The divinity of Jesus is something that they redefine and defend in other terms. We have already come across this type of reformulating liberal christology in chapter 3; functional christologies are all of this type. Typically functional christologies begin, using the popular terminology, 'from below', from the human side of the paradox, and then proceed to fathoming the divine side. When the move to the divine side is made, the divinity of Jesus is often maintained by claiming, in one way or another, that Jesus has in full what the rest of humanity only has in part. In other words, the divinity of Jesus is redefined in terms of Jesus possessing to the fullest extent certain qualities which humanity as a whole can hope to emulate.

However, the group being analysed in this chapter do not make any move 'to the divine side' at all. They talk about a human Jesus only and are extremely reticent about speaking of any special activity of God in Jesus, or of a distinct divine presence in him, or of his incarnating in full what the rest of humanity only incarnates in part. Two of the group are prepared to go as far as saying that Jesus *'could have been chosen by God.'* Kathleen says:

'[Jesus] could...God could have...well I think given what has happened through the centuries and since...it could well be and I am prepared to accept that he is the man that God chose to create this religion, this set of beliefs that we now believe in, if you like. I am certainly prepared to accept that.'

Ben talks about Jesus being *'someone who was affected and influenced by what ever was put into his mind. And let's say it was God-given'*, and that he was *'something special'* and that perhaps *'from a mental standpoint, an intellectual standpoint he was different'* from everyone else. The line dividing Ben from some of the functionalists is very thin at this point, but he stops short of saying that Jesus was divine in any way. In this group the paradox of the God-man is dissolved by denying the divinity of Jesus. The divinity is neither defended or redefined, but rejected. Let us, for argument's sake, take Ben's idea of Jesus being different from everyone else *'from a mental standpoint'* and equate it with the concept of God-consciousness, which has been at the centre of

²³ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 98. See also 92-96.

liberal christologies since Schleiermacher. We could then say that Jesus was different from everyone else because of the quality of his God-consciousness. A theological liberal, who wants to remain loyal to Chalcedon, might then argue that because of the perfection of his God-consciousness, Jesus is fully God. D. M. Baillie, for example, does this. He uses the concept of a perfect God-consciousness in Jesus to speak about the full divinity of Jesus. He wants to make Jesus utterly unique by making the degree of his God-consciousness (understood in terms of the paradox of grace) a difference in kind and not just degree.²⁴ But none of this group would make that kind of move. They do not conclude that Jesus is different in kind and thereby fully divine, because he happens to be, in some way or other, different in degree. This kind of thinking was present among the functional group, but it is absent here.

The functionalists speak about the divinity of Jesus in the style of the liberal reformulators, that is, in terms of divine activity and presence and/or in the sense of Jesus embodying or exemplifying certain qualities. But this group do not speak about the divinity of Jesus at all. They are much closer to the radical than to the reformulating liberals. The radical liberal approach eschews Chalcedon altogether, abandoning any claims of uniqueness and divinity for Jesus. Hick (a radical), for example, criticises Baillie (a reformulator) for claiming uniqueness for Jesus, arguing that any christology based on the theme of God-consciousness, of humanity as responsive to God's grace, does not by itself entail that Jesus is unique. For Hick, the interaction of the divine and the human in the life of Jesus is not something that in principle is unique. It is 'a special instance' of an interaction 'which occurs in many different ways and degrees in all human openness to God's presence', and it is a mistake to single Jesus out as the supreme point of contact between God and humankind.²⁵ Hick opts instead for 'a non-traditional Christianity' based upon an understanding of Jesus as someone who embodied, or incarnated, the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God, but who was not 'the locus of final revelation and purveyor of the only salvation possible

²⁴ D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London, Faber and Faber, 3rd ed. 1961), esp. chapter 5. For a critique of Baillie's christology, see Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 94-96 and Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 106-111.

²⁵ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 109-110. See also, Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 82-94.

for all human beings.²⁶

Ben, similarly, does not consider that Jesus' being different from everyone else '*from a mental standpoint*' counts as Jesus being fully divine. He does not conclude that Jesus is fully divine or fully God, because he happens to be different from other human beings. He does not look for divinity in the unique quality of his life on earth. Even if it could be proved that Jesus was indeed more open to God's presence, or different '*from a mental standpoint*' to everyone else (and there is no way of establishing on historical grounds that this was the case²⁷), this would only count as Jesus being fully divine or fully God because that is what had already been chosen to count as Jesus being fully divine or fully God.²⁸ This group do not allow *anything* to count as Jesus being divine. John is the most avowedly humanistic of all and his understanding of Jesus has many similarities with that of Hick. It is to a discussion of John's christology that I now turn.

Jesus the representative human

John has also read more scholarly works on the historical Jesus and Christian origins over recent years and has invested considerable time and energy into thinking about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.²⁹ He has reached some provisional conclusions.

'I think I see [Jesus] as an encapsulation of every man and woman if you like, in that he's faced in his life with so many situations that...it's rarely situations that I have actually faced, except in a very watered-down strength. You read every day in the newspaper people facing situations...standing up for what they believe or fighting administrations, governments, harsh treatment, that kind of thing...so I don't actually see Jesus as the Son of God. I see him as a son of God in that I am a son of God. That fact, I think, doesn't devalue my Christian faith, which is really in the words and the life-style of this man Jesus and I could, with a kind of distorted view, see myself in every situation that he finds himself in...as with the Apostles...people like Peter...when you do let down friends...it is all there. So it has really got every situation that you are likely to find yourself in and the suffering at the end...I think we nearly all of us suffer at some stage, perhaps not to the extent that Christ had to,...the loss of a partner, serious illnesses, things like that...And the fact that he has gone before and you see that there are ways of handling it...is a comfort and the great strength of Christianity.'

²⁶ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, ix.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, 110-111.

²⁸ Cf. See above, p. 92-93.

²⁹ Again the question arises, is John an ordinary theologian then? See above, p. 80(n2).

He later adds that *'Jesus is me and you and everybody else'* and agrees with the statement that Jesus is the *ideal*, the representative human. John places Jesus solely in the category of human being. Jesus, in his lifetime, was an exceptional human being, a rabbi, who died for his cause, which was to open up Judaism. Later, during the early development of Christianity, he was transformed into a divine figure. But, Jesus' words and life-style still continue to inspire and empower human living today. The emphasis here is emphatically on the man Jesus: his words, his life and his faith. *'It's really the man Christ and his words and his life which are what make me a Christian.'* It is Jesus the man, not Jesus the divine redeemer, who is at the centre of this type of christology. John can do without miracle and dogma. It is Jesus the man that matters. Jesus is said to provide the pattern for authentic human living, showing by word and example how to live a fully human life. He is the icon of the true self; the clue to understanding what a human being is or can become.

This kind of christology emphasises the continuity between Jesus and other human beings. There is no 'ontological gap' between Jesus and other human beings.³⁰ Jesus may differ from other human beings in the extent to which he possesses certain qualities, such as his profound God-consciousness, but he is certainly not different in kind, and he is not necessarily different in degree from other significant religious figures. It is typical of liberal christologies generally to stress the continuity between the human and the divine. All human beings have the capacity for union with the divine. *'This is a potency that is present in all human nature.'*³¹ As John puts it, *'God is in all of us... we have all got God inside us.'* *'Whatever form God takes, it permeates us, rather like the sun, this is the life-force which is in all of us.'* The emphasis here is on incarnation in everyone, not just Jesus; the divinity in Jesus is the same as the divinity within every human being. But some human beings are more open and responsive to the divine presence than others and achieve a greater degree of union with God. Jesus was such a person. The quality of the divine-human interaction in Jesus was without doubt exceptional, but John makes no claims about the interaction between the divine and the

³⁰ To borrow a phrase from McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 310.

³¹ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 376.

human in Jesus being absolute or total or unparalleled elsewhere in creation. He says that Jesus is the channel through whom we have learnt this '*new way of living*', but we could have learnt it from another source. It was just that '*the time was perfect for that to happen in the Jewish faith.*' He goes on to say, '*So I think it was time in a sense for somebody to be highlighted. So, if it was a Ghandi-like figure, at that time, he would have become the son of God and I think that he was a son of God.*' Jesus just happened to be the right person in the right place at the right time. The followers of Jesus '*realised what a force they had here and so they interpreted it in a way that they felt was worthy of him and helpful to others.*' Jesus so embodied or incarnated the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God that he became paradigmatic for Christians, but, in principle, someone else could have done the same job.

In this christology, Jesus the exceptional rabbi has been transformed, not into God the Son, the Second Person of a divine Trinity come down to save the world through his atoning death, but into 'the representative human.' Several academic theologians have used this, or similar terminology, to describe Jesus. Jesus is 'the Archetypal Man'(Ritschl), 'the paradigm of humanity'(Schillebeeckx), 'the Man, the archetype of humanity', 'the representative human being' (Macquarrie), 'the proper man', 'the completely integrated self'(Robinson), to give just a few examples.³² What does it mean to speak of Jesus in this way? Each theologian gives his own nuanced account, spelling out in some detail what is entailed in the claim that Jesus stands for or represents humanity as a whole. All recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of humanity, the representative of that authentic humanity which is striving for expression in every human person. As Robinson puts it, 'We see in him what each of us could be - in his own unique way.' He is the man 'in whom we can glimpse a vision' of what is possible.³³ Linda, one of this group, sees in Jesus '*the truly spiritual person.*' She also sees this characteristic in varying degrees in the lives of other people and longs to be like this herself. She sees Jesus as embodying the ideal human-divine relationship and as someone who mediates God's presence in a particularly powerful way, just as other

³² All of the theologians listed here are reformulating liberals. They want to maintain the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. The concept of divinity is generally adjusted to fit with what they say about Jesus' humanity.

³³ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 73.

spiritual people do today.

Hick sees in Jesus someone 'who was exceptionally open to the divine presence and who thus incarnated to a high degree the ideal of human life lived in response to the Real.'³⁴ He also calls Jesus 'the representative human' and talks about his being someone who lived in so intense and empowering an experience of the divine presence that in Jesus' presence God became a living reality to many of his hearers, and his words and life continue today to make God real to those who are inspired by him.³⁵ He says, 'Jesus' life embodied a love that is a reflection of the divine love, and that the ideal of humanity living in response to God was, to a startling extent, embodied, incarnated, in his life, so that we may take him as our lord, guru, spiritual leader.'³⁶

John talks about honouring Jesus and interprets worship of Jesus as '*putting-oneself-in-a-relationship with Jesus.*' Worship of Jesus is '*just relating very closely to that person and so the way I interpret it is I'm getting close to Jesus and everything that he stood for which is the whole of mankind really.*' Jesus is to be revered as the leader and founder of this new way of living founded on forgiveness and love and John's intention is to follow the same path, but so often '*the human frailty [prevents us] from going all the way.*'

Human not divine

So for this group, Jesus' significance lies in his humanity not his divinity, and in his status as the representative human not the supernatural redeemer of humanity. The emphasis falls full square on Jesus the human being who had real life experiences like ours and a sense of God like ours. The man Jesus - with his message, his conduct, and his fate - 'offers the supremely concrete criterion by which human beings can take their bearings.'³⁷ He also points to God and stimulates the Christian to become engaged with the reality of God. Jesus '*assists belief in God.*' But he does not have to be God to do all of this.

³⁴ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 152.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁷ K ung, *Credo*, 47.

For those who want to remain loyal to Chalcedon, there has to be talk of christology 'from above'; of God's place in it all. There has to be some way of saying that, 'All this is from God' (2 Cor. 5:18). But all such talk is virtually absent from this group. They do not use two languages to speak about Jesus, only one. Robinson argues that Jesus is the human person of whom 'we must use two languages, man-language and God-language', because 'Jesus' words and works are not simply those of any man faithful and open to God but the self-expression of God acting in him and through him.'³⁸ But this group hardly talk about the God-side of Jesus at all. There is no talk about Jesus 'coming from God' or 'being sent by God', or of his 'acting for God.' It is the absence of this kind of discourse which decisively distinguishes this group from the functional group, all of whom used God-language to talk about Jesus, interpreting Jesus by reference to God. In this group the standpoint is decidedly human. Jesus is considered to be the representative human, not God's representative: the emphasis is from the bottom up and never from the top down. There is little talk about what God was doing in him and through him.

Traditionally the incarnation has always been regarded as the supreme act of God in human history. God acted in and through Jesus in a decisive and special way to redeem the world. But the emphasis in this group is on general as opposed to special revelation. We have already seen that John does not consider the Jesus-event to be a special and unrepeatable act of God. He has a very strong sense of the immanence of God and of the continuity between God and the world. The liberal approach to God's action in the world is to favour some kind of continuity between the divine and the human rather than a radical discontinuity. There is a sense of the 'naturalness' of God's activity in the world in distinction from supernatural, otherworldly, in-breaking, invading activity of God.³⁹ From this perspective, Jesus becomes a model, an example, a pattern of the universal principle of God's incarnation in all things. Critics of this approach claim that such a Jesus is not special enough or divine enough to be a saviour. Pinnock complains that liberals 'see redemptive grace everywhere in the world in principle quite independent of Jesus, though evoked for us by him. God's grace is independent of Jesus

³⁸ Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 113. See also 114-125.

³⁹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 98.

in principle. He does not in any way cause that grace to exist. Rather, he is the symbol of it and the sacrament of it [Liberal christology] is really a pattern Christology, not a decisive event.⁴⁰

But this group seem to manage perfectly well with a pattern christology and a non-divine Jesus. Such a christology is religiously adequate for them. The key question at the heart of all christologies since the early church has been, 'What kind of Jesus is necessary for salvation?' Inbody claims that, 'Regardless of what scripture and tradition teach, we will not let Jesus Christ be anything more or anything less than we think we need for our salvation.'⁴¹ This group do not need Jesus to be divine to give weight or authority to his role as the representative human. But to dismiss this christology as one that simply regards Jesus as 'just a good man' or 'a mere man' is a travesty. Such facile conclusions fail to take any account of the impact of Jesus on the religious consciousness and moral life and practice of the believer. There is no reason to suppose that Jesus has any less impact on an unorthodox, as opposed to an orthodox believer, as the following soteriological chapters will illustrate.

⁴⁰ Pinnock, *Theological Crossfire*, 173.

⁴¹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 104.

Chapter 6

THREE SOTERIOLOGIES

As was stated in chapter 1, the main soteriological aim of the interview was to explore what meanings, if any, the interviewees attach to the death of Jesus and the claim that Jesus is saviour. Do they adhere to the classic theology of the cross? Can they give an account of how the cross is salvific? In this chapter I will examine the three main theologies of the cross operating in the sample and in the next chapter I will look at some of the soteriological difficulties encountered by the sample. I will begin with exemplarist interpretations of the cross.

EXEMPLARIST SOTERIOLOGY

A martyr's death

Six of the sample - the four with a sceptical christology and two with a functional christology (both men) - articulated a clear exemplarist theology of the cross. These interviewees all considered the death of Jesus to be a martyr's death, talking about Jesus as a martyr to his cause.

Bruce

'Having got the message across, [Jesus] has still not quite got there with everybody...for very understandable political reasons. You can see how it all ended up like that.'

'Jesus was a threat. There is no doubt about it. By both the Pharisees and some of the Roman rulers.'

Richard

'[Jesus] was viewed as a subversive and yet he had the courage to stand by his beliefs right the way to the very end...he didn't waver from his faith and his calling. He had a greater sense that what he was doing was right and he had the courage to do that...he stood up for what was right.'

'[Jesus] was upsetting the status quo and people didn't like that. The more influential people who were being disturbed from making their money, clearly, I think, colluded with the Romans to have him caught and betrayed and eventually put to death.'

Kathleen

'[Jesus] was a martyr for his cause if you like. And I think what he is saying is...even if it gets really difficult you shouldn't back-peddle just because it is expedient to do so...we should stand up and be counted.'

Ben

'The cross is symbolic of Jesus' martyrdom.'

This group offer an historical construal of Jesus' death, offering historical reasons and motives for Jesus' being put to death. Jesus' death was due to his preaching and his actions, which brought him into conflict with both the religious and the civil authorities of his time. Jesus confronted people or challenged their interests. It was his prophetic teaching and ministerial action that caused his execution.¹ Jesus' death was a function of the radicality and seriousness of his message and of his fidelity to his mission or cause, which was 'to bring people back to God.' According to Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'it was [Jesus'] life-praxis as a totality, his radical solidarity with the Father and with the outcasts of his society, a solidarity expressed in his communicative words and actions, that lead to his death.'² Jesus' death was a function of the life he lived. Seen from this perspective, Jesus' death remains connected to the whole of his life. It is not separated off and made a datum of reflection in itself. Borg talks of Jesus dying as a martyr, not as a victim. He writes:

A martyr is killed because he or she stands for something. Jesus was killed because he stood against the kingdoms of this world and for an alternative social vision grounded in the kingdom of God. The domination system killed Jesus as the prophet of the kingdom of God. This is the political meaning of Good Friday.³

It has been suggested that any authentic religious leader who embodies or incarnates the

¹ Reconstructing in any exact fashion the motives for the decisions that led to Jesus' death is impossible. As Gerard S. Sloyan writes, 'It is impossible to conclude from the Gospels what sequence of events brought Jesus to the cross.' See Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1995), 40.

² Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Critical Social Theory and Christology: Toward an Understanding of Atonement and Redemption as Emancipatory Solidarity', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 30 (1975), 104.

³ Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 91.

message they proclaim would be willing, if necessary, to be martyred by those who reject the challenging truths that he or she proclaims, so that there was 'a tragic appropriateness' in the death of Jesus, just as there was in the case of, say, the modern leaders Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King.⁴ Jesus' death was not necessary in order for a divine purpose to be accomplished. Rather it was the inevitable result of the cause to which he gave his life. 'You can see how it all ended up like that.' That there was a certain inevitability in Jesus' death discloses something rather terrifying about the human condition. Jesus' death 'unmasks our fundamental human condition' and is 'unqualified evidence that the world stands in need of redemption. As unbridled violence against the innocent one, the cross lays completely bare the dark chasms of the human heart.'⁵ Jesus' death symbolises '*man's inhumanity to man*' and exposes the truth about the sinful condition of humanity, bringing out clearly into the open the vicious nature of human sin and the end to which it leads. Seen from this perspective, the cross can in itself cause repentance. Auguste Sabatier wrote that Jesus' passion and death 'was the most powerful call to repentance that humanity has ever heard.'⁶

For this group the crucifixion of Jesus is a symbol of historical evil trying to overcome good; of self-giving love; of active fidelity, commitment and obedience to a cause; and of the strength of Jesus' attachment to God. Many assert that the cross has continued to be the central Christian symbol because it stirs deeper and more complex emotions than can be captured by any doctrine or theory. The impression made by the crucifixion of one who was so close to God cannot be fully articulated. The felt impact of Jesus' death can never be exhausted, 'for the voluntary acceptance of death by a holy person has a moral power that reverberates beyond any words that we can frame to express it.' When anyone knowingly gives their life for the sake of another, 'something has happened that is awe-inspiring and, in an indefinable way, enriching and enhancing to the human community. And so it was with the death of Jesus.' The voluntary sacrifice of a holy life challenges and inspires 'in a way that transcends words,' so that the meaning of the

⁴ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 131.

⁵ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 158.

⁶ Auguste Sabatier, *The Doctrine of the Atonement and its Historical Evolution* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 127.

cross cannot be reduced to 'any culture-bound theological theory.'⁷

An exemplarist interpretation of the cross

Most of this group reject outright the traditional interpretation of the death of Jesus as an atonement for human sin. They take an exemplary view of the saving work of Jesus. Exemplarist soteriology has little room for such concepts as justification - of being accounted righteous in the eyes of God, or substitution - of Jesus taking our place in bearing the penalty of sin. They do not understand the death of Jesus in these terms at all. They interpret the phrase 'Jesus died to save us from our sins' in the following way:

Richard

'I do believe he died to try and save us...to take us away from that sort of sinful behaviour.'

Kathleen

'He wanted us to change...he wanted us to rethink our values.'

John

'It isn't that he takes our sins...I see it in a different kind of way.'

'When we say he died for us and took away our sins, I think I see it as...I can't quite find the words to express it...but it is the same as seeing other people go through a very hard time in that you are actually with them.'

'I think by seeing Christ on the cross...the removal of our sins...I don't think it wipes out anything that we have done wrong at all...um...putting it in the eyes of God that we have been forgiven...is a helpful way of your feeling better about yourself...but you still have to face up to the people that you have hurt or whatever...it doesn't alter that at all.'

Bruce

'[It is] much more of a statement about dying for people.'

'[It is about] the ultimate sacrifice.'

Bruce finds the analogy of people in war who sacrifice their lives for others, a helpful one for making sense of how Jesus' death can be said to save us. Jesus' death '*was a bigger version of that kind of thing.*' Bruce does not consider the cross '*to have taken sin away.*'

⁷ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 131-132.

Ben

'We have translated his death into that sort of phraseology. It is how we want to see it.'

For Ben, forgiveness does not come through the cross. Forgiveness is something we *'hope and pray for.'*

'Jesus died to save us from our sins' is always given an exemplarist interpretation for which the death of Jesus does not provide the basis that enables God to forgive sin. Salvation does not depend on what Jesus is said to have accomplished on the cross; for this group the salvific possibilities of the cross lie in a completely different direction altogether. Salvation, for those who are happy to use the term (and not all are), issues from the new possibilities for human existence that the ministry, life and death of Jesus open up. Jesus *'shows us how to live'* and in that way he is a saviour.⁸ Following Jesus' way results in salvation. As Richard puts it,

'If we conducted ourselves in the manner and the example that he did, we would be saved. We would not commit any of the sins of the nature that he is illustrating. And life and the world would be a much better place.'

[Salvation from sin is] 'salvation from a community almost eating itself or degenerating...salvation from sort of moral or physical standards...um...those would seem to be the two sort of key areas that I would see.'

The womanist theologian Delores Williams makes the same point, insisting that Jesus came to show humans life: to show redemption through a perfect vision of right relations with God, creation, neighbour and self. She writes:

Redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life. Redemption had to do with God, through the *ministerial* vision, giving humankind the ethical thought and practice upon which to build a positive, productive quality of life.⁹

It is Jesus' whole life that is constitutive of salvation and not just his death. The cross,

⁸ This theme is explored further in chapter 8.

⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993), 165. For her outline of Jesus' ministerial vision, see 167.

in itself, does not redeem humanity; it has soteriological significance only in the context of Jesus' life as its climax and summation. Salvation consists in the transformation from destructive patterns of living to creative ones, inspired by Jesus' vision of right relations with God, creation, neighbour and self. This way of approaching salvation is more akin to the approach of Eastern Christianity, which sees salvation as the gradual transformation of human beings into the 'likeness' of God, where 'likeness' refers to 'assimilation to God through virtue' (St. John of Damascus). This 'assimilation to God' was also frequently called deification (Greek *theosis*). Deification is for Orthodoxy the goal of every Christian, to be reached by the faithful following of Christ within the common life of the church.¹⁰ This Eastern understanding of salvation contrasts with the classic or Western/Latin view, which considers salvation to hinge upon an atoning transaction that enables God to forgive the fallen human race.¹¹

Exemplarist theories of atonement see the significance of the cross in terms of its effect on human beings rather than on God. For this reason they are also spoken of as 'subjective' theories.¹² In exemplarist theories of atonement the cross has 'no transcendent value or reference; its value relates directly to its impact upon humanity.'¹³ Transcendent or 'objective' elements - such as the idea of a sacrifice which has some impact upon God, or Jesus dying in order to pay some penalty or satisfaction due for sin - are not part of exemplarist theories. The emphasis is on the subjective impact of Jesus' death upon human beings and on salvation as a process in present human experience. The impact of Jesus' death upon human beings cannot be fully delineated. As the data above show, it can take the form of inspiration and encouragement to the believer to model herself upon the moral and/or religious example of Jesus. It can also take the form of inspiration and encouragement to persevere in situations of human suffering.

¹⁰ See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 216-242; Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1975), 97-110; Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

¹¹ See Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, esp. 38-40 and 94-95. See also, Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 129-131.

¹² They are also called 'humanistic' or 'liberal' or 'moral influence' theories.

¹³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 356.

John, who spoke of Jesus as 'the representative human,' talks about the cross being symbolic of human suffering. Jesus represents humanity and as such, '*He is us in that situation*' so that '*I really see myself on the cross, having stood up for something that...like possibly during the war-time or whatever.*' Jesus' suffering '*is something that I can share in, although I am not experiencing the full horror of it and so in a way it is relieving something out of me.*' The cross '*is a help. A release I think of the pressure that is on you...to share the experience of somebody else...Christ's crucifixion was a very public death and therefore his experiences were being shared. The Bible shares them with us. If we share serious problems with other people then it will help and it is a pattern to follow.*'

Identification with Jesus lies at the heart of this soteriology. For John, identifying with Jesus on the cross is salvific, bringing release and healing. Schleiermacher considered the sufferings of Christ to give inspiring example, especially to those who themselves endured pain and suffering, provided they were not looked upon as punishment.¹⁴ The cross, in the context of Jesus' life, can also empower a way of life in which 'one turns the other cheek, forgives one's enemies "unto seventy times seven", trusts God even in the darkness of pain, horror and tragedy, and is continually raised again to the new life of faith.'¹⁵ It can engender hope 'that life will win over death in the end.'¹⁶ On an exemplarist understanding, the story of Jesus has power, in itself, to transform lives and effect salvation and does not need to be hedged around by transactional atonement theories which have increasingly come under criticism today as 'archaic, bizarre, offensive to human sensibilities, immoral, an ideology of repression, and even a sacralization of abuse.'¹⁷

The language of sacrifice, on an exemplarist reading, signifies the heroic and costly action on Jesus' part, especially in the giving up of his life, freely and willingly. The cross represents a 'sacrifice' only in that it represents Jesus giving up his life. This is how the language of sacrifice is used by this group; they do not use it to denote an

¹⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 436-438.

¹⁵ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 132.

¹⁶ Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 101.

¹⁷ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 142.

expiatory sacrifice.¹⁸ The language of the cross as a victory is interpreted as '*Jesus having the courage to stand by his beliefs right the way to the very end*' and '*not giving up.*' This chimes in with Tillich's approach. He interprets the victory of Christ on the cross as a victory over existential forces which threaten to deprive us of human existence. The power of the cross and resurrection lies in Jesus' triumph or victory over all the powers of negativity that can enslave us. In adopting this existentialist approach, Tillich succeeds in converting Gustav Aulen's *Christus victor* theory of atonement, which was originally radically objective, into a subjective victory within the human consciousness.¹⁹ Paul Fiddes, in a similar vein, asserts that Jesus' victory over the power of sin in its many forms is a past event that 'creates and enables a victory in our lives in the here and now.'²⁰ He writes:

The victory of Christ actually creates victory in us The act of Christ is one of those moments in human history that 'open up new possibilities of existence' Once a new possibility has been disclosed, other people can make it their own, repeating and reliving the experience.²¹

The story of Jesus has power to actually create victory or courage or perseverance or hope, and so on, in the believer. Exemplarist soteriology cannot thus be reduced to simply affirming Jesus as an example to follow; there is much more to it than that, as the data clearly indicate.

The cross as a demonstration of the love of God

The type of exemplarism discussed so far has focused on the power of the influence of Jesus' ministry, life and death to transform lives and thereby effect salvation. But there is another type of exemplarism present in the sample - one that focuses on the cross as a demonstration of the love of God.

¹⁸ On the interpretation of Jesus' death as a gift-sacrifice, see Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, 80-81.

¹⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology 2*, 191-208.

²⁰ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136. Cf. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, revised ed. 1977), 324.

Numbers are difficult to pin down here. Several people (nearly all women) mentioned the passion and death of Jesus as revelatory of God's love, but their soteriological focus usually lay elsewhere. Like Peter Abelard, to whom the moral influence theory is usually traced, they were not pure exemplarists. Though he strongly emphasises the subjective impact of the cross, Abelard does not reduce the meaning of the cross to a demonstration of the love of God. This is only one component of his soteriology, which includes other traditional ideas concerning Jesus' death as a sacrifice for human sin.²² At least two of the women, however, both of whom hold a functional christology, focus exclusively on the cross as a demonstration of the love of God and eschew all talk of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice. In both cases the cross viewed as a demonstration of God's love has had a profound impact on their lives, as these extracts illustrate.

Hilary

'I can't put into words the significance of that for me now...that Jesus was willing to give up his life...I find it hard to come to terms with that immense sacrifice.'

'I just feel so grateful. I just feel such gratitude. I feel so indebted...I feel such amazing respect for somebody who could send their Son...or see their Son be crucified in such a painful way...Also to know that I am loved as well. I feel real comfort in that.'

Jill

'I remember when I read, and this was before I had my own children, the part where it said, "And God so loved the world that he gave his only Son", and I thought...well it just meant so much to me to think that somebody could be willing to do that for somebody else. Not that God is a somebody, you know, but that any entity could give...so...for other people...was such a huge thing and I felt...thought...after I had my own son, it meant even more.'

'And appreciating that Jesus, as a man on the earth at that time, was willing to give his life for other people. That was such a huge thing.'

In this kind of exemplarism, the cross primarily symbolises the love of God for humanity. There is a shift in emphasis here as the interpretation of Jesus' death takes a theological turn. The cross as a demonstration of the love of God for humanity is a central aspect in the New Testament understanding of the meaning of the cross. It was

²² See Philip L. Quinn, 'Abelard on Atonement: "Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It"', in Eleonore Stump (ed.), *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 281-300.

this theme that was emphasised by Abelard, for whom the purpose and cause of the incarnation was to show how greatly God loved us, and to lead us to love God more. Abelard restates the Augustinian idea of Christ's incarnation as a public demonstration of the extent of the love of God with the intent of evoking a response of love from humanity. He writes:

His Son has taken upon himself our nature and preserved therein in teaching us by word and example even unto death - he has more fully bound us to himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him everyone becomes more righteous - by which we mean a greater lover of the Lord - after the Passion of Christ than before, since a realized gift inspires greater love than one which is only hoped for.²³

Abelard powerfully brings home the subjective impact of the love of God in Christ, as do the interview extracts just cited. Hearts are 'enkindled' and inspired to love by the love of God in Christ. The story has power to create or generate love within the believer and to effect a profound change on the self. In the moral influence theory, Jesus reconciles God and humanity by showing God's love to humanity in such a compelling way that humanity is impelled to respond in wonder, love and praise. So too for both Jill and Hilary, Jesus' death demonstrates the depth of God's love for them and evokes from them a response of love and gratitude. The story of Jesus' death and the notion of God that it embodies transforms their attitudes and lives. *'To know that I am loved by God...It makes such a huge difference.'* Such knowledge is salvific.²⁴

For these two women, salvation comes through the experience of encountering the love of God revealed supremely in the passion and death of Jesus. That God gave his Son *'knowing that it would end in a mortal death'* effects at-one-ment. Again, the story - but this time a different aspect of it - is salvific in itself and does not require to be

²³ Peter Abelard, 'Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans', in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, vol. X, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (London: SCM Press, 1956), 283-284.

²⁴ For others in the sample the cross is anything but a symbol of the love of God. Their responses will be discussed in the next chapter.

theologised as an atonement for human sin. Jill is '*not very comfortable*' with such theologising. She rejects satisfaction/substitutionary theories of atonement, considering them to be '*quite a negative and punishing and retribution sort of approach that doesn't sit very easily with how much I think God loves us.*' Her salvation theory is much simpler: Jesus saves by revealing the depth of God's love. Or as Hilary puts it, '*God just loves me and that's all I need to know really. Basically, he just makes me feel, well, "I love you". Full stop. That's the end of the story for me.*' Therein lies salvation.

TRADITIONALIST SOTERIOLOGY

Around one third of the sample fall into this next category. They are mainly women, all of whom have a functional christology. What characterises this group is their lack of any explicit atonement theology. They cannot articulate a theology of the cross at all, questions about the cross eliciting little response beyond the repeating of set formulae. They have what I will call a traditionalist soteriology. This label is borrowed from Towler, who identifies a particular type of Christian religiousness that he calls traditionalism. The very essence of traditionalism is 'unquestioning acceptance.' Traditionalists 'believe in everything conventionally included in the Christian religion', but cannot explain 'what they believe or why they believe it.' They have an attitude of 'taking for granted' and the reasons for belief are rarely examined. What is striking about this particular form of religiousness is 'the necessity of believing, rather than what is believed' and the obligatory nature of the prescribed beliefs. 'There can be no question of degrees of belief in this type of religious attitude: it is all or nothing.' The tradition must be accepted *in toto*.²⁵ These characteristics appear to be typical of this group.

A traditionalist interpretation of the cross

Atonement theology is carried in the language of the liturgy and hymns and this group

²⁵ Robert Towler, *The Need for Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 80-93.

are likely to have learned their atonement theology from there, since they rarely hear a sermon preached on the theology of the cross and they do not study the Bible. 'Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'; 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins'; 'he put an end to death by dying for us and revealed the resurrection by rising to new life'; 'calling to mind his death on the cross, his perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world'; 'Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world.' These phrases and sentences are all taken from the service book which the sample use.²⁶ Such discourse is the common coin of the church's worship and all of this group will be familiar with it, being regular churchgoers. When asked to comment on such language, however, most are at a loss and are unable to make any further theological comment, beyond repeating the set phrases given by the tradition or saying, *'I just accept that,'* as if the discourse was self-explanatory. They *'just accept'* that Jesus came into the world to save sinners: *'that is what Christians believe.'*

Marion

'Well that is what we are told in the Bible isn't it? He came to save us from our sins etcetera.'

'And you just accept what is there don't you in a way...and you are brought up with it. I suppose he did all that, didn't he, for us, because it was what God wanted him to do, wasn't it? That was the idea I suppose.'

'I think...he did save us. He came here to save us really, didn't he...through God. As I say, my faith really is quite simple. And I don't delve too much into it.'

Rose

'Well I do think of him as being a Saviour I suppose, but...not too much about it. Um...I suppose you do think of him being a Saviour.'

'Yes. Saves us from...yes. I think...I suppose so [laugh].'

'I suppose he saves us from our sins, from whatever...[voice trails off].'

Elizabeth

'Well, as we are told, he was sent to save the world, to save us sinners...And I think that's the crux of your faith really, isn't it? God so loved us that he sent his only, well he created his Son...sent his only Son...that sounds weird...but he sent...he had to suffer for us, so obviously...I'm losing the thread...tell me what did he...?'

There is no explicit theology of atonement or salvation here. This group's theology is hidden and not readily available for inspection. They have great difficulty articulating

²⁶ 'Holy Communion Order One', *Common Worship*, 166-205.

their soteriological beliefs, just as they did their christological beliefs. Regarding the soteriological significance of Jesus, two main reflex responses are given: *'he came to show us how to live'* and *'he died to save us from our sins.'* For this group, it is axiomatic that Jesus is saviour, but they cannot easily say in what way(s) Jesus is a saviour or give an account of how the cross of Jesus is salvific. Haight writes:

Because of the fullness of the experience of salvation, and the amplitude of its existential reality, no single definition of salvation can confine its meaning. The result is that the meaning of salvation remains elusive: every intentional Christian knows what salvation is until asked to explain it.²⁷

This group say that Jesus as saviour has existential meaning, but they cannot conceptualise or articulate that meaning. Whatever is 'known' by the believer is hidden from immediate self-awareness; they cannot easily give voice to the concrete experiences of saving encounters with God. They use the language of the tradition, but *'don't think about what it means'* and do not want to either. Rose, like most of this group, is not interested in *'going too deep into things.'* She *'has [her] beliefs'* and is content for them to remain unexamined. One of her beliefs is that Jesus died to save us from our sins. She has other beliefs too that she is equally certain about: for example that God forgives sin and everyone is going to heaven. But she is unable to make any comment on how these beliefs might be connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Commenting on her very certain belief that everyone will go to heaven she says, *'I must have believed that from somewhere I think...in Sunday school days or somewhere, you know...[voice trails off].'* Christianity is a set of beliefs that *'you just have'* and *'you just accept.'*

Others do make statements which connect the cross with forgiveness of sin and eternal life, saying, *'Jesus died so that we would all be forgiven'* and *'Jesus died so that we might have eternal life.'* But beyond these simplest of formulations, which are in effect no more than set answers, little more is generally said. This group (and others in the

²⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 335.

sample) do not present with fully worked-out theologies of salvation. Instead what we have here are a cluster of beliefs which coalesce around the death and resurrection of Jesus, but these beliefs do not form a logically coherent whole. Sociologists of religion have made the same point. For 'the average believer', says Towler, Christianity is in practice 'much more like an amalgamation of beliefs and practices held together by their common association with the church rather than by their logical relation one to another.'²⁸ Bernice Martin and Ronald Pluck, commenting on the construction of 'nomos' or a meaning system that will help us make sense of our world, write:

...it may well be that articulated intellectual *coherence* is only infrequently a feature of 'nomos' construction....In short, *system*, if by that we mean logically coherent pattern, may be exactly the wrong word to use of the phenomenon: it is more like a patch-work quilt or much-mended net than like a system.²⁹

Academic theology seeks to systematise beliefs. Ordinary theology, on the whole, does not. 'Most people's practical belief is, probably, non-systematic.' It exists 'in clustered bits and pieces.'³⁰ Yet there is evidence of some reasoning, albeit apparently confused. Elizabeth says:

'[Jesus] saved us. He forgave us our sins and if Jesus hadn't come and done that how could God show, you know, that sinners were forgiven? Because I think otherwise if you had sinned...gosh I've sinned and I'm never going to go to God...but Jesus showed us that sinners are forgiven, so it's never too late to change. Whereas you could sin and think I'm a hopeless sinner and I'll never be saved so you would just go on sinning wouldn't you?'

Underlying this thinking is an acceptance of the idea, fundamental to the Christian mythos, that sin separates humanity from God and that through Jesus the Christian receives forgiveness of sin and the promise of everlasting life. And Jesus' death was crucial in this: '*He had to suffer for us,*' Elizabeth asserts. Jesus had to suffer and die in

²⁸ Towler, *Homo Religiosus*, 153.

²⁹ Bernice Martin and Ronald Pluck, *Young People's Beliefs: An Exploratory Study Commissioned by the General Synod Board of Education of the Views and Behavioural Patterns of Young People Related to their Beliefs* (London: General Synod Board of Education, 1976), 47-48.

³⁰ Douglas J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 19, 21.

order that humanity might be forgiven. But she cannot go beyond this to give any kind of explanation as to why. 'You just take things for granted.' 'A Christian believes these things. You just accept them.' Diane is the only person in this group to give any hint of a causal explanation when she says 'his dying because he was so good, is the only way he could save everybody else really, because that is what God has said.' There are hints here of an older narrative and memories of the overarching myth: of fallenness from paradisaical happiness, of Adam and that fatal sin, of the need for a Redeemer, someone without sin who could undo the effects of the Fall and restore humanity to relationship with God. What this group has is a story - the outline of the Christian mythos - which they keep in their heads *in fragments*, rather than as one overarching, coherent epic.³¹ They can be said to have a narrative or story soteriology, albeit a fragmented one, as opposed to a systematic or analytical soteriology.

It is significant that the liturgy and the New Testament are rather short on explanations too. Joachim Jeremias suggests that the New Testament contains 'clusters of idea-complexes' to explain the crucifixion.³² Stephen Sykes suggests that these idea-complexes, found in the liturgy and hymns as well, offer a variety of 'explanatory hints' as to how the event of the crucifixion plays a part in God's plan of redemption, but that these explanatory hints and suggestions are mostly undeveloped in these contexts. He argues that it is characteristic of theological communication in these contexts 'to allude to, rather than spell out' the meaning of the idea-complexes or themes. Only in atonement theories are they fully developed.³³ All these idea-complexes, together with the related 'sin-guilt-responsibility-freedom' nexus of ideas, will have been internalised by this group over many years of churchgoing.³⁴ They cannot expand on these ideas, but this does not seem to matter to them. Their theology is more imagistic and metaphorical than conceptual. It would seem that some people do not need explanations or atonement theories. They can manage perfectly well without them. Christianity 'works' for them, even though, 'I haven't really thought about it.'

³¹ Cf. Stephen Sykes, *The Story of the Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), esp. xi-xiii.

³² Joachim Jeremias, *Der Opfertod Jesu Christi* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1963) cited in *ibid.*, 15.

³³ Sykes, *The Story of the Atonement*, 15-17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

It works for them primarily at the level of affect. Primary expressions of faith, such as hymns and the liturgy, do not attempt to give a reasoned account of the truth claims that they make. The words of the liturgy and hymns provide 'a series of pegs on which to hang conscious or unconscious recollections and reflections.'³⁵ The familiar words of the liturgy and hymns ('Who on the same night that he was betrayed'; 'he opened wide his arms for us on the cross') become the 'carrier of rich layers of meaning and emotion and a range of implication incomprehensible in its depth and indefinite in its extent.'³⁶ The liturgy carries great emotional rather than cognitive weight in the faith-experience of this group and others also. Questions about the cross invariably evoked emotional rather than doctrinal (cognitive) responses, indicating that feelings, not doctrine, are primarily associated with the cross. This issue will be discussed further in chapter 9. My focus in this chapter remains on the doctrinal stances adopted by this group in respect of soteriology.

Forgiveness without an atoning death

As we have seen, many in this group have learned to connect the death of Jesus with the forgiveness of human sin, but are quickly in difficulty when asked to give an account of how or why the two are connected. Without an understanding of the Jewish atonement and sacrificial rituals, the explanations are not obvious. A few of this group, however, like others in the sample, namely the exemplarists and some of those with soteriological difficulties, do not appear to connect their belief in a forgiving God with the event of the cross at all. Their belief in a forgiving God seems to bear little or no direct connection to the cross. It is to the understanding of this wider group (which includes these traditionalists) that I now turn.³⁷

It is around the forgiveness of sins that the piety of many seems to revolve. As Kathleen

³⁵ Ibid., 13. Sykes is here talking about creedal recitation, but the same principle applies to other liturgical language and hymnody.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Most of my groups are exclusive, but there is an overlap here between some of the traditionalists, the exemplarists and some of those with soteriological difficulties. The data quoted in this section are, however, primarily from traditionalists.

puts it, *'we all know we are flawed'*, and several comment that one of the reasons for going to church is to receive absolution, the forgiveness of sins. *'That's part of going to church. We want to be forgiven...we want to be...to try harder...you know.'* *'That is why you go to church...to say you are sorry and to try and put things right.'* There is widespread acceptance of the belief that God is a forgiving God, who freely forgives all those who truly repent. As Diane says:

'I think if you sort of pray about it and ask God for forgiveness then you sort of expect that he will wipe the slate clean. Whether that is too simplistic a view. But that is why you pray for forgiveness. You know what you have done isn't right and God knows it isn't right, but if you deeply believe and are sorry for what you have done then I believe that God takes that on board.'

This belief is not dependent on the need for an atoning human death. The data suggest that many effectively bypass the traditional atonement theology surrounding the cross. In academic and liturgical theology, God's forgiving is concentrated in the central event of the atoning death of Jesus. But in much ordinary christology, belief in God's forgiveness is largely independent of the death of Jesus. Many see Jesus as the agent of God's forgiveness and love, saying that *'Jesus taught...that God will forgive sin.'* Jesus was God's messenger, offering God's forgiveness of sins and acceptance into the coming kingdom of God, especially to those whom the respectable religious establishment considered to be grievous sinners or definite outcasts from God's kingdom. Jesus offered forgiveness on God's behalf; the only prerequisite being repentance. Michael Winter argues that the teaching of Jesus on this matter is 'unambiguously clear': nothing more nor less is required for reconciliation than that forgiveness is asked for. Compensation is not required in any form. 'One could cite practically the whole of the gospels in support of this contention.'³⁸ Hick also holds this view. In the Lord's Prayer, for example, we are taught, says Hick, 'to ask for forgiveness for our sins, expecting to receive this, the only condition being that we in turn forgive one another. There is no suggestion of the need for a mediator between

³⁸ Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 88-89. Forgiveness actually takes various forms in the gospels and the necessity of repentance as a prerequisite for forgiveness is disputed. See Haddon Wilmer, 'Forgiveness', in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pypers (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 246. See also, Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 175-179.

ourselves and God or for an atoning death to enable God to forgive.' And in the famous Lukan parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the same principle is clearly emphasised. The situation calls for a repayment of the squandered money to the father, but no such thing is required by the forgiving father. The father, when he sees his penitent son returning home, does not say, 'Because I am a just, as well as a loving father, I cannot forgive him until someone has been duly punished for his sins', but rather the father had compassion on the son and freely offered unconditional forgiveness.³⁹

Many in the sample operate on the same principles. There is divine forgiveness for all who truly repent. No form of satisfaction or compensation is required as a precondition of acceptance back into a loving relationship with God. All who ask for forgiveness, with sincerity, are reconciled to God. This simple requirement of repentance, and nothing more, is not confined to the teaching of Jesus. It can be found in other New Testament writings. 'If we say we have no sin, we are deceived and there is no truth in us. If we confess our sin, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:8-9). It can also be found in the Old Testament (e.g. Hosea 14:2-9 etc.) and in present day Judaism, as in the prayers on the Day of Atonement. Similar views on divine forgiveness are in fact found throughout the world's theistic faiths. The Christian (Western/Latin) belief in the need for an atoning human death stands out as exceptional.⁴⁰ Hick contends that within contemporary Protestant thought this distinctive belief has now given way to a widespread acceptance of the idea of a free divine forgiveness for those who repent, and he points to the rise of exemplarist theories in the modern (and I would add, postmodern) period as evidence for this shift.⁴¹

Divine forgiveness for all who truly repent obviates the need for an atoning death. If we learn that God is a gracious and forgiving God from Jesus' teachings and ministerial

³⁹ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 127-128. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 460-461, 604-613. For further examples of forgiveness without compensation in the gospels, see Winter, *The Atonement*, 88-90.

⁴⁰ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 128.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

practice, it follows that Jesus' death was not strictly necessary. As Charles puts it:

'I may need correcting on this, but my own belief is that it wasn't necessary for [Jesus' death] to happen to get God's forgiveness...I mean, if he is a forgiving God and always has been and is eternal, I don't think it needed Jesus to do what he did in AD 30.'

How can this claim be reconciled with the Christian tradition that the passion and death of Jesus were central to the whole process of salvation? Charles, like others, ends up going down the exemplarist route. The cross and resurrection reinforces *'the great story of God and God's forgiveness'*; it makes it *'more convincing'* and *'reinforces what Jesus taught and that is that God will forgive sin.'* Jesus' life, death and resurrection, was God's way of showing to humankind that he loves and forgives us. *'That was the way in which God assisted us to overcome our sinfulness and it is an example of the way in which God permanently loves us.'* The traditional language of sacrifice is *'not very helpful'*, but serves to *'embellish the principle...that God is prepared to forgive sin.'* The significance of Jesus with respect to forgiveness lies in his embodying forgiveness, as opposed to achieving forgiveness on our behalf through his death on the cross.

The data suggest that many opt (often unconsciously) for the more straightforward belief in forgiveness without the need for an atoning death, because they find such a belief easier to understand. Charles says:

'I just...I don't know quite what forgiveness of sins really means. I do know that we spend our lives sinning and we shouldn't...you get into all these terribly technical things about atonement and forgiveness. You can actually wind yourself up into the most awful...it all becomes terribly complicated I think, unless one has done a theological degree. I haven't studied this and I can't explain all the details of this. I simply...to me...very simply...God and Jesus together are prepared to forgive sins.'

As we shall see later, some explicitly reject belief in an atoning death because they find it morally unacceptable, but the majority seem not so much to reject belief in an atoning death as to fail to understand it. Asking for forgiveness is not complicated.

Understanding how the shedding of Jesus' blood effects atonement is. In our contemporary world there is little natural understanding for the idea that *'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness'* (Heb. 9:22). One wonders what people make

of the complex and difficult passages in say, Hebrews or Romans, where atonement is explained. Not a lot, one suspects. Sykes observes that 'without considerable and repeated explanations' (which the sample are not given) modern congregations are unlikely to be able to explain atonement.⁴² It would seem that people only take what they need. That God freely and graciously forgives repentant sinners is sufficient for their religious needs and it is this simpler, but no less profound theology, that is learned from scripture, the liturgy and hymnody. The more complex atonement theology that is also represented through these media is essentially ignored.

Reduction of atonement or reconciliation to the request for forgiveness, without any antecedent form of adequate satisfaction or just punishment, is simple, in the sense that it is uncomplicated; but it is not an easy option. The request for forgiveness, when it is sincerely made, implies that the sinner has resolved to change their way of life, and the need for moral conversion is stressed by many. God is a forgiving God, but *'it mustn't stop you trying not to sin.'* *'I mean you have got to improve. Do better next time.'* Considerable emphasis is placed on the need for self-examination, sincere repentance and the need for conversion of thought and behaviour. What is very important for many traditionalists, and others besides, is belief in eternal salvation through merit.

Eternal salvation through merit

Many in the sample understand the word salvation primarily in next-worldly terms. When next-worldly concepts of salvation dominate, salvation as something real in the present for those who believe in Jesus is not emphasised as much as salvation in the future, after death. To be saved is to receive eternal life. Life after death is really important to traditionalists (and others).⁴³ For them, *'that's what faith is all about.'* But some in the sample (around six) attach far less importance to belief in life after death (*'I'm not that bothered about it'*) or else are agnostic about it (*'I'm not sure that I believe in an after-life.'*)⁴⁴ Borg asserts that one of the reasons why Christianity has

⁴² Sykes, *The Story of Atonement*, 4.

⁴³ Again, there is some overlap here with other groups.

⁴⁴ One survey shows that 78 per cent of churchgoers of various denominations believe in life after death. See Leslie J. Francis, 'The Pews Talk Back: The Church Congregation Survey', in Jeff Astley (ed.),

ceased to be compelling for millions of people over the last thirty to forty years is its after-life orientation.⁴⁵ Life after death is not 'good news' for all. Many feel no need of this belief or hope in order for their lives to have meaning. But for the majority of this sample eternal life is 'very important.'

Elizabeth

'[My faith] makes a purpose in life. I mean, if you hadn't a faith, all be it a simple faith, what, where are you going? At least you are living for something in the future...there is a point in living...I think it is only that hope that keeps you going at times.'

Tom

'I'm convinced that there is an after-life...I don't see any point in being on the earth if there isn't an after-life.'

It is not just Christians who believe in life after death, but for the Christian the grounds for hope of eternal life lie in the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁶ Life after death or eternal salvation is made available and possible through Jesus. As the liturgy (and New Testament) puts it, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, to be our advocate in heaven, and to bring us to eternal life.'⁴⁷ Jesus was raised, Paul claims, as the 'first fruits' or guarantee that believers will also be raised (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23) with an immortal, 'spiritual body' (15:44) and it is Jesus' resurrection that is traditionally emphasised as the ground of hope for the Christian's own resurrection. However, the data suggest that many have never considered the grounds for their belief in life after death and they do not connect this belief in any specific way with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Life after death is 'inbuilt in Christianity,' but as to the grounds for this belief, 'Do you know, I honestly don't know. I just accept that it is part of Christianity.' There appears to be is very little

Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 181. A more recent survey of *Church Times* readers shows that 87 per cent of laity and 91 per cent of clergy believe that there is life after death. See Leslie J. Francis (ed.), *Fragmented Faith: Exposing the Fault Lines in the Church of England* (forthcoming).

⁴⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 2. Borg asserts that the 'older way of understanding Christianity', which has ceased to be persuasive to many today, was, in both harder and softer forms, 'doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic, and orientated toward an afterlife.'

⁴⁶ Another survey shows that churchgoers are more likely to believe in a life after death than non-churchgoers (78 per cent compared with 53 per cent). See Guy Buckler and Jeff Astley, 'Learning and Believing in an Urban Parish', in Astley and Day (eds), *The Contours of Christian Education*, 399.

⁴⁷ *Common Worship*, 168. Based on John 3:16

therefore that is specifically Christian about this belief. It is *'just something that I believe.'* Here is yet more evidence in support of the claim that much ordinary theology is unsystematic and disconnected. The liturgical anthropologist Martin Stringer asserts that, *'most ordinary worshippers do not think in terms of systematic beliefs, and systems of theology, at all. Rather they think almost entirely in terms of specific belief statements as and when these are needed.'*⁴⁸

The irrelevance of Jesus' death and resurrection to eternal salvation is confirmed by the evidence of Pelagian tendencies throughout the sample, evangelicals excluded. Many talk about eternal salvation being dependent, not on belief in Jesus and/or in what Jesus has done, but on how this life is lived. They can be said to have a *'Parable of the Sheep and the Goats theology'* (Matthew 25: 31-46).

Tom

*'I do actually try now to put things in the plus pan of the scales.'
'I...think what would God think when it comes to judgement day.'*

Valerie

'I think that only good people will be saved.'

Kathleen

'When we are lined up [laugh] and we are being judged, the fact that we went to church every Sunday...is not actually going to weigh up as to whether we were morally a good person. To my mind that would be much more important than how often you went to church.'

'If there is life after death...then only the morally upright will get it...that's what is being preached at us. That you had to deserve it.'

'That is certainly the impression that comes across to the lay person who hasn't done a lot of study about it.'

'If you have got to be so deserving, then I probably wouldn't get there anyway [laugh]...so as far as I'm concerned it is not worth worrying about or thinking about.'

Sheila

'[Salvation] is not automatic. I've heard vicars say coming to church is not an automatic salvation. There is more to it. You should live...the life...but that doesn't mean to say you can't be forgiven a few times. It doesn't mean you will go to heaven just because you have been to church. It depends how sincere your prayer is and how you live your life.'

⁴⁸ Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship*, 179.

Jan

'Sometimes I think [the idea of salvation] is all a load of cobblers and sometimes I get really worried and think I ought to do the right thing because I have my immortal soul to consider.'

Richard

'I personally do think that if you conduct yourself in a manner akin to Jesus Christ and the way that he behaved and you listen to God and what God is telling you, that you will have...there is another life.'

The Pelagian controversy erupted in the early fifth century and centred upon two individuals: Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius, a British monk. The controversy is complex, involving questions concerning human nature, sin, grace and merit.

Pelagianism is generally summarised as the view that humans are able to earn their salvation through their own achievements. Pelagius argued that humanity merely needed to be shown what to do and could then be left to achieve it unaided. Humanity has been shown what to do in the moral example of Jesus. Sin can be avoided by following Jesus' teaching and example. For Pelagius, God created humanity and provided information concerning what is right and wrong, in the example of Jesus, and then ceased to take any interest in humanity, apart from the final day of judgement. On that day, individuals will be judged according to whether they have fulfilled their moral obligations. In other words, God rewards each individual strictly on the basis of merit. Jesus Christ is involved in salvation only to the extent that he reveals, by his actions and teaching, exactly what God requires of the individual. Salvation comes through imitating the example of Christ.⁴⁹

The Christian tradition has been thoroughly unsympathetic to Pelagianism and the idea that good works or the mere external imitation of Christ in itself is or gives rise to the Christian life. The mainstream Christian approach, following Augustine, has tended to argue that the imitation of Christ is a consequence not a condition of Christian life, since the beginning of the Christian life is a matter of grace alone. Salvation is an act of God's grace - a gift, not a reward for good behaviour. Through the death and

⁴⁹ See Gerald Bonner, 'Pelagianism', in Hastings, Mason and Pyper (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, 526-527. See also, Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 357-361.

resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is enabled to deal with fallen humanity, thereby giving us that which we do not deserve, namely salvation. On this view, the death and resurrection of Jesus is absolutely crucial to salvation, whereas for Pelagianism Jesus' death has no effect on the outcome of salvation.

There are obvious similarities with Pelagian thinking shown by many in the sample, who both emphasise the importance of moral responsibility and play down the role of Jesus' death in achieving salvation. Over half of the sample consider Jesus' role as exemplar to be of prime soteriological significance.⁵⁰ However, unlike Pelagius, they also recognise that humans fail and constantly require God's help and assistance (grace) in living a life pleasing to God. They do not have a religion of works alone. Their thinking, like much Christian thought, is in tension, 'glorifying the amazing grace of divine forgiveness while being cautious lest justice, virtue, and order are undermined by too much of it.'⁵¹ They pray for forgiveness in the present and hope for it in the face of the final judgement, where *'you will have to answer for whatever you have done on this earthly life.'* In such a scheme, an atoning death has little part to play.

But for some in the sample Jesus' atoning death is absolutely crucial to salvation. It is to their theology that I now turn.

EVANGELICAL SOTERIOLOGY

Substitutionary atonement

The substitutionary theory of atonement is a hallmark of evangelicalism and all the evangelicals in the sample subscribe to this theory.⁵² What is surprising is that nobody else does. No other person in the sample speaks about the cross in the same way as the

⁵⁰ See chapter 8.

⁵¹ Wilmer, 'Forgiveness', 246.

⁵² On substitutionary atonement as a hallmark of evangelicalism, see Donald G. Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1973), 60-62.

evangelicals. Admittedly, certain aspects of the theory are present in the theology of some of the traditionalists, but it is always inchoate - a full-blown theory never emerges. The traditionalists never offer an explanation as to how the death of Jesus on the cross effects atonement and the forgiveness of sin; the evangelicals all do so, using a characteristic phraseology and theology which is illustrated in the following extracts.

Dorothy

'Jesus paid the price for me on that cross. He was sent by God and even if I was the only one, that's what God would have done...because I feel...well that's the way I have been taught I suppose, but that is the way I've felt as well...and just realising the cost that Jesus paid, the price he paid for me.'

'...it was God's plan. It had to be, because that was the only way...because God, sorry Jesus, is perfect, God's Son...and there had to be a perfect sacrifice for the sin of...um...me...of the world...Jesus was the only person...figure...God...um...you know...God's Son was...um...the only thing that could actually wipe the slate clean.'

'Because I mean we have all fallen short of what God planned. God planned a good creation that he had made and for people to live in harmony and because of sin everybody wants their own wishes and they, including me...um...do their own thing and...that way there is a separation between...there cannot be communion between God and me because of the sin that I have done. Jesus is the way that that bridge can be...um...that gulf can be bridged between God and me and um...so I mean I see him as a bridge to God and um...a sacrifice that was given for me.'

Paul

'Jesus died to pay the ultimate price for everyone's sins. Once and for all.'

'Jesus paid the penalty for all those things I had done wrong.'

'[Jesus] died for the sins; to set us free from the chains of bondage.'

'I think a penalty had to be paid because of the grand scale of sin.'

'The reason that he was on the cross was that he could pay the debt for people that have done wrong things in their lives.'

'The reason that he died on the cross is me...I have contributed somewhat to all the pain and suffering that he went through...the pain and the suffering he has gone through is because of people like me.'

Peter

'Our sin separates us, separates me from God. And this idea that God is holy and perfect and there has to be some way of dealing with the things that separate me from God...the fact that [sin] creates a barrier, a separation between us and God and that in order to deal with that barrier, to make the bridge if you like, Christ had to die on the cross to pay for our sins or to meet the demands of justice for our sins.'

'God through Christ paid that penalty. God pronounced what the penalty was, but at the same time he actually paid the penalty himself in order that we could actually...that there wouldn't be a barrier between man and God. So that is why the cross is so central, from my perspective, because without the cross the barrier would remain.'

The length of these extracts indicates that the evangelicals, in contrast to the majority of

the sample, all had a lot to say about the cross. This is because substitutionary atonement is the cornerstone of their theology. The extracts are peppered with the set phrases of substitutionary atonement theory. Paul Zahl, an evangelical theologian, asserts that 'the content of theology is the substitutionary atonement of Christ.' It is 'the fulcrum for all theology.'⁵³

This theory has its roots in the writings of the eleventh century theologian Anselm of Canterbury.⁵⁴ Anselm developed his theory partly as a response to a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the classic *Christus victor* approach. Anselm's theory arises out of the medieval thought world and presupposes then-current understandings of honour, offence, reparations and social obligations. The basic human problem is perceived to be disorder which dishonours God. God and humans are related like feudal lords and their serfs. Any act of disobedience dishonours the lord and satisfaction must be given. In other words, the offence caused by human sin must be purged. But as the satisfaction that is due to God on account of the offence of sin is infinite, while humanity must provide this satisfaction only God can provide it. It is for this reason that God became human in Jesus. By dying as a perfect man who did not deserve to die, Jesus offered his life freely to God and so gave him honour in an infinite amount. In Jesus' perfect obedience unto death, satisfaction is rendered and justice is done, God's honour is restored and as a result sinners are forgiven. Anselm's theory works on the principle that God is totally and utterly obliged to act according to the principles of divine justice throughout the redemption of humanity, and Jesus' death on the cross satisfies the demands of divine justice.

Anselm's satisfaction theory was developed further, most notably by the sixteenth century Reformer John Calvin, into the penal substitution theory.⁵⁵ Calvin's theory is grounded in the general principles of law, reflecting the cultural shift from a feudal to a civil law framework. If God's justice is to be upheld, the debt due to God because of

⁵³ Paul F.M. Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000) 58,52.

⁵⁴ See St. Anselm, 'Cur Deus Homo?', in *Anselm of Canterbury*, vol. 3, eds. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto and New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1976), 39-137.

⁵⁵ See John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes* (Mac Dill, Florida: MacDonald, 1972), 275-277.

human sin must be repaid. Jesus, as God's Son/God, pays the debt and bears the punishment for human sin. Calvin is most concerned with the vindication of the divine law, which stems from the righteousness of God. A God of righteousness cannot endure iniquity, iniquity or sin violates the divine law and must be punished. Hence Jesus is punished in our place, as a substitute, taking upon himself the pain and the penalties of sin which should have been ours. His death on the cross is both payment and punishment for our sin. Although Jesus fulfilled the law and so deserved no punishment, he still takes the punishment for our sin, assuming the just penalty, and in exchange his righteousness is transferred or 'imputed', to use Reformation terminology, to us. It is this interpretation of the cross that remains the primary framework of evangelical Protestantism and is represented in the interview extracts given above.

As they indicate, this theory can easily be combined with the idea of the cross as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus can now be said to have offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to appease the demands of justice or pay the debt we owe. The evangelicals have explicitly learned substitutionary atonement theology during the process of socialisation into evangelical Christianity. They have not just implicitly learned it from the liturgy or hymns. As the data from the rest of the sample show, this just does not happen. Rather, they have been specifically taught it. Although evangelicals have a theology of the cross, however, they do not engage in systematic theological reflection any more than anyone else. Like many of the traditionalists, they too '*just accept*' the theology they have been given and are quickly in difficulty when pressed for further clarification. Paul, for example, after reciting the scheme he had been taught, then said, '*I've never actually thought about why Jesus had to die on the cross for our sins...An analytical mind might want to know. I just accept it.*' Or as Peter says,

'You look at the mechanics of...you can explain in a sort of transaction way what happened on the cross, but you know, that still leaves so many unanswered questions. You know, about why God should do it and how he did do it. And I suppose I don't dwell on those things.'

No one ever expressed any objection to the interpretation of the cross which they have been given. Indeed, they all considered substitutionary atonement to be the required theory for every true Christian. A Christian was '*someone who has accepted that Jesus*

paid the price for their sins on the cross.’ But the satisfaction and substitutionary theories of atonement - so dominant in theology, preaching, piety and liturgy for nearly a thousand years - face considerable pressure in theology today.⁵⁶ Liberal theologians have consistently criticised these particular theories as standing in conflict both with the biblical view of God’s love and mercy, and with a moral vision of justice. It is asserted that theologies which represent God as angry and offended, or as a punishing God intent on exacting the penalty for sin, should be set to one side.⁵⁷ ‘Substitutionary atonement is an affront because it proposes a repugnant, “sub-Christian” view of God, when measured by scripture.’⁵⁸ Such theories are also considered to be morally suspect, especially in respect of notions such as transferred merit or guilt and ideas of retributive justice. More recent challenges to satisfaction atonement have come from theologians who articulate contextual theologies. These theologies argue that satisfaction atonement has been used to justify violence, or the oppression of women or people of colour. For example, J. Denny Weaver, a pacifist theologian, argues that satisfaction atonement allows accommodation of the violence of the sword.⁵⁹ James Cone, a black theologian, argues that it allows accommodation of slavery and racism and various feminist theologians argue that it allows accommodation of the abuse of women.⁶⁰ As a consequence, pacifist, black, feminist and womanist voices alike have all challenged any understanding of atonement that presumes salvation or reconciliation to God requires the killing of Jesus in order to satisfy the demands of divine justice. The difficulties with satisfaction atonement are succinctly summed up by Elizabeth Johnson. She writes:

In recent years the satisfaction theory has come under severe criticism for the following reasons: for its focus on the death of Jesus to the virtual exclusion of his ministry and resurrection, thus truncating the biblical witness; for its methodological mistake of literalizing what is meant to be, in truth, a metaphor,

⁵⁶ Johnson, ‘Jesus and Salvation’, 5.

⁵⁷ See Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 401. Cf. Winter asserts that there is an almost universal consensus that explanations of atonement along the lines of Anselm’s theory are now untenable (*The Atonement*, vii).

⁵⁸ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 151.

⁵⁹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2001)

⁶⁰ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, revised ed. 1997). The critique offered by feminist theologians will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

turning it into an ontological reality; for its promotion of the value of suffering, easily exploited to maintain situations of injustice; and for its effective history which has fostered the idea of an angry God who needs to be recompensed by the bloody death of his Son.⁶¹

Satisfaction atonement assumes that God's justice requires compensatory punishment (violence). Sin was atoned for because it was punished vicariously through the death of Jesus. It was through Jesus' killing that the demands of justice were satisfied and salvation was won. In this theory divine justice depends on punishment. 'The conclusion is inescapable that satisfaction atonement is based on divinely sanctioned, retributive violence.'⁶² This theory puts abusive punishment structurally at the centre of what constitutes and defines salvation. Weaver asserts that 'satisfaction atonement, which assumes that God's justice requires compensatory punishment for evil deeds committed, can seem self-evident in the context of contemporary understandings of retributive justice in the North American (and western) system of criminal justice.'⁶³ My data suggest otherwise. Many of the sample have heard a recitation of satisfaction atonement and tacitly reject it. Something about it offends. They are '*not very comfortable*' with it. They do not buy into its schema of retributive justice. There is avoidance of any model of God as the author or agent of the death of Jesus and of any suggestion that the cross of Jesus was a necessary part of God's plan or will. The image of God which such theories embody is clearly unacceptable to many. As Jill says of satisfaction atonement, '*it strikes me as quite a negative and punishing and retributive sort of approach.*' In modern liberal western culture, distributive theories of justice, focused on the reformation of the offender, have replaced older theories of retributive justice. Distributive justice is considered to be a morally superior form of justice.

In the satisfaction theory, the atonement is a necessity imposed upon God by a superior principle. Justice requires that certain conditions have to be satisfied first. God cannot

⁶¹ Johnson, 'Jesus and Salvation', 5.

⁶² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 225. The link between satisfaction atonement and systems of retributive justice has been thoroughly analysed by Timothy Gorrige in his book *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶³ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 3.

forgive until the punishment demanded by justice is extracted. The theory 'seems to set God in contradiction to Godself. It draws upon the juridical metaphors of the New Testament in a way that brings mercy and justice into collision. In other words, the Anselmian theory makes the act of forgiveness something of a problem for God. Grace is made conditional on satisfaction. But is conditional grace still grace?'⁶⁴ The assumption that God's justice requires to be satisfied before he can put his forgiving love into effect becomes a supreme principle and does not allow for another kind of justice - that is, a justice that is satisfied by repentance and a turning to God as did the Prodigal. Many in the sample seem to opt for this kind of justice. It makes no sense to them that God can only forgive after a penalty has been paid.

When objections were raised in the interviews against substitutionary atonement with a couple of the evangelicals, the force of this argument was generally acknowledged, but there was a reluctance to engage in discussion, since to do so '*would be threatening*' to faith. Substitutionary atonement and the doctrine that Jesus is God are both essential elements of this version of Christianity. Faith rests on them and therefore any challenge as to their veracity will almost inevitably be treated with a good deal of suspicion if not hostility.⁶⁵ Substitutionary atonement will always appeal to some. Its simple message of transactional guilt is very effective and appealing, especially, says Hopkins, where feelings of guilt, insecurity and inadequacy are running high. To be told the 'good news' that Jesus' death takes away guilt and eternal damnation need not be feared because Jesus' blood has paid the price for sin, can bring enormous relief.⁶⁶ Substitutionary atonement is not, however, the whole of evangelical soteriology.

A personal relationship with Jesus

Mention must be made, albeit very briefly, of another key feature of evangelical

⁶⁴ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 153.

⁶⁵ For a defence of substitutionary atonement, see Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 125-157. See also Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 179-224, where he engages the defenders of satisfaction atonement.

⁶⁶ See Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology*, 48.

soteriology, namely, that Jesus is an experienced reality in the life of the believer.⁶⁷ All of the evangelicals, bar one, talked at length about Jesus as a present reality with whom they have a personal relationship. Much is made of the need for personal conversion in evangelicalism and of '*letting Jesus into your life as Lord and Saviour*'.⁶⁸ Being a Christian '*means accepting what Jesus has done for you on the cross and...letting him into your life.*' Personal conversion involves coming to know Jesus in a direct, immediate and personal way as '*the Lord of your life.*' It involves 'a particular kind of experience of encounter and appropriation of Christ within one's inner life, viz., to be "born again" in an immediate and direct experience of God or Christ or Jesus as a loving and present companion in one's inner life.'⁶⁹ All the evangelicals in the sample talked about their conversion experiences and of '*coming to know Jesus.*'

Evangelical piety, which has its roots in pietism, has a concern for true religion, the religion of the heart. Jesus must be known personally, directly and intimately in one's heart rather than in one's head. As such, one might argue that evangelical piety is a distinctive form of mysticism. Mysticism is a multifaceted tradition. What is common to mysticism is the claim that there is a special sort of direct, immediate and intuitive experience and knowledge of God which is essentially different from ordinary knowledge about ourselves and the world.⁷⁰ Inbody argues that evangelicalism offers, through its soteriology, a distinctively modern version of the mystical tradition.

The tradition of direct, immediate knowledge of God or Christ or Jesus has a distinctly modern Protestant form, viz., North American evangelical Christianity. Salvation by faith alone is thought of not so much in terms of justification and imputed righteousness through divine grace (as in the Protestant Reformers), but rather in terms of a direct, immediate awareness of God as a loving and forgiving God (assurance) and Christ or Jesus as an immediate and constant companion in

⁶⁷ The experience of Jesus as a present reality with whom one maintains a personal relationship is not actually exclusive to the evangelicals. The piety of three of the functionalists (all women) is also of this type.

⁶⁸ On this hallmark of evangelicalism and the legacy of pietism, see Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance*, 101-157.

⁶⁹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 77-78.

⁷⁰ On the different forms of the mystical tradition, see Chesnut, *Images of Christ*, chapter 4.

one's heart or by one's side. Saving faith is mystical knowledge of immediate union and continuing companionship with Jesus in one's heart. The person who has 'been saved' knows that God or Christ or Jesus loves her or him with a direct, intuitive awareness that goes beyond the bonds of any kind of 'normal' knowledge, including the 'normal' religious knowledge in the means of grace provided by the church, such as reading Scripture, reciting creeds, participating in the liturgy, or any other kind of ecclesial mediation.⁷¹

At the centre of evangelical soteriology, then, is a mystical experience of Jesus as a loving and present companion in one's inner life. And this companion is *'everything.'* He is everything because he is the friend who is always to be relied upon, the constant companion who is always near, the healer and restorer who brings new life. The following extracts illustrate the phenomenon.

Susan

'[Jesus] has been a constant companion to me. There is never a moment that I am not aware of his presence beside me. It is just the most wonderful glorious relationship.'
'Oh I love him. I just love him. He has just become everything to me...He has filled every gap that there was in my life, every need that there was and there were many and he has just led me through and completed areas of my life that were empty and barren.'
'Whatever happens to us, whatever difficulties there are in this life...he will bring us through and show us the way.'

Hannah⁷²

'[Jesus] is my dearest friend. I...I mean...you know...um...he is a person who is always with me. I talk to him. Constantly apologise to him. I know that I don't live up to his...desires are for me. But, equally, I know that he would never let me down. And...I'm trying to think...there is great comfort in the spirit of him.'

Dorothy

'[Jesus] is the most dependable friend that you could ever have. Somebody that is completely supportive in the sense of, yes, you have made a mistake, but I love you still...in spite of the error of your ways and...yeah...I think really it is the best friend that you can have.'

⁷¹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 76. English evangelicalism, we might argue, adopts a similar position.

⁷² Hannah is not one of the evangelicals. She has a functional christology and an exemplary view of atonement.

Pat

'[Jesus] has completely revolutionised my life.'

'It was as though I was in a very, very deep pit, covered with sticky spiders' webs. And I was struggling to get out. And I was being helped out by Jesus.'

Paul

'In a nutshell, Jesus is my everything. That says it all. He is what my family are to me, but more. And nothing is more precious to me on this earth than them. Put what value I have on them and multiply it a hundredfold and you have got Jesus.'

Six women and one man talk about Jesus in this way - as an invisible, spiritual presence in their hearts. The Jesus who resides in their hearts is the risen Christ *'who has gone to heaven and then comes back to your heart...a spirit.'* But listening to these people speak, some will just as easily talk about God being with them as Jesus. God and Jesus are often used interchangeably, suggesting that 'Jesus' is a label or name for a felt experience. What really matters is the *experience* - the experience of love, acceptance, assurance, healing, intimacy and companionship. But the question remains: when believers say that Jesus is with them as their constant friend and companion, which Jesus do they have in mind? According to Harold Bloom, the Jesus who stands at the centre of American evangelical piety is a very solitary and personal American Jesus. Furthermore, he is the resurrected Jesus rather than the crucified Jesus or the Jesus who has ascended to the Father.⁷³ The Jesus of American evangelical faith is a highly selective Jesus from the New Testament who is continued in the contemporary context. 'When they speak, sing, pray about walking with Jesus, they mean neither the man on the road to eventual crucifixion nor the ascended God, but rather the Jesus who walked and lived with his Disciples again for forty days and forty nights.'⁷⁴ Or as Inbody puts it, 'Jesus is the resurrected friend, walking and talking to me along the side of the road or "beside the Syrian sea" or "in the garden" in moments of private luminosity with the repentant sinner. "He walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own."⁷⁵

There is no direct evidence from the data to suggest that the Jesus people inwardly

⁷³ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷⁵ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 87.

converse with is Jesus, the resurrected friend, and more empirical work needs to be done in this area. Quite what connections there are between the Jesus of the heart and the Jesus of the texts remains unclear. The Jesus of the heart is clearly not a first-century social prophet. According to Kuitert, the Jesus of the heart is more like a teddy bear! 'Jesus has to be there for comfort, just as a child has to take its teddy bear to sleep peacefully.'⁷⁶ In the type of 'Jesus-mysticism' outlined above, Jesus becomes the vehicle 'by which people can express their religious longings, their need for acceptance, for comfort' and its emotional value cannot be overestimated.⁷⁷ The data clearly show that Jesus as a constant companion in one's heart or by one's side brings much reassurance, security and comfort. Knowing Jesus in this way is reported to be transformative, that is, salvific. The personal relationship with Jesus is sustained primarily by the reinforcing structure of evangelical worship and evangelical discourse. Worship songs and choruses to Jesus evoke, reinforce and sustain the experiential encounter with Jesus, as does fellowship with other evangelicals. So, for the evangelicals in the sample, Jesus saves in two main ways: he saves through his atoning death and he saves by being a constant companion.

To summarise the soteriological findings so far: the evangelicals and the exemplarists, who together make up just over one third of the sample, both have their own distinctive, if antithetical, theologies of the cross. The traditionalists have what can only be described as a passive theology of the cross; leaving just under a third of the sample unaccounted for. This last group are united in finding the cross '*very difficult to understand*' and can perhaps be said to have a confused theology of the cross. The next chapter seeks to address some of their difficulties or '*muddles*'.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, 198-199.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁷⁸ Some of these difficulties are experienced by the exemplarists and traditionalists as well. Those with a 'confused' theology of the cross nearly all have a functional christology.

Chapter 7

SOTERIOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES

Saved from what?

For those who have a confused theology of the cross, the key technical terms - atonement, redemption, salvation - all 'do not have much meaning.' Such vocabulary is 'dead capital.' It has no 'legal tender.'¹ The noun 'salvation' refers either to an act of saving or to the state of having been (or being) saved. It has a negative as well as a positive moment: salvation *from* (e.g. death) and salvation *for* (e.g. life).² The term is virtually meaningless for many as they have no sense of having been (or being) saved. The idea does not relate to their own religious experience at all. 'Saved from what?' they ask. Matthew Fox tells of a woman saying to him at a conference, 'I have always wondered what I was being redeemed from. But I was afraid to ask.'³ Wiles observes that, 'For people today the language of "salvation", the whole idea that men and women need to be "saved", has far less resonance than it did in the past.'⁴ Words like salvation and its associates 'saviour' and 'save', fail to 'touch down' in people's experience and to address their deepest concerns.⁵ Such language has no purchase on anything. The data show that it is not just these words which fail to communicate meaningfully. Much of the traditional soteriological language fails to touch down also. Unlike the traditionalists, those with a confused theology of the cross admit to be puzzled by many of the traditional soteriological affirmations and openly acknowledge their lack of understanding. The phrase 'Jesus died to save us from our sins' typically elicits this kind of response. Sheila, a life-long churchgoer, says:

'I don't understand what "he saved us from our sins" really means. I think that is a difficult one.'

'I don't quite understand redemption. Yes. I know what is said and I listen to it, but I'm

¹ To borrow phrases from Leander E. Keck, *A Future For The Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 158.

² *Ibid.*, 154.

³ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1993), 51.

⁴ Maurice Wiles, *Reason to Believe* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 75.

⁵ Patrick Sherry, *Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 2.

not quite sure...what saving from our sin means...or...well, that's it. I could have a lesson or two on that [laugh]. Could you describe what you understand by redemption?'

It has been said that 'Christ Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3) is the single most frequently used lens through which Christians in the New Testament sought to understand Jesus.⁶ The data suggest that many today have difficulty understanding Jesus through this lens. They cannot make sense of the language. They do not know what conclusions to draw from it. The traditional ways of theologising the death of Jesus, using ideas of forgiveness, salvation, sacrifice, penalty, remission of sins, substitution, justification - to name just a few - do not seem to connect with many in my sample. They find such theologising of Jesus' death '*very difficult to understand.*' It follows from this that they are not attaching the same theological significance to Jesus' death as the tradition does. Haight writes, 'The language of Jesus suffering for us, of being a sacrifice to God, of absorbing punishment for sin in our place, of being required to die to render satisfaction to God, hardly communicates meaningfully to our age. These concepts do not intersect at all with present consciousness.'⁷ And in a similar vein, Monica Furlong says:

If the Christian churches are to survive their present crisis then they need to find, as the early Christians did, new language and fresh thinking. Slapping down the old money - unity, salvation, hope, the Son of God, forgiveness - as if it is still legal tender, will not work. We bite the coin and find it counterfeit.⁸

The reasons people gave for their puzzlements with the traditional soteriological language are many and various. Those most frequently cited are mentioned below. (It must be said that not every soteriological difficulty is felt by all.)

⁶ So claims Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology*, 52.

⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 241.

⁸ Cited in Sherry, *Images of Redemption*, 2. The original citation comes from a review by Monica Furlong of Pope John Paul II's book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* in the *Independent* in 1994.

Where is the evidence?

Several find it hard to make sense of the claim that Jesus came to save the world from sin, because of the lack of any empirical evidence to substantiate such a claim. In view of the persistence of the power of sin and evil in history and peoples' lives, such a claim can seem not only audacious but also offensive, especially where sensitivity to the problem of human suffering and evil is most acute.

Edward

'I don't understand the concept that Jesus came to save us from sin. I don't understand...I mean that almost implies that BC there was this massive amount of sin. Jesus comes along and saves us all and then you know, somehow AD, it is all different. I don't understand that.'

Suzanne

'To say that Jesus died for our sins...I have trouble relating to that because we are still sinning now, but he died all those years ago and I can't relate the two things together.'

Sin, evil and suffering, the perennial loci of the human predicament, have not been 'made well' through Jesus' death on the cross. '*Sin did not cease to be once Jesus had come.*' Evil continues to stalk the world. Therefore how can sin and evil be said to have been dealt with? The same problem is raised by the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo in his novel *The Samurai*. The samurai is looking at a crucifix and is puzzled:

*'I...I have no desire to worship you,' he murmured almost apologetically. 'I can't even understand why the foreigners respect you. They say you died bearing the sins of mankind, but I can't see that our lives have become any easier as a result. I know what wretched lives the peasants lead in the marshland. Nothing has changed just because you died.'*⁹

The samurai had been told that Jesus would save all mankind, but he could not understand what that salvation meant. Jews too are puzzled by the problem of how Christians can believe that the world has indeed been redeemed. Martin Buber has said that 'to the Jew the Christian is the incomprehensibly daring man, who affirms in an

⁹ Shusaku Endo, *The Samurai*, trans. C. van Gessel (New York: Harper & Row/Kodansha International, 1982), 173.

unredeemed world that its redemption has been accomplished.'¹⁰ In view of the lack of apparent evidence that the world has indeed been saved or redeemed, how can the death of Jesus two thousand years ago be said to have made such a supposed difference? The world does not look redeemed and these Christians do not feel redeemed.

Colin Gunton is aware that the power and persistence of sin and evil in the world makes the constitutive (or objective) view of atonement vulnerable to attack. The constitutive view of atonement claims that Jesus' death on the cross is not just illustrative or demonstrative of the saving will of God, but is an essential component of it. Such an approach insists that Jesus does not just reveal something of importance to humanity; he achieves something for humanity - something without which salvation would not be possible. The satisfaction and classic *Christus victor* atonement theories both provide such a constitutive role for Jesus. In the former theory, Jesus achieves forgiveness of sin for the whole human race and in the latter theory he achieves, through his cross and resurrection, a decisive victory over sin, evil and death. Gunton argues for this latter view. He raises the question of whether 'the real evil of the real world is faced and healed *ontologically* in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus', and argues that there must be some sense in which this is true. If not, he fears a slide back into merely exemplarist and subjective understandings of salvation which deny any constitutive role to Jesus. He argues that *non-constitutive* understandings must be resisted because they deny that salvation for the whole world is dependent on what happened on Good Friday.¹¹

But why is there not more empirical evidence to demonstrate that the particular event of Jesus' death has effected a universal, or even widespread change? Gunton accounts for the limited empirical effects of the Christ event by insisting that the ontological healing of real evil in the real world has to be 'realised' (in the sense of 'made real') in time and space by and through human responses.¹² He also finds resources for defending the

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 2nd ed. 1963), 40.

¹¹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 165.

¹² *Ibid.*, 170.

constitutive claim in eschatology. The response to the empirical embarrassment of failing to show clear evidence in support of the constitutive claim is often defended by stressing the eschatological dimension of the fulfilled work of Christ. 'Because the full effects of reconciliation are "kept in heaven" we should not expect to see it all empirically realized in this world, either within or beyond Christendom.'¹³ To the extent that the main effects of Christ's victory are conceived as being operative in the eternal realm rather than in earthly history, the constitutive claim can be asserted 'without fear or favour' from empirical evidence (or lack of it).¹⁴ But this defensive strategy is unlikely to convince those, like Edward, for whom life after death is *'not something that is particularly important.'* He is more concerned about life before death. What use is it for him to know that real evil in the real world has supposedly been healed ontologically in some other world? What help is that in the midst of this-worldly struggles against historical evil? Where what matters is salvation from sin and evil in this world, perhaps only an exemplarist or illustrative account of atonement may be of any help.

Why did Jesus have to die?

Any account of atonement that narrates events or transactions that occur in another world is mythological. Similarly, any account that speaks of Jesus absorbing the punishment for human sin in order to satisfy the demands of justice or pay the debt that was due also uses mythic language. This kind of mythic symbolism is, it is claimed, 'plainly unintelligible in a postmodern culture.'¹⁵ It is certainly plainly unintelligible to some of the life-long churchgoers in my sample. Eleanor has attended an Emmaus course (as have several of this group) and had substitutionary atonement explained to her by her evangelical housegroup leaders, but she still says:

'What I have raised a query about, is why did Jesus have to die? I'm still...I don't

¹³ Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation: An Essay in Universalism and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 17.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 348.

understand why Jesus had to die for the sins.'
'I find [the cross] all a bit complicated [laugh]. I think I will forget about that one...what I don't understand is why he had to die for our sins.'

Every 'explanation' of the cross which she has been given has failed to convince. She just cannot understand why a death was necessary for God to forgive sin. Valerie, similarly, finds the death '*totally unnecessary.*' She says:

'I really don't understand and I never have really understood why Jesus had to die like he did. I know that he's...because of all this sacrifice business. Um...and of course how it is all tied back to Adam and that fatal sin, you know. And Jesus was therefore sent on earth and sacrificed because God loves us...well I have always had a bit of a problem with that. It is totally unnecessary.'

As we saw in the last chapter, others also have difficulty with any claim about the necessity of an atoning death, indicating that there is a widespread problem with this idea. If, as Sykes contends, atonement, understood as the forgiveness of sins by the shedding of the blood of Jesus, is 'the very heart of the faith', then the fact that this idea is problematic for so many must surely be a cause for concern.¹⁶ But the difficulties for this sample are obviously not that grave - after all they are all still regular churchgoers. That the problems with such a key concept can so readily be laid aside, suggests that atonement is not the very heart of faith for them; they do not place as much emphasis on Jesus' death as academic theologians (or evangelicals) do. It may be said that they tend to circumvent atonement. They can do this because they have no need for a redeemer or mediator, substitute or representative to 'do something' about sin. It does not follow from this that they have a weak or inadequate understanding of sin - the charge usually levelled against non-constitutive theories of atonement. Rather, the data suggest that it is precisely because they take the power and persistence of sin and evil in the world so seriously that they cannot accept that somehow it has all been 'dealt with' on the cross. The feminist theologian, Christine Smith, says that she 'will never understand or embrace language that suggests that Jesus' death on a cross, or any death on a cross, breaks the power of sin, transforms human conditions or shatters evil.'¹⁷ The

¹⁶ Sykes, *The Story of the Atonement*, 6.

¹⁷ Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 158.

data suggest that many in the sample would agree with her.

The most fundamental claim of soteriology is that the cross reconciles God and estranged creatures. But many find this claim simply unintelligible. The idea that the cross was necessary for reconciliation to occur is '*something I will never understand.*' The most oft-repeated query was, '*Why did Jesus have to die?*' To explain Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sin would have made sense to the first Christians in view of the central role which sacrifice played in the Jewish religion at that time. To explain Jesus' death as the satisfaction due to God on account of the offence of sin would have been intelligible to the church in the medieval period, but such explanations are not credible any more. The penal substitution theory still appeals to a few, but many find it totally implausible. The idea that it is God who is primarily injured by sin or that guilt can be removed from a wrongdoer by someone else being punished instead fails to convince. The underlying problem is that people cannot see why a specific act is required in order for reconciliation to occur. The fact that the specific act is a '*hellish violent*' and '*gruesome*' death only exacerbates the problem. This response may be even stronger now for those who have seen Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*.

Atonement theology is based on the underlying premise that sin causes estrangement. But many of this sample have never felt that their being 'a sinner' has prevented them from entering into a relationship with God. In these circumstances, atonement theology appears to be largely redundant. Concepts such as justification - being made righteous by the death of Jesus - have little currency in such a climate. Whilst there are some Pelagian tendencies in this group, the general mood is not one of self-justification. Rather, there is a strong sense that it is God's loving presence to human existence alone that 'saves' and 'makes well.' All is grace. Because they experience God as always willing to enter into a relationship with them, they cannot understand why Jesus' death was necessary for God to be able to accept sinners. If God is loving and forgiving now and always has been, then why was Jesus' death necessary for God to accept sinners? Such puzzlements make the constitutive claim that the death of Jesus transformed God's relationship with sinners, and caused or enabled God to accept and love sinners, difficult to accept. The problem of the necessity of Jesus' death for forgiveness to be granted was raised in the last chapter. It is sufficient to add here that this difficulty is

not new. Objections to the idea that forgiveness is dependent on Jesus' atoning death have been around for a very long time.¹⁸ It would seem that like many before them, the majority of the sample prefer a theology based on God's free forgiveness for penitent sinners that obviates the need for an atoning death.

Puzzlement also arises from the how question concerning the causality of Jesus' saving work, as well as the why question. How can the shedding of one man's blood actually effect forgiveness for the sins of the world? There is a consensus among many modern writers that the New Testament is silent about the causality linking Jesus' death to human liberation from sin. The writers of the New Testament make no attempt to offer a causal explanation as to how the death of Jesus liberated the human race from sin. The workings of sacrifice are not explained; no proper theory is ever given as to how the act of sacrifice could remove sin and guilt from the community or from individuals.¹⁹ Michael Winter complains that many modern authors also fail to solve the question of causality convincingly. But reasonable explanations are, he claims, what today's enquirer, be she agnostic or believer, so urgently needs. He writes:

The modern reader, who finds the death of Jesus so repugnant . . . desperately needs to be given a positive and cogent account of how humanity was liberated from sin, in order to make sense of an apparently senseless crucifixion. The intrinsic efficacy of sacrifices no longer convinces the modern mind, and contemporary enquirers are entitled to something satisfactory with which to replace the ancient convictions about blood offerings.²⁰

Winter offers his own explanation to the question of causality: Jesus secured reconciliation for the human race by intercession, by asking for our reconciliation with God.²¹ I have my doubts whether the believers studied here would find his solution any more compelling than any other. As Valerie says:

¹⁸ See McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology*, 109-115.

¹⁹ Michael Winter gathers together a number of modern writers who all agree that the New Testament offers no explanation as to how the atonement was effected. See the references cited in Winter, *The Atonement* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 30-37. See also 11-27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 87-114.

'Occasionally when it is discussed on the radio I do listen on purpose. But I suppose I have given up because every explanation that they try to give, or I have heard given, is unsatisfactory. I find it unsatisfactory...But I have a sneaking suspicion that I will never feel at ease with it, no matter what explanation is given to me.'

Unlike Winter, none of this group feels the need to defend a constitutive view of atonement. They therefore do not need explanations in the same way that constitutivists do. For many, Jesus' death is a senseless crucifixion: *'Why couldn't he have lived a lot longer?'* They find it very hard to see how a positive evaluation can ever be put on such a *'heart-breaking'*, *'violent'*, *'horrendous'* and *'cruel'* event. Haight asserts that *'the strange and tortuous explanations'* that are generally given of how the cross could have been positive and salvific cannot begin to make any sense to a postmodern imagination.²² These data suggest that he is right.

A sadistic God?

There is evidence that the primary reason why some people prefer *'not to think too much about [the cross]'* and its meaning is not because they have no need for an atoning death, although this certainly seems to be the case, but because they have an innate aversion to *'all that suffering'* and to the notion that something as *'awful'* and *'horrendous'* as the killing of Jesus could possibly accommodate a positive interpretation. How can the suffering and death of Jesus be anything but evil? What can possibly be good about Good Friday? Atonement is *'territory strewn with images and assumptions of violence'* and some of the women in particular (around four) are put off by this.²³ Atonement theology starts with violence - with the killing of Jesus - and the data suggest a deep repugnance to this violence, which may account for low attendance at Good Friday services. As Jan says,

'I am very squeamish about physical pain. I'm someone who hates going to the dentist. So I don't like to think too much about [the cross]. And then the Methodist hymns that I learnt as a child. Man of sorrows and things. Why am I singing about this? Um...so that

²² Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 345.

²³ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 1. More data are needed to establish how widespread the difficulties outlined in this section actually are.

is all muddled.'

That this violent death was in any way necessary or required for the salvation of sinful humanity is something they '*just don't understand.*' '*Such a violent death. And then the spear in the side. It's all...oh I think it is heart-breaking.*' There is considerable antipathy towards turning the crucifixion of Jesus - the killing of an innocent victim - into something good. Traditionally the cross has been celebrated as something good because it resulted in the salvation of sinful humankind. Without atonement what is there to celebrate about the cross? Only atonement for human sin puts the good into Good Friday and, as we have seen, for many in the sample (not just these four women) this is missing.

Inevitably, there is also some resistance to the idea that Jesus' death and suffering was in any way required by God to make salvation effective, for what kind of God would require it? A God who expects or demands the death of his only Son is '*a cruel Father figure*', or as Julie Hopkins puts it, '*not a God of love but a sadist and a despot.*'²⁴

Valerie says:

'When Jesus cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", I always think that that is the most sympathetic thing that he ever says. Because you do, you think, where the hell were you and why did you let him go through that? And I have always thought that they are very powerful words. And sometimes I feel a little bit alienated from God in some of those...particularly when it comes to the Easter time, because it was...perhaps it comes down to one of the television programmes I saw at a very young age...it is an horrific story. It comes down to, how could God put Jesus through that? And you always think, whenever you watch it or hear it, perhaps something will happen and he will get let off and he never has to be crucified. But maybe there is that masterful thing...it all comes back to Milton doesn't it...all that masterful thing about God being a bad person and a cruel Father-figure to actually put him through that.'

'And I have the most sympathetic view for those who say that Milton depicts God as the most unpleasant old man [...] So God as a sort of omnipotent big bully...that's never really left me.'

It is the contention of many pacifist, black, feminist and womanist theologians that not only the traditional sacrificial view of atonement, but also the satisfaction and substitutionary models, have promoted violence and a punitive view of God. What kind

²⁴ Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology*, 50

of God can require an innocent one to suffer on the cross, especially his own 'dearly beloved Son'? Is this not a picture of God as a sadist, a monster, a tyrant, a 'big bully'? Certainly, for those such as Valerie, the cross does not function as a symbol of God's love, as it does for others in the sample.²⁵ She cannot see it that way: a God of love would never have allowed Jesus to go through the crucifixion. Rather than demonstrating the love of God, the cross reveals God to be 'a cruel Father figure.' For Valerie, the difficulties with traditional atonement doctrine stem from the interpretation of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. She says:

'I don't believe in sacrifice in that sense anyway. You read those awful things. About that torso that was found in the Thames. I mean it has all those resonances about it. As soon as people mention sacrifices and first-borns being slain, I just don't understand it.'

'Every year when we come around to Easter and this sacrifice...the issue of sacrifice and the lamb to be slaughtered to save us from our sins...how, you know, Jesus being crucified on the cross helps me be saved from my sins. I don't understand.'

Patrick Sherry asserts that 'The notion of the sacrifice of a human being, or of an animal, as expiatory or propitiatory seems strange, if not absurd, to many people today.'²⁶ Incidents of reported sacrifice, be they animal or human, are greeted with a mixture of horror and perplexity. The practice is thought to be 'revolting.'²⁷ The ancient practice of sacrifice and belief in the powerful religious efficacy of shed blood is completely alien to the modern mind. Gunton asserts that sacrifice, in this sense at least, has ceased to be a living metaphor and for the most part it has become not merely a dead, but a debased metaphor, prone to misuse and trivialisation. Nevertheless, he insists that to understand Jesus' death as a sacrifice is to go to the heart of the doctrine of the atonement, and that 'the notion of sacrifice, tired and misused as it often is, remains a matchless conceptual expression of the theological significance of all that Jesus began and continued among us.'²⁸ However, for people like Valerie, the language of sacrifice only has negative connotations and remains an unhelpful, dead metaphor, which has no currency. It only serves to promote a negative view of God. Not only can the idea of Jesus' death as a sacrifice suggest placating an angry God (propitiation), it

²⁵ See above, 'The cross as a demonstration of the love of God', p. 123-126.

²⁶ Sherry, *Images of Redemption*, 38.

²⁷ Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement*, 116.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127. See also the rest of the chapter entitled 'Christ the Sacrifice: a Dead Metaphor?', 115-141.

also suggests that God in some way demands the blood of the innocent victim before he will enter into relation with his people. According to Sherry, 'the idea of an atoning sacrifice, at least as it was sometimes presented traditionally (e.g. in terms of propitiating an angry God) seems to be bad moral doctrine, if not sado-masochistic.'²⁹

Because the metaphor of sacrifice can so easily be misunderstood, many academic theologians have advocated abandonment of the metaphor altogether. Feminist theologians, in particular, have been trenchant in their criticisms. Joan Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, in their well-known essay, 'For God So Loved The World?', use the image of divine child abuse to depict the suffering by Jesus at the request of the Father. 'Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers "without even raising a voice" is lauded as the hope of the world.'³⁰ Some would say that to conceive Jesus as the victim of divine child abuse is to commit the sin of reading metaphorical language literally.³¹ The words 'Father' and 'Son', the atonement language of 'sacrifice' and expressions about God 'delivering up' his own son (Romans 8:32), for example, are all metaphorical ways of speaking and to treat them in a naively realist fashion as literal descriptions is mistaken. But the feminist critique is (in part) levelled against the language of metaphor being treated literally. In the feminist critique, 'Father', 'Son' and 'sacrifice' are all models (systematic and relatively permanent metaphors) that have 'gone astray' by being treated literally and used exclusively.³²

The image of abuse in the traditional atonement model offends Valerie, as it does Brown and Parker and many other feminist theologians as well. Many feminist critics then go on to make the point that the image of divinely sanctioned abuse (violence), which appears in the traditional theories of atonement, functions to justify and reinforce the suffering and acceptance of abuse by Christians, and especially by women. In Brown and Parker's view, the central image of Christ on the cross as the saviour of the

²⁹ Sherry, *Images of Redemption*, 38.

³⁰ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?' in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds), *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 2.

³¹ See Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 165. Cf. Kuitert, *The Legacy of Christianity*, 157-160.

³² See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, esp. 145-194.

world who 'died for our sins' communicates the message that suffering in general is redemptive.³³ It is claimed that the image of divinely-sanctioned, innocent suffering has therefore contributed to the victimisation of women in both church and society, in that Jesus, functioning as *the* model of innocent and passive submission to abuse, encourages women to submit passively to abuse and reinforces the victim role for women. This kind of atonement theology is thus said to encourage 'martyrdom and victimisation', and as this theology of abuse is internalised so the cycle of abuse is perpetuated.³⁴ Atonement theology has even been identified as the central force in shaping Christian women's acceptance of abuse: 'The image of God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression.'³⁵ By underwriting a sacralisation of suffering and abuse, traditional atonement theology is 'an abusive theology that glorifies suffering', and should be done away with.³⁶

Other feminist theologians, such as Hopkins, agree with Brown and Parker's central thesis that the predominant image of traditional atonement theology is one of 'divine child abuse', in which God the Father demands and carries out the suffering and death of his own son, but do not share their view that the cross has no redemptive possibilities, arguing that it is possible to rethink the meaning of the cross in ways that do not render suffering salvific and that avoid a model of God as the author or agent of the death of Jesus. In putting forward her own proposal for a Christian theology of atonement which seeks to avoid the harmful dimensions of traditional atonement theology, Hopkins suggests a radical restructuring of understandings of God and of the sufferings of Jesus in a theology she calls 'The Scandal of the Vulnerable God.'³⁷ Unlike Hopkins, however, most ordinary believers do not appear to possess either the skill or the desire to reinterpret the cross in ways that avoid the abusive features of traditional atonement theory. They simply lose atonement, as Brown and Parker advocate they should, disregarding those features of the received theology that they find

³³ Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved The World?', 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology*, 55-63.

either unacceptable, distasteful and/or incomprehensible.

Some feminist critiques voice specific concerns about the effects of atonement theories upon women's psychological, spiritual and physical well-being. They argue, for example, that far from 'saving' women, the death of Christ only deepens their guilt.³⁸ It is women who have traditionally been made to bear the primary guilt for human sin, since it was women who initiated human disobedience in the story of the Fall. If women had not caused sin in the first place, Christ would not have had to suffer to rescue us. That Jesus suffers (is punished) in our place is not salvific, therefore, as it engenders feelings of guilt and unworthiness in women who feel guilt at having caused the sin that made the suffering necessary. The full impact of the traditional atonement theology on the behaviour and attitudes of those who imbibe it through worship is difficult to assess accurately without further empirical work being undertaken. My instinct is that those who question the traditional atonement theology are far less likely to be negatively influenced by it than those who passively accept it, as the evangelicals and the traditionalists tend to do. But this can be little more than a guess. What the data do suggest is that many of the women in the sample are far more discriminating than many feminist theologians presume. They do not internalise the supposed 'theology of abuse' implicit in the liturgy and hymnody, but resist it. Valerie, for example, says, *'I hate the business that it is Eve that tempts Adam'* and dismisses the story of the Fall (along with much of the teaching of St. Paul, whom she considers to be a misogynist) as *'not very helpful to us.'* There is no passive acceptance of blame or guilt evidenced here.

This is worth exploring further. Hopkins asserts that 'When theologians, missionaries, and preachers blame on a subjugated people or an inferiorized sex the sins that lead to the death of Christ and demand penitential self-denial, the result is not redemptive.' When women are blamed for the sins that lead to the death of Jesus they are 'loaded with a sense of interiorized guilt and self-hatred.'³⁹ Atonement theology is thus 'a recipe

³⁸ See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Western Religious Tradition and Violence Against Women in the Home', in Brown and Bohn (eds) *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, 31-41. Cf. Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 95-107.

³⁹ Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology*, 54.

for depression and self-hatred.⁴⁰ Brown and Parker make the same point, saying that atonement theology, because it reinforces the victim role for women, 'can lead to destruction of the human spirit through the death of a person's sense of power, worth, dignity, or creativity.'⁴¹ There are hints in the data that this could be happening with some, but equally there is strong evidence of resistance to the scapegoat and victim role in others. Suzanne says, '*I suppose I don't like to think of him being put to death because of my sins*', and Pat remarks:

'I've always found Jesus' death rather difficult. Again I recognise...and I recognised this quite a long time ago...that that again was a psychological disturbance that I had. The reason I found it difficult was because of my father. It was a silly thing. But when he went into one of his rages, he used to say, for whatever reason, I fought the Second World War... for you. Bear in mind that this was a rage. He used to go like that (wags finger). But it was the "for you" bit that used to get to me. He was kind of laying guilt at my feet. And when I went to church, not long after I had become a Christian, as I put it, in the communion service there is a bit where it says something like, Jesus died for you, he laid down his life for you. There are a lot of "for yous" in it. And I found myself becoming very, very uncomfortable and feeling acutely guilty. And what I wanted to stand up in church and shout was, "I didn't bloomin' well ask you to die for me. What are you talking about? I didn't ask you to do that". Which of course is what I wanted to say to my father when I was a little girl. I wanted to ask what the Second World War had to do with me. So there was this whole psychological hiccup. So I have always had a bit of a hang-up about the cross. Because I have never really got deeply into it. I tried...I did try desperately hard to get into it.'

Both Suzanne and Pat go on to report an increased sense of self-worth and value since 'going back to church' or 'becoming a Christian', indicating that whatever their difficulties with traditional atonement theology might be, they do not prevent them from experiencing Christian salvation: a salvation that is most likely to be mediated via Jesus, but which has little to do with his cross, certainly as the cross is traditionally interpreted. This leads on to the question of how Jesus does save, if he does not save by atoning for human sin.

How does Jesus save?

As we have seen, the data quite clearly show that much traditional atonement theology

⁴⁰ Ibid., 50.

⁴¹ Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved The World?', 7.

and language is a stumbling block to many. Some find it offensive; most are simply puzzled by it. Either way, it is beyond dispute that the traditional ways of interpreting the cross do not communicate meaningfully to a number of the sample. Haight asserts that the images associated with the language of traditional atonement theology 'offend and even repulse postmodern sensibility and thereby form a barrier to a salutary appreciation of Jesus Christ.'⁴² The data show that those who find the traditional atonement theology difficult or puzzling, or even offensive, simply circumvent it. They 'put it on one side' or 'park it', saying 'there is too much else that is important to let that get in the way.' They do not allow the difficulties it presents to get in the way of their spirituality. One wonders, of course, how many others have not been able to do this. For how many is traditional atonement theology a barrier which they cannot circumvent, a barrier which prevents them, not necessarily from appreciating Jesus Christ, but from participating in organized religion? Only further empirical work among non-churchgoers can answer *that* question.

Theologians such as Gunton argue that the language of traditional atonement theology is still usable and continues to contain rich treasures of meaning for Christian thinking about the cross. Others, like Haight, insist that it functions only as an obstacle to faith and should be abandoned. Hick advocates our ceasing to employ Anselmian language in contemporary liturgies and theologies.⁴³ Inbody insists that all ideas of vengeance, retaliation, satisfaction, and payment must be eliminated from Christian teaching about redemption.⁴⁴ Ruether argues that 'feminist liberation critiques of the classical theology of the cross should force Christian theologians and liturgists to tell the Jesus story in a different way, a way that [she believes] is more authentic to its historical reality.' According to Ruether, Jesus did not 'come to suffer and die', but to bring 'good news to the poor, the liberation of the captive.' He did not seek to be killed by the powers that be or to offer his life as the necessary means of redemption. Such notions are 'later Christian rationalizations in the face of the terrible reality of the crucifixion.' Redemption occurs, rather, 'through resistance to the sway of evil, and in the

⁴² Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 241.

⁴³ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 118.

⁴⁴ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 163.

experiences of conversion and healing by which communities of well-being are created.⁴⁵ According to Ruether, therefore, the symbol of the cross should be re-clothed in this theology.

Although many people do not get as far as re-clothing the cross in any articulate theology (there are hints that if they could they would follow in the same general direction as Ruether), they do effectively undress the cross of its traditional theological clothing. They do not view the cross through the theological trappings of traditional atonement theory at all. By questioning the need for the crucifixion, even considering it to be *'totally unnecessary'*, they are implicitly rejecting the traditional atonement theology. They do not consider the cross to be the pivotal point in time when God reconciled the human race to himself, nor do they perceive the cross to be a necessary condition for the forgiveness of sin. For this group of churchgoers, Christianity without atonement may be said to be their dominant theological position. The death of Jesus remains, for many, an appalling tragedy which they do not theologise into something good.

Several comment that Jesus' death had to be a very public death so that he would be *'marked out'* as the link to God. Such comments confirm that they are not interpreting the cross in terms of traditional atonement theology at all. Edward says,

'I suppose his whole death and his resurrection had to be done in a way that people would notice because otherwise his purpose on earth would somehow have been missed.'

And Jesus' purpose, according to Edward, was not to suffer and die as an atonement for human sin, but to be the link to God. *'The reason Jesus came was to establish and provide a link to God...Jesus has provided the link...by his legacy of life on earth.'* Most people point to the life of Jesus as the source of salvific potential. Jesus' death retains a complex appeal, as the death of any innocent victim does, especially one designated Son of God. But his death is never conceived in terms of atonement for human sin.

⁴⁵ Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 104-105.

They do not claim salvation via the death of Jesus. Rather they claim salvation through the whole Jesus event. Hence the death of Jesus does not carry the theological weight it does in academic (or evangelical) theology. Jesus died. Attaching the theological phrase 'to save us from our sins' seems to add little and could be dropped, although most say that they are happy to 'go along with what is given', for 'It is part of the tradition.' Unlike the revisionist academic theologians they do not plead for the language to be changed. These ordinary churchgoers are not theological radicals; they do not champion construction of a new set of theological metaphors, but make do with the old, even though they do not find them particularly helpful or comprehensible. This perhaps suggests that when they use the traditional atonement language in worship they may be using it expressively or non-cognitively. This interpretation will be discussed further in chapter 9.

It does not follow that, when atonement for human sin is disregarded or is not understood, Jesus' death on the cross ceases to have redemptive possibilities. Exemplarist soteriology has shown that the cross *can be* separated from traditional atonement theology without loss of redemptive possibility or power. Revisionist theologians have shown how the cross can be reinterpreted as redemptive in ways which avoid, even reject, the liabilities of the classical models. But as far as most ordinary believers go, these redemptive potentialities of the cross are largely unfulfilled, since they prefer to keep the cross at arm's length as 'a mystery', something which they 'don't want to think too much about.' Academic theology seeks to understand how the cross can be an answer to the problem of sin and suffering. Much ordinary theology would not think of looking to the cross in this way. The cross is 'an ordeal that Jesus went through'; it is a compelling narrative, which evokes emotional rather than reasoned/articulated theological responses. Ordinary believers do not analyse theologically the narrative of the cross or look to it to provide answers to the perennial human problems of evil, sin and suffering. Rather they see it as a part of a *story*: Jesus' death is the event that climaxed his life of preaching, teaching, deeds, etc. The death of Jesus is something that happened to him; they do not think through or develop the story into doctrine. They do not stake out a theological position on the cross or agonise about how it should be understood.

It is generally recognised that atonement theology has preoccupied Protestants more than Catholics. 'Since Catholic belief accords believers immediate access to the saving grace of Christ in the sacraments, Catholicism has not sensed the same need as Protestants to guarantee access to God's grace via a correct doctrine of atonement.'⁴⁶ It would seem that many in the sample have no need for a correct doctrine of atonement and there is evidence to suggest that some have no need for a high doctrine of the sacraments either. For these Christians, God's saving presence is not dependent on either right doctrine or sacraments, but is freely available to all. Churchgoing helps because it nurtures right relationship with God, but it is by no means essential. Such an egalitarian and democratic approach to encounter with God renders atonement doctrine (amongst other things) superfluous. From this perspective, salvation is no more and no less than God's self-gift or presence to a person; salvation consists in being conscious of one's union with God. Jesus plays his part in the experience of salvation, not by atoning for human sin, but through being God's representative on earth. As such he reveals and mediates God's saving presence to humanity. In short, Jesus saves because Christians encounter God in and through him, as he bears God's love, forgiveness and friendship to humanity. '*Jesus shows us that God loves us and forgives us.*' For many, it is Jesus' life, as much as his death or resurrection, which mediates God's saving presence. Like the exemplarists, it is Jesus' life and public ministry that many people turn to as the focal point of his salvific activity, a life which '*opens up new possibilities for us*' and which they can more readily engage with. As Jill puts it:

'I know the cross is pivotal...and it is a vital part of the whole picture, but I am not hung up on it. To me the story of the life of Jesus and the things that happened when he was living are just as important as how he died and even why he died and also the things that happened after his death...you know...the way the gospel was spread, the early church, the relationship with Paul and all of those things that we can learn from there mean as much to me.'

Contextual and exemplarist theologies stress that the whole of Jesus life is important for soteriology. They emphasis the redemptive significance of Jesus' public ministry and do not 'isolate his death from his life-praxis and posit it alone as redemptive in itself.'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2

⁴⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Critical Social Theory and Christology', 101-102.

For Delores Williams (who was mentioned earlier in relation to exemplarist soteriology), it is not Jesus' death which redeems us but his life: 'Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' *ministerial* vision of life and not through his death.'⁴⁸ She therefore argues that it is the synoptic gospels, more than Paul's letters, that provide resources for constructing a Christian understanding of salvation that speaks meaningfully to people such as black women. Much of the ordinary soteriology of this sample is narrative rather than conceptually-based and seems to be little influenced by the complex atonement theology of Paul. It also refuses to tie the concept of salvation too closely to the death of Jesus. As we have seen, many find it hard to understand how the death of Jesus can be said to save us and are much more comfortable with the idea that salvation comes through Jesus' life and teaching.

Those who do focus on the death of Jesus as the means of salvation, that is, those who hold a substitutionary view of atonement, tend to give the impression that the life of Jesus is of secondary importance, since what really matters is that a blood price was paid. Their accounts of how Jesus saves therefore ignore both the historical circumstances which brought about his death and the redemptive significance of his life. For them, salvation comes through the cross alone. However, as the transcripts show, the life of Jesus does play a large part in their present experience of salvation and cannot be said to be of secondary importance. It is ironic that those who eschew reference to the salvific potential of Jesus' life in their theoretical accounts of salvation are the very ones who in practice are most likely to experience salvation through it, since they are the ones who engage in spiritual practices that foster redemptive engagement with the life of Jesus. (This process will be discussed further in chapter 10.)

Emphasising the life of Jesus as salvific, rather than his death, brings this ordinary soteriology, like the exemplarist soteriology discussed earlier, closer to the Eastern rather than Western emphasis in thinking about Christian salvation. As we saw in the last chapter, on the Western/Latin view, to be saved is to be relieved of guilt by Jesus' atoning death. On the Eastern/Orthodox view, however, salvation is conceived of as deification. In the Eastern understanding of salvation there is a strong link with the

⁴⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

doctrine of the incarnation, since it is through the incarnation that the possibility of deification is made possible. An emphasis on the whole of Jesus' life as salvific inevitably shifts the focus of attention in soteriology onto the incarnation. One could say that these ordinary believers are redeemed by the incarnation (albeit understood functionally), rather than by the cross. Inbody would encourage such a view. He writes, 'We are redeemed by the incarnation, not the cross. It is through the power of the God who is incarnate in the life, preachings, teachings, healings, passion, death, resurrection, and promised consummation of Jesus Christ we are redeemed. Grace, grace, all is grace.'⁴⁹

The modern liberal view of salvation, initiated by Schleiermacher, is not dissimilar to the Eastern understanding of salvation. One could say, therefore, that much ordinary soteriology is effectively *liberal*, as is much ordinary christology. Schleiermacher's formula on the saving work of Jesus is clear: 'The Redeemer assumes believers into the power of His God-consciousness, and this is His redemptive activity.' Schleiermacher viewed the saving influence of Christ in the context of God's total creative work, so that Christ's 'every activity may be regarded as a continuation of that person-forming divine influence upon human nature.'⁵⁰ Such a soteriology, as Schleiermacher recognises, limits the redeeming action of God in Christ to those individuals who enter into the sphere of Jesus' historical influence as that is extended in history by the church.⁵¹ On this account, the traditional, constitutive claim that Jesus' saving work effects salvation for the whole world, regardless of whether or not all have heard about the Jesus event or whether they consider themselves to be Christians, is lost and the door is opened to a *pluralist understanding* of religious truth. The data show that the majority of the sample are effectively pluralists and it is to a brief survey of this theme that I now turn.

Salvation through Jesus alone?

Three broad approaches to the Christian understanding of the relation between Christianity and other religious traditions are routinely identified, namely exclusivism,

⁴⁹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 163.

⁵⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 425-427.

⁵¹ Ibid. Cf. Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 81-82.

inclusivism and pluralism.⁵² Exclusivism holds that Christianity is the one true religion and that there is no salvation outside of an explicit historical contact with and faith in the person of Jesus Christ as mediated by the church. The dogma that *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, 'Outside the church there is no salvation', has been the teaching of the church throughout most of its history. But in many church circles exclusivism today is a minority position, usually identified with Protestant fundamentalists and conservative evangelical Christians. My data confirm this picture. It was only the evangelicals who strongly asserted that salvation was through Jesus alone and that only Christians would be saved, that is, receive eternal life.

Paul

'Without accepting that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, without accepting that he was the Son of God, then there is no eternal life for you. Like it or not, that's it...when your life is over, that's it. It's over.'

'That's as cut and dried as it is. I mean, that is what it says in the Bible. The only way to get to heaven is through Jesus.'

'I know that somewhere in the Bible it says that the only way to the Father is through the Son.'

'People who have different faiths...they won't go to heaven.'

'It says quite clearly in the Bible, in black and white, that you should worship no other God but me. That's cut and dried.'

Susan

'I don't agree and I never will agree that there are many ways to God, as I have heard people say. There are many ways to Jesus, but only one way to God and that is through Jesus.'

Dorothy

'All Christians will be going to be with Jesus...But for those who have not chosen to follow Jesus in this life [Jesus' second coming] will be terrible and terrifying.'

Exclusivism, as the data show, takes an extremely negative attitude towards other religions. Christianity is uniquely superior; it alone is the one true religion. The exclusivist position was usually defended on the grounds that *'that's what it says in the Bible.'* Certain texts are appealed to and read pre-critically; an exclusivist interpretation

⁵² For an overview of these three approaches, see Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), chapters 2-4 and Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983), chapters 2-4.

being assumed in them.⁵³ A corollary of exclusivism would appear to be missionary obligation. Since only Christians will be saved, converting non-Christians to the Christian faith becomes imperative. Evangelism is another hall-mark of evangelicalism.⁵⁴ It follows that on the exclusivist view only a minority of human beings will actually be saved, since only a small proportion of the world's population are Christian. Exclusivism, in its extreme form, would also exclude many Christians from eternal salvation, since *'they haven't accepted Jesus into their lives as Lord.'* *'They know of Jesus...but they haven't yet come to that personal awareness, relationship.'* A couple of the evangelicals in the sample derogatorily classify other church members as *'churchgoers not Christians'*, because they have not had a 'born again' conversion experience. On this view, the exclusivist claim is not just that Jesus Christ alone constitutes salvation, through being the only 'God-man' and therefore the only person who could make a full atonement for the sins of the world, but also that knowledge about this exclusive saviour is required for salvation. One must acknowledge Jesus explicitly before one can be saved. This harsh view is frequently toned down with some such rider as *'it is up to God to know what is going to happen to them...It is God's decision,'* or *'at the end of the day, my belief is that God is just and that he will do the right thing.'* This is effectively a way of dissipating any cognitive dissonance that is set up between the claim that God is all-loving and wills the salvation of all, and the exclusivist conclusion that most will in fact be lost. *'It's God's problem not mine.'* All such let-out phrases are easy ways of avoiding the serious theological problems that the exclusivist position poses.

Inclusivism is an attractive option for those Christians who want to distance themselves from the exclusivist claim that only Christians will be saved, but who want to maintain the traditional claim that the particularity of the Jesus event is constitutive of universal salvation. Inclusivism holds that salvation is available through other religions *and* that Jesus is the constitutive cause of this salvation. What truth there is in other religions is constituted by God's work in Jesus Christ. Karl Rahner is usually cited as the most

⁵³ The key texts here are John 14:6, Mark 16:15-16, Acts 4:10,12, John 3:16,18 and Romans 10:9-15.

⁵⁴ See Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance*, 72-75.

significant advocate of this model.⁵⁵ It was Rahner who coined the phrase 'anonymous Christians' to refer to those who have experienced divine grace through Christ without necessarily knowing it. No-one in the sample comes close to holding the kind of christocentric inclusivism advocated by Rahner. This, I venture to suggest, is because christocentric inclusivism is a theological position constructed by an academic theologian for other academic theologians, that is, those people seeking an *intellectually satisfying* answer to the problem of retaining the Christian claims to finality while including all of humanity into the work of Christ.⁵⁶ Most ordinary Christians are not theologians in this sense and besides, they have no constitutive claim to defend. They are effectively pluralists in their approach to other religious traditions.⁵⁷

The widespread assumption throughout the sample (evangelicals excepted) that all religions are different ways to the same God is evidence of this pluralist approach.⁵⁸ Most people admitted that they '*couldn't go into it deeply*', but their view was that people of other religions '*are praying to a greater being who in their view is to them what God in the Christian faith is to us.*' On this view, Christianity is one religion among many religions leading to God. Very few saw any theological problem with adopting this approach. This is because there is no problem when one holds a functional or sceptical christology, coupled with a non-traditional understanding of atonement for such a theology allows for a pluralist understanding of religious truth. On this view there is no theological reason for claiming that Christianity is the only one true religion or that all salvation is constituted by Jesus. The majority do not have, and never have had, a theology that would lead them to conclude that only in Jesus can true salvation

⁵⁵ For Karl Rahner's view, see his 'Anonymous Christians', *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), 390-398 and 'One Mediator and Many Mediations', *Theological Investigations*, vol. IX, trans. Graham Harrison (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 169-184.

⁵⁶ Rahner's view depends on a sophisticated metaphysics of the Trinity. According to Haight, 'Only by means of a theoretical or speculative, metaphysical construction can one attempt to understand how Jesus Christ had a causal influence on the salvation of those who have never come in contact with him historically, or who existed before the appearance of Jesus' (*Jesus Symbol of God*, 349). Most ordinary believers eschew such metaphysical speculation. See below, pp. 201-204.

⁵⁷ In one survey, only 44 per cent of churchgoers hold the view that Christianity is the only true religion (Francis, 'The Pews Talk Back', 181). In the recent survey of *Church Times* readers, 46 per cent of the laity and 48 per cent of the clergy believe that Christianity is the only true religion (Francis, *Fragmented Faith*).

⁵⁸ A few people were unsure about what perspective to adopt towards the non-Christian religions and no data was available for one interviewee.

be found or that Jesus caused or causes the salvation of all. In their theology, God can and does save in other ways which are not dependent on or caused by the Jesus event. They have never assumed or learned that the Bible or the church teaches that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Therefore several expressed surprise when this suggestion was put to them. This shows that the 'traditional' mythos is no longer the received doctrine.⁵⁹

This theology is consistent with the pluralist approach as advocated by Hick, one of the most significant exponents of a pluralist approach to religious traditions. He argues that Christianity is 'one among a number of human responses to the ultimate transcendent reality we call God.'⁶⁰ The different religions are, 'so far as we can tell, equally authentic spheres of salvation/liberation, through which the universal presence of the Real, the Ultimate, the Divine is mediated to human beings.'⁶¹ The pluralist position is that there are several true ways to the Ultimate Reality, the Real, the Transcendent (which Christians call God). People of different religious traditions are worshipping the same one Ultimate Reality. Yahweh, the Holy Trinity, Allah, Vishnu, Brahman and so on are different names for the same ultimate reality. Time and time again interviewees would say '*we are all praying to the same God.*' Marion's responses are typical. She says:

'God's God, isn't he...whether he is the Christian one or the Muslim one or whatever.'
'[A Muslim's] God is probably the same as ours, but just...they see it in a slightly different way.'
'It is all one God.'

This popular attitude, that all religions are essentially different paths up the same mountain, assumes that all religions share a common object of devotion and/or a common religious experience. The apparent differences between the religions are 'merely accidental, culturally conditioned elements of time and place.'⁶² As Ben says,

⁵⁹ A couple of people were aware of the teaching that outside the church, or outside Christianity, there is no salvation, but expressed disquiet about it.

⁶⁰ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, ix.

⁶¹ John Hick, 'Response to Clark H. Pinnock', in Dennis Ockholm and Timothy R. Phillips (eds), *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 128. See also, in the same book, Hick's, 'A Pluralist View', 27-59.

⁶² Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 191.

'if you strip away the ornament, [other religions'] perception of God is probably very similar or the same to one's own.' The viewpoint that the devout in all religions are really worshipping the same God is based on a theocentric view of reality, which presupposes that there is one God at the centre of the 'universe of faiths'. The centre is not Christianity or the church or Jesus Christ, but God. Hick argued for this kind of approach in his *God and the Universe of Faiths*, declaring that it was time to move away from the traditional view that outside the church, or outside Christianity, there is no salvation toward the view that Christianity is but one way among many leading to God. Describing this change as a 'Copernican Revolution', he argued against 'the dogma that Christianity is at the centre', advocating rather that 'it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.'⁶³ The shift required here is from a Christ-centred to a God-centred approach. In his later formulations, Hick recognised the problem of using the term God, a distinctly theistic concept, and reformulated his theocentric view of the other religions by referring to the Ultimate Reality or the Real.⁶⁴

Like Hick, those who hold a pluralist perspective in this sample speak from a particular Christian, or at least monotheistic viewpoint. Their belief that other religions are equally authentic ways of salvation is not a neutral judgement, but one founded on particular Christian views about Ultimate Reality/God, namely that God is all-loving and wills the salvation of all. Non-Christians are saved because the God whom Jesus Christ has clearly revealed God to be - a loving, gracious and forgiving God - is merciful toward all God's children and desires all humankind to be saved. Such a God would not save only a minority of human beings. Their pluralist outlook is therefore a consequence of belief in one God, maker and sovereign Lord of all, who is a God of love and who wills the salvation of all people. They reject the exclusivist claim because it is incompatible with this belief.

Marion

'God is a God of love...and Jesus loves us...are they really going to condemn all these

⁶³ Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 131. See also the rest of chapter nine, 'The Copernican Revolution in Theology', 120-132.

⁶⁴ See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 10-11.

other people just because they haven't become Christians?'

Tom

'I don't believe that the benevolent God that we have would say, "tough", to everybody else... "you are all out".'

Bruce

'I couldn't go along with [Christianity as the only way of salvation] because it actually goes against some of the things that Jesus taught in his own life. Because at the end of the day, if we are talking about a forgiving God, an understanding God...I just don't see how that squares with...this is the only way to do it argument and attitudes. It just doesn't gel together properly.'

Schubert Ogden similarly argues against exclusivism on the grounds that it runs counter to the core of Jesus' preaching of a God bent on human salvation. He adds that, in terms of our experience today, the experience of being saved through Jesus provides no grounds for saying that God cannot save in some other way, or that only Christians are saved.⁶⁵ God has no special, favoured way in which to achieve salvation; the different world religions each serve as one of God's means of salvation. The primary mediation of God's presence and salvation for Christians is the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but in other religions the fundamental mediating focus of God's salvific presence may be an event, a book, a teaching, a praxis. Jesus is not the only norm.⁶⁶

There are other non-theological reasons that people give for rejecting the view that Christianity is the one true religion. Several of the sample have been influenced in their thinking about other religions through their contact with adherents of other faiths, through work, travel or their social life. At least four of the interviewees have friends and family who are practising members of another religion and they do not find them to be any less sincere or devout than they are. They recognise that Christianity is to them what Islam is to the devout Muslim or Judaism to the practising Jew. To hold that Christianity is the only way of salvation is 'arrogant' and 'wrong'. 'We have no right to judge.' The exclusivist claim offends postmodern relativistic sensibilities, where each religion is seen as partial, incomplete, limited, one particular way of looking at

⁶⁵ Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 27-52.

⁶⁶ See Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 405-410.

things. The modern historical consciousness, one of the most recognised features of the postmodern world, has deeply influenced people's attitude towards the non-Christian religions, in that people now recognise pluralism as part of the historical conditions of human existence and are generally more open to other religions than they were in the past.⁶⁷ It is evident that the religion to which one adheres normally depends upon the accident of one's birth. As Tom says, *'I believe in God because I was born English. If I had been born in Indonesia, you know, what would have happened?'* He goes on to say, *'[If Christianity is] right, that means that about three-quarters of the world has got it wrong. And I have difficulty with that...How can so many others be wrong?'* Historical consciousness promotes acceptance of other religions as true (but not necessarily equally true) paths to God.⁶⁸

Alongside acceptance of religious pluralism, there was a widespread unease within the sample, if not an outright opposition, towards missionaries and proselytising. It is worth noting that if this attitude extends towards evangelism in general, and the data suggest that it might, then evangelistic initiatives are unlikely to receive enthusiastic support. One of the concerns expressed about a pluralistic theology of religions is that it undermines or destroys missionary outreach. Certainly it must change it, for faith in Jesus Christ can no longer be commended on the grounds that God's salvation is constituted by Jesus alone.⁶⁹ For most of the sample, Christianity is *'one way of getting to God'* and there is no christological or soteriological reason for thinking otherwise.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 395-398.

⁶⁸ Pluralism does not imply that all religions are equally true. See Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, chapters 4 and 6. See also John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), esp. chapters 4-6. I cannot say how many of my sample hold the view that all religions are equally true, because I did not ask this specific question. One survey in an Anglican parish shows 50 per cent of churchgoers and 46 per cent of non-churchgoers affirming that all religions are equally true (Buckler and Astley, 'Learning and Believing in an Urban Parish', 399). By contrast, in the *Church Times* survey only 12 per cent of laity and 7 per cent of clergy say that all religions are of equal value (Francis, *Fragmented Faith*).

⁶⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of this complex issue, see Paul F. Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996).

Chapter 8

THE DOMINANT SOTERIOLOGY - JESUS AS EXEMPLAR

In view of the fact that so many people have difficulty understanding how the death of Jesus can be said to save us, it is perhaps not surprising, although it was initially quite unexpected, that Jesus as exemplar is *the* dominant soteriological theme in the sample. For well over half of the sample, Jesus is saviour because *'he shows us how to live.'* When asked about Jesus' function and significance, they would reply by saying:

'[Jesus] purpose was to show us what it is to follow God and how to be a good person.'
'[Jesus was] God's way of getting through to us humans how we should conduct ourselves.'

'He set out by his example the way we should all live.'

'[Jesus was] sent from God to teach us how to live.'

'[Jesus] gives us the rules for living.'

'He came to get us all back on track.'

It is not just those who hold a sceptical (or low) christology who emphasise Jesus' role as exemplar. Many of the functionalists do too, as does Charles, who holds an ontological (or high) christology. Charles may have an ontological christology, but soteriologically he has no need of it: Jesus does not *have* to be God ontologically in order to function as exemplar. So exemplarists can be found across the whole christological spectrum. Robert Towler's sociological study of conventional religion makes the same point. He identifies 'exemplarism' as a type of religiousness that sees in Jesus' teaching, life and death an example for all to follow, and he offers examples of exemplarism from a wide range of traditions within the church as well as from the great company of the unchurched.¹ In view of the importance of Jesus' role as exemplar in the sample, I want to say something more about this theme in this chapter. The subject is complex. All I propose to do here is draw attention to the main issues raised by the data on Jesus as exemplar.

Jesus as the moral ideal

When people say that Jesus shows us how to live, they are casting Jesus in the role of

¹ Towler, *The Need for Certainty*, 19-37.

moral, spiritual, and perhaps even theological, exemplar. Jesus is the ideal, the model, the type, the paradigm of what humankind is supposed to be before God. But it is Jesus' role as a moral exemplar that seems to be uppermost in many exemplarists' minds and it is this aspect of Jesus as exemplar that I want to concentrate on in this chapter. Towler characterises exemplarism as 'a moral type of religiousness.'² For Hilary, Jesus is the moral ideal because he was the one human being '*who never did anything wrong*' and went through life '*committing no sin.*' He was morally '*totally perfect [...] because he was the Son of God.*' For Richard, Jesus is the moral ideal because he '*embodies the correct moral qualities*'; he was '*morally upright*', '*embodies goodness*' and '*moral purity, which we should try and emulate in our lives.*' The data raise the *Euthyphro* Dilemma in a modified form: is Jesus the moral ideal by definition, viz., because he is the Son of God (Hilary), or do we judge him to be the moral ideal by our own standards (Richard)? It would seem that both positions are operating in the sample.³

To cast Jesus in the role of moral exemplar presupposes that the main thrust of Jesus' teaching is about morality and that this was what Jesus was really about. But was he? Nicholas Harvey challenges the assumption that Jesus was deeply interested in and concerned about morality. He argues that to identify Jesus with morality is a false interpretation and that our assumption that Jesus was preoccupied with morals says more about ourselves than Jesus. He seeks to show that 'the thrust of Jesus' life and teaching was at most oblique to anything that could reasonably be called morality and not infrequently subversive of it.'⁴ The view that Jesus was primarily concerned with morality is based, says Harvey, on the *prior* assumption that morality is all-important and this assumption is then allowed to dictate the interpretation of Jesus. To cast Jesus as moral ideal or exemplar, and to understand his teaching in such a way, is to superimpose on the story told in the gospels a false picture. He proposes that the reason why this interpretation continues to be a major preoccupation within the church is not so much out of a passionate conviction that moral standards are of decisive importance, but rather 'as

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ The situation is actually more complex than this. See below, p. 194. For further discussion of this philosophical issue, see Basil Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 146-153. Cf. Jeff Astley, *Choosing Life? Christianity and Moral Problems* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 110-111.

⁴ Nicholas Peter Harvey, *The Morals of Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), 32.

a sort of panic in the face of the alternative'. Morality is given a high profile to assuage fear of 'anarchy and chaos.'⁵ Several in the sample attribute the alleged decay of our society to a decline in moral standards and assert that '*the world's in the state it is because people do not follow Jesus' commandments.*' Harvey concludes that a heavy investment in morality is really about social control. Jesus is used to endorse values deemed to be culturally valuable, thereby ensuring conformism and conservatism, which is supremely ironic considering that Jesus was anything but a social conformer or acceptor of the status quo. Haight writes, 'In its domesticated form [Christianity] tends to sacralize the status quo and help socialize people into standard patterns of behaviour.'⁶

It is said that Christians have often substituted a false norm for the story of Jesus by projecting their own values and biases onto it.

The sentimental Jesus of middle-class piety hides the cross of poverty and oppression; the Jesus of Western imperialism is refuted by the nonviolence of the passion accounts; the Jesus of patriarchal tradition wilts under the evidence that the Nazarene chose the powerless and the marginal to share his table.⁷

Counterfeit portraits, it is argued, can be exposed by a return to the Jesus portrayed in the gospels, since without some continuity between what Jesus actually was and is claimed to be today, then christology becomes little more than the ideological projection of the self-interests of those offering the christology. Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino states that 'whenever, in the course of history, Christians have sought to reinvest Christ with his totality, they have returned to Jesus of Nazareth.'⁸ Many modern christologies claim the historical Jesus' support for their cause. However, at least some of these christological reconstructions, which put forward alternative foci for what Jesus 'really stands for', are clearly attempts to invest a particular perspective with the authority of the historical Jesus. They show a Jesus refashioned in the enquirer's own theological image and likeness, just as Liberal Protestants found in Jesus the prototype of Liberal

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, 115.

⁷ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 11.

⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), 130.

Protestantism.⁹ I will defer a discussion of the hermeneutical issues involved in interpreting Jesus and the tendency to make Jesus in our own image, until chapter 10. Here I want to say something about the moral teachings of Jesus in relation to the (admittedly limited) data.

The rule of love

The ethical teachings of Jesus continue to be 'storm centres in historical-critical debate.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, some scholars contend that there is a striking fundamental consistency in the moral teaching of the New Testament, namely the requirement of love, which is dependent directly on Jesus.¹¹ Most of the exemplarists would go along with the thesis that the principle underlying Jesus' teaching is the principle to love. They too make the commandment to love the central and all-embracing principle of Jesus' ethical teaching, saying that the rules Jesus gave are '*love God and love your neighbour.*' It is perhaps hardly surprising that 'love' is singled out as the major ethical theme in the light of Jesus' commandment to love which is given in all three synoptics (Mark 12: 28-34; Matt. 22: 34-40; Luke 10: 25-28) and repeated at length in the final meditational text in John's gospel (chapters 13-17). Paul also makes love the paramount virtue and it is considered to be the greatest of the 'theological virtues'. Early Christian writers such as Justin and Tertullian regularly appealed to love as characteristic of the Christian community and Augustine is renowned for the saying, 'love and do what you like.'¹² But perhaps the primary reason why people appeal to love as the principle underlying Jesus teaching, is the extent to which Jesus' commandment to love both God and neighbour is

⁹ The English modernist George Tyrell wrote of Adolf von Harnack, 'The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.' See George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), 49.

¹⁰ Tom Deidun, 'The Bible and Christian ethics', in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Christian Ethics: An Introduction* (London: Cassell, 1998), 17.

¹¹ Adrian Hastings, 'Morality', in Hastings, Mason and Pypers (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, 448-451. Cf. T. W. Manson also makes love the essential thing in the teaching of Jesus. See his, *Ethics and the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1960), chapter 4. The claim is not undisputed. J. L. Houlden, for example, highlights the significant moral differences which exist between the various New Testament writings and even between writings by the same author. See his *Ethics and the New Testament* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), where he criticises 'the canonizing and harmonizing impulse which longs to produce "the New Testament view"', 121. See also Leander E. Keck, *Who is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 157-158.

¹² See Hastings, 'Morality', 450.

included in worship (e.g. the eucharistic liturgy).

Tom Deidun questions the legitimacy of making 'love' the ethical master theme. He argues that it is not the case that New Testament writers always give 'love' the unique ethical status that many today are inclined to give it and it is doubtful whether either Jesus' or Paul's ethical teachings are reducible to, or can be deduced from, the single principle of 'love'. Even when New Testament writers acknowledge the supremacy of love, it cannot be assumed that they all mean the same thing by it. Jesus in the synoptics speaks of love of God and neighbour, whereas Paul speaks almost exclusively of neighbour love. The Fourth Gospel has a different slant again, as do the Johannine epistles, and not everywhere in the New Testament does the concept of love measure up to 'our own best Christian appraisals of love.' For example, the love commended in the Johannine epistles turns out to be 'a sectarian-type love, whose flipside is fear and hatred.' In any case, love as the guiding ethical principle can give rise to various, even opposing, Christian ethical stances, 'so that blanket statements about love do not really tell us anything.'¹³ Deidun objects strongly to any approach which singles out a biblical or New Testament master theme.¹⁴ Highlighting one theme inevitably means ignoring others.

Some of the sample appear to take it for granted that their notion of love coincides with that espoused by Jesus. Jesus' approach seems to have involved a radical new interpretation of the divine command to love. Ronald Preston claims that some of Jesus' teaching is at the level of 'natural' morality, for instance, the Golden Rule, 'Always treat others as you would like them to treat you' (Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:13), which is found in some similar form in other ethics. He considers the distinctive feature of Jesus' ethical teaching to be the way it radicalized common morality. Jesus' ethic goes beyond 'natural' morality and is very different from the everyday ethic of reciprocity (of doing good turns to those who do good turns to you).¹⁵ T. W. Manson considers total self-

¹³ Deidun, 'The Bible and Christian Ethics', 8-9, 24. See also 44 (n60).

¹⁴ He thus criticises John Howard Yoder for singling out non-violence as the central ethical message, arguing that there is no justification for singling out this theme over and above any other theme such as, almsgiving, prayer or speaking the truth. *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ Ronald Preston, 'Christian Ethics', in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 95. For a description of the various dimensions of this 'radical ethic', see 94-100.

giving to be the characteristic feature of the ethic of Jesus. The hallmark of Jesus' command was to love 'as I have loved you.' Again, Jesus' ethic is an ethic which goes beyond. Jesus' love is marked by its quality.¹⁶ Jesus' radical ethic was often expressed in hyperbole (exaggerated language). His words have a manifest radicalism to them and transcend the 'safe, middle-of-the-road and prosaic' guidance of the wisdom tradition.¹⁷ C. H. Dodd has argued that the precepts of Jesus were designed to 'appeal to the conscience by way of the imagination', and specify only the quality and direction which acts must have if they are to be genuine expressions of Christian love. They are therefore not to be understood as enjoining or prohibiting this or that particular set of concrete actions.¹⁸

However, when people say that it is the ethic of love which drives Christian moral life, what they usually have in mind is a set of ethical attitudes and values that are generally accepted as being central Christian values. In practice, love becomes codified. It is turned into a set of commands (what is right), prohibitions (what is wrong), and aspirations (what could/should be), so that certain virtues and actions become the principles for personal conduct. People's concept of love may be formed more by Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 13 than by the teaching of Jesus, since this great rhapsody to love is perhaps one of the most well-known pieces of scripture. Paul's hymn has been described as a portrait for which Jesus is the sitter, but perhaps the sitter would have himself preferred a more radical manifesto, based on justice, as love in action?

The problem with a concentration on 'love' or 'neighbour love' as the master theme is that the diversity and radicality of Jesus' teachings can then be ignored. The radical elements of Jesus' ethic are effectively neutralised and brought nearer to common sense morality. This can be seen to happen as early as the New Testament itself. The radical demands of Jesus' love ethic began to be formalised and institutionalised, even routinised. It was made more practical and regulatory. In practice, for 'relatively unimaginative people, a code of what love might lead one to do and avoid remained

¹⁶ Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel*, 62-65.

¹⁷ Hastings, 'Morality', 449. On Jesus' radical ethic, see also Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 6-33.

¹⁸ C.H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 61.

necessary.¹⁹ A correlation was made between natural law and Christian morality (see Romans 2). 'There was no other way of formulating a code of behaviour for Christians, the implementation of love in daily life, than to run it, so to speak, along the tracks of natural law.' However, the more this was taken for granted, 'the more the idea could take root that Christian morality was in principle natural law morality or, alternatively, Ten Commandments morality', and in the Christianising of Europe the church fell back on a morality of law, based on the Ten Commandments.²⁰ As we shall see, many of the sample today rely on such a Ten Commandment morality.

Hornsby-Smith talks about religion providing people with a practical ethic for getting by in the social world.²¹ The rule to love might be considered to be an adequate ethic for the practical moral problems which most people face in everyday life. In situation ethics, 'There is only one thing that is always good and right, intrinsically good regardless of the context, and that one thing is love.'²² The situationist is prepared in any situation to compromise or even set to one side any ethical rule, if love seems better served by doing so. The problem here is that of knowing in any situation what 'the loving thing' to do is, as some in the sample acknowledge.

Jan

'Love God and love your neighbour...if you take those as rules...it is difficult to say exactly what it means.'

Charles

'Well, the rules to me are first love your God. I must confess I do have quite a bit of difficulty in interpreting the word love.'

As the rule of love does not tell us what to do, it is perhaps not much practical help in some instances of moral decision-making.

¹⁹ Hastings, 'Morality', 450.

²⁰ Ibid. On the various ways in which the command to love was received, interpreted, and applied within the early church, see Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1973); James Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1929); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, trans. J. Holland-Smith and W. J. O'Hara (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), esp. 217-225.

²¹ Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England*, 91.

²² Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 60.

Christianity as morality

Following Jesus entails striving to be like him. He is *'a sort of figure-head'* whom *'we should always aspire and strive to be like.'* Jesus is the model for moral behaviour. As Christians we should follow this moral ideal, but striving to be like Jesus *'is very difficult'*, *'no way are you going to make it'*, *'we will never succeed.'* Nevertheless, *'you should try.'* Striving to be like Jesus means *'helping others'*, *'doing good acts'*, *'being nice'*, *'not doing bad and wrong things through your life'*, *'following the code of conduct'*, *'being public-spirited'*. In sum, it means *'being a good person.'* Valerie says:

'I'm frightened of saying I am a Christian because then I have got to be a very good person and I'm not. I think Christians...you hear people say, he's a good Christian...they visit people when they are sick and you know.'

'I loathe to say [I am a Christian], because I always...I sort of feel that I am saying I am a good person by saying that.'

She goes on to say that the advantage of following Jesus' teaching is that *'you can live with a beautiful free conscience throughout your life'* and *'that's where real peace comes from.'* Following the rules given by Jesus results in *'inner contentment and inner happiness. And that's the fundamentals of having a good life.'*

A good person is someone who follows certain lines of conduct (they do not *'do bad and wrong things'*) and who is characterised by certain virtues (they are *'kind and good'*). Love finds expression in an ethic of action and an ethic of character. In Richard Hoggart's study of working-class culture in the 1950s, he reports on the working-class identifying Christianity with morals. Doing your best to be an 'ordinary decent' person is what Christianity really means.²³ This corresponds closely with Edward Bailey's more recent studies of the folk religion of English people, where "Christianity"... is a way of life that is readily (if anachronistically) summarised as "the Ten Commandments", or "the golden rule" or (now, only occasionally) as "the Sermon on the Mount", or by the oft-repeated paradigm of "helping a little old lady across the road."²⁴ It has been

²³ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 87-94.

²⁴ Edward Bailey, 'The Folk Religion of the English People', in Paul Badham (ed.), *Religion, State, and Society in Modern Britain* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 155. Bailey is best known for defending the concept of 'implicit religion' - a concept that shares some similarities with folk religion. See Bailey, *Implicit Religion: An Introduction*, 32-33.

suggested that this identification of Christianity with 'a rather undemanding type of kindness' may be a particularly English form of Christianity.²⁵ Nancy Ammerman characterises American Christians as 'Activist', 'Golden Rule' or 'Evangelical.' Activists define the Christian life in terms of social action and working for justice; Golden Rule Christians in terms of doing good and caring for others; and Evangelical Christians in terms of being saved. Her study of American congregations suggests that Golden Rule Christianity may also be the dominant form of religiosity among middle-class suburban Americans.²⁶

Identifying Christianity with morality also means that '*you can be a Christian without going to church*', since 'being Christian' means 'being good'. Christianity is in reality nothing but morality. When Christianity is reduced to morality then Jesus is made superfluous and ethics loses its connection with Jesus. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many in the three parishes who consider themselves to be Christian but do not go to church, and my data show that some churchgoers do not consider churchgoing to be an essential part of being a Christian either.²⁷ '*It is how you live your life is being a Christian.*' What matters is '*being morally a good person...that is much more important than how often you go to church.*' '*Going to church is nothing.*' As Bruce puts it:

'I think you can go through all the rituals and be labelled a Christian and still not have a very Christian life. You know, I still think it is possible to go to church every Sunday and all that sort of stuff and really not do very much outside of that to actually help anybody or make life a little bit better for somebody and sometimes it doesn't actually take very much.'

Priority is given to praxis in this type of exemplarism, but it is praxis of a certain kind. The emphasis is on personal as opposed to any form of socio-political morality.²⁸ Most

²⁵ Jeff Astley, 'Non-realism for beginners?' in Colin Crowder (ed.), *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism* (London: Mowbray, 1997), 101. Cf. Towler, *The Need for Certainty*, 22. Early research suggests that almost 72 per cent of the population in the most recent national Census equate Christianity with values. See Linda Woodhead, 'Should Churches Look Inward, Not Outward?', *The Church Times*, 31 December 2004, 5.

²⁶ Nancy T. Ammerman, 'Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream', in David D. Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 196-216.

²⁷ The statistics from Richter and Francis' study show that well over two-thirds of their respondents believed that churchgoing was unnecessary for Christians (*Gone But Not Forgotten*, 12).

²⁸ Cf. Ammerman, 'Golden Rule Christianity', 203-206. Ammerman found that urban congregations were

consider Jesus to have given a code of conduct for personal morality and little stress is laid on the public or political dimensions of morality. Moral priorities are seen to rest with the local community and 'doing good' there. 'Doing good' does not involve the believer in social or political radicalism and the three churches with which we are concerned here are not preoccupied with a concern for social justice.²⁹ People will give alms (more or less willingly) to Christian Aid or other good causes, and many are involved in various kinds of charity and voluntary work. Such praxis is challenged by liberation theologians, however, who advocate that the poverty of the poor demands a new praxis involving, not acts of generosity to alleviate their plight, but 'a compelling obligation to fashion an entirely different social order.'³⁰

Jesus as the norm for moral life?

The statement, which many make, that *'Jesus set out by his example the way we all should live,'* implies that Jesus is a norm for the moral life. Some mainstream Christian ethicists would say that Jesus is too concrete or narrowly particular to have any direct import for ethics. But narrative ethicists such as William Spohn put Jesus (and therefore the gospels) at the centre of Christian ethics. According to Spohn, if Christians are disciples of Jesus, that implies that his life and teachings are *normative* for them. He writes, 'The particular life and death of Jesus set the boundaries for Christians, direct their intentions, and shape the emotions and actions of individuals and communities. That is to say, the life of Jesus functions as their "norm" or standard.'³¹ He argues that the life of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels should function as the moral paradigm for Christians. 'Through faithful imagination [Jesus'] story becomes paradigmatic for moral

more likely than suburban ones to be activist.

²⁹ Some argue that the New Testament writers were not concerned with issues of social justice either. Thus they never thought it was their business to try to transform social and political structures by working for, say, the abolition of slavery. This attitude may have been due in part to their 'apocalyptic' mindset or imminentist eschatology. See Deidun, 'The Bible and Christian Ethics', 6 and David Brown, 'Christian Ethics: The Contemporary Context', in Cyril S. Rodd (ed.), *New Occasions Teach New Duties? Christian Ethics for Today* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 69. Concern for social justice is, however, a fundamental theme of both liberation theology and much modern practical theology. In both areas, the argument is made that it is not sufficient to come alongside individuals in their various struggles, for these struggles arise in a socio-political context, which itself must be radically questioned.

³⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, 'Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith', in Rosino Gibellini (ed.), *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, trans. John Drury (London: SCM Press, 1980), 8.

³¹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 10.

perception, disposition, and identity.³² He stresses the role of Jesus in character formation and insists that the story of Jesus should shape the dispositions and identity of Christians so that they live a distinctive life of discipleship together. Specific practices, such as prayer and meditation, can help train the imagination and reorientate emotions to produce a character and way of life consonant with Christian New Testament moral teaching.³³

Now obviously, *if* Jesus is to function as the paradigm for Christian moral life, then there must be an engagement with the specific stories of the gospels and the freest possible interaction between the story of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels and the unfolding story of the individual believer and community. Only through an engagement with the story of Jesus are possibilities opened up for the story to shape the moral life of the believer. A commitment to certain spiritual practices (such as meditative Bible study) is therefore desirable, if not a prerequisite. However, the majority of our exemplarists display no evidence of entering into an engaged reading with the text. They listen (perhaps) to two Bible readings when they come to church on a Sunday. (And one of the interviewees admits that when the scriptures are read that is the time when she *'switches off most.'*) Personal or group study of the scriptures is not part of most exemplarist's spiritual practice (cf. see below, pp. 234-235).

There is evidence to suggest that many have no clear idea about the main thrust of Jesus' teaching, beyond the commandment to love. They are not clear about what the New Testament has to say about ethical matters and are unsure about the meaning of key concepts such as 'the kingdom of God' (but then the scholars cannot agree about the meaning of this concept either!) What the sample do have are snippets of the story: remembered fragments to which they struggle to give meaning. Churchgoing over the years has furnished them with a memory bank of stories and aphorisms, such as 'turn the other cheek', 'go the extra mile', 'the last will be first', together with certain images of Jesus as the man for others, the man who went about doing good, the one who laid down

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid., 3. Perhaps the most important proponent of this narrative view of Christian ethics is Stanley Hauerwas. See his *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

his life for his friends. They have a 'bits-and-pieces' theology, not unlike Jesus' teaching itself, at least as recorded in the synoptics - or, rather, as it existed in the oral tradition prior to the evangelists' redaction. This was a theology and ethics conveyed in an ad hoc fashion, by means of unconnected snippets, more like ordinary theology than academic theology!³⁴

It is Jesus' teachings and person that give a concrete application to the commandment to love. They concretise the abstract notion of love and give material content to it, fleshing out what Christian love is (should or could) be. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, enlarges the view of who the neighbour is. Other stories, sayings, and actions of Jesus demonstrate the radical nature of his love, in particular in terms of unlimited forgiveness. Only by becoming familiar with these stories, sayings and actions can we begin to learn what Jesus' model of loving is. If there is no engagement with the gospels, then the principle of love loses the radicality Jesus brought to it. When love becomes 'doing good', which is normally being kind to people according to their own lights, then the notion of love has been reduced to 'natural' or common morality. Following the Golden Rule is not the same as modelling one's life 'on the pattern of humiliation, suffering and triumph of the Christ event (Philippians 2:1-11).'³⁵

Jesus as exemplar means allowing Jesus 'to school one's fundamental human values, one's conception of what virtues are most authentically human, one's basic idea of what human life is for and where it is leading, and, more generally, opening up a pattern or mode of possible existence in the world.'³⁶ Strictly speaking, therefore, Jesus only becomes an exemplar when this begins to happen. On this view, much so-called exemplarism is not really exemplarism at all.³⁷ If there is no engagement with the

³⁴ Form criticism has shown that during the oral period between the time of Jesus' ministry and the writing of the gospels the traditions about Jesus circulated as independent units. 'This is why', writes Stephen Travis, 'when we look, for example, at Mk. 2:1-3:6 we find a collection of short paragraphs (known as *pericopae*), each complete in itself and with no essential connection with what precedes or follows.' See Stephen H. Travis, 'Form Criticism', in I. Howard Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 154. On the difficulties of speaking of the coherence of Jesus' teachings, see also Keck, *Who is Jesus?*, 157-158.

³⁵ Astley, *Choosing Life?*, 31.

³⁶ Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, 361.

³⁷ This is perhaps particularly so in the case of the exemplarism said to exist among the great body of the unchurched. See Towler, *The Need for Certainty*, 22-25.

gospels, then there is very little that we may identify as *specifically Christian content* to the concept of love. The concept of love, if it is to be Christian, needs to be invigorated by a return to the gospels and by paying attention to the actual practice of Jesus. Without a constant return to the gospels, the very concept of love itself risks turning out to be little more than the projection of cultural assumptions. Love becomes a rule whose content is filled, not by direct reference to the gospels, but by implicit reference to other norms.

Clearly Jesus is not the only norm or source of moral guidance for Christians.³⁸ People live by a range of norms, standards, principles or rules; some of which may derive directly, or indirectly, from the Christian tradition and others which will not.³⁹ People learn their morality from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways; their moral formation is often implicit and 'unacknowledged as a learning process.'⁴⁰ The data certainly show that the sample draw on various aspects of tradition; whilst many appeal directly to the New Testament commandments to 'love God and love your neighbour', others prefer Ten Commandment morality.

Hannah

'If we just lived by the two commandments Jesus gave us the world would be a much more peaceful place. But it doesn't work.'

Ben

'I mean if you have got the Ten Commandments in front of you and the Lord's Prayer, you can do an awful lot worse in life. I try to have those guiding lights in front of me. It doesn't always work, but you can make the effort.'

Tom

'We have the Ten Commandments as a code of conduct that we ought to do.'

Richard

'We also have the guidance of the Ten Commandments as a sort of good benchmark as to how we should behave. And I think it is a very, very applicable and a very relevant benchmark as to how we should behave.'

³⁸ See Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 10, where he lists other norms that guide morality, such as the Ten Commandments, the cardinal virtues, natural law and judgements about consequences.

³⁹ See, for example, Rowan William's account of the factors which shape the sense of self in 'Making Moral Decisions', in Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3-15, esp. 5-9.

⁴⁰ Astley, *Choosing Life?*, 102.

Deidun writes, 'nearly all Christians, more or less consciously and more or less selectively, subscribe to [divine command] morality, having been brought up on it; and the mainstream churches have traditionally made a carefully selective use of it (e.g., when focussing on 'the Ten Commandments' or Jesus' prohibition of divorce).'⁴¹ In appealing to the norms of 'fair play' and 'justice', Bruce says:

'Jesus has actually changed the way that we live...that is how you end up with the Christian ethos and the so-called Christian country. I know it is probably a bit different now, but it is still very much the Christian ethos that drives our way of life and our idea of fair play and justice.'

The norms of 'fair play' and 'justice' may be said to derive from the late flourishing of the Christian tradition or from Jesus himself, but they are values which many atheists are also committed to (perhaps more so than many Christians). Right values can be independent of Jesus (or religion). Unbelievers and believers alike can acknowledge the same duties or virtues. 'Doing good' is not a specifically Christian practice. While it is widely acknowledged that 'you do have to be good to be a Christian', it is also recognised that 'you don't have to be a Christian to be good.'⁴²

Miroslav Volf argues that practices of non-Christians can be christomorphic, but for the Christian practices should be normatively shaped by Christian beliefs. To be a Christian is to explicitly believe *in* Jesus and commit oneself to follow his way of life. The internal constitution of a *Christian* practice, therefore, should point to the story of Jesus as its external norm. It is this story which should provide the norm for say, the Christian practice of hospitality: 'This practice is Christian only insofar as Christ serves as the model for its practitioners, and Christ is available as a model only through . . . Beliefs about who Christ is and what Christ did, expressed in the form of narratives, ritual actions, or propositions.' 'If we are engaged in Christian hospitality we will examine what we did in the light of the story of Christ.' The way in which Jesus' life is exemplary has to be carefully specified, but in an appropriately qualified way Christian practices should have an 'as-so' structure, says Volf. 'As Christ, so we.' For Christians, the 'nexus

⁴¹ Deidun, 'The Bible and Christian Ethics', 22. See also 21-23 where he highlights some of the problems associated with 'divine command' theory.

⁴² Astley, *Choosing Life?*, 109.

of stories' should be determinative of practices.⁴³

The impact of Jesus on the moral life

The interviews were not designed to investigate people's moral life. Jesus and ethics only became an issue of importance after the data was analysed. I had not anticipated Jesus as exemplar playing such a prominent role in soteriology, since in academic theology it is always the cross and atonement that dominate soteriological discussion. Only after the interviews had been conducted and analysed did it become apparent that many ordinary believers have different soteriological priorities to those adopted by professional theologians. It is not at all clear, therefore, to what extent the Christian tradition, and in particular the story of Jesus, shapes the moral life of the interviewees or plays a normative role in their moral reflections and decision-making.⁴⁴ Further empirical work would need to be carried out to investigate the extent to which persons allow their thinking and conduct to be shaped by the model provided by Jesus and the degree of commitment to his way and values.⁴⁵

However, in spite of the paucity of the data, it is possible to make some tentative observations. It must be clear by now that the simplicity of the claim 'Jesus shows us how to live' belies its complexity: it is by no means obvious in what ways or to what extent Jesus does 'show us how to live'. It may be that for some, and almost certainly for those who never attend church or engage in any kind of Christian spiritual practice, Jesus does not actually play a large part in their moral life. This is not to say, of course, that these people are not highly moral, they probably are. I am only saying that their morality may not be influenced to any great extent by the figure of Jesus. When the ethical principle 'love' becomes disconnected from the actual story of Jesus, then Jesus has little

⁴³ Miroslav Volf, 'Theology for a Way of Life', in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 250-251.

⁴⁴ For a discussion on Christian moral decision-making, see Richard G. Jones, 'How Christians Actually Arrive at Ethical Decisions', in Rodd (ed.), *New Occasions Teach New Duties?*, 85-96. Cf. Williams, 'Making Moral Decisions', 3-15.

⁴⁵ Robin Gill's book *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) provides a detailed empirical analysis of the moral effects of churchgoing, as displayed through large scale questionnaire surveys.

direct import for ethics, other than as the author of the moral rule. When Jesus is reduced to a formula, then his lived teaching is largely irrelevant to ethics. Jesus may look as if he plays a large part in ethics, but I suggest that in reality he does not. It is not, therefore, strictly accurate to say that Jesus is an *exemplar*, since only through familiarity with his story, his life and death, his teachings and ministerial practice, can one begin to figure out what following him might actually mean. Leander Keck asserts that Jesus cannot be the authoriser of the moral life 'if externally he is a stranger or a casual acquaintance about whom one knows a few stories and sayings.' He goes on to say:

What such knowledge is more likely to produce is a caricature instead of a trustworthy image. Not only must one acquire true familiarity with the gospels, but one must also be left alone with them in order to ponder the figure they portray. Internalizing Jesus requires steady exposure; a sudden impulse to 'look it up' in the gospels will not suffice.⁴⁶

Richard Jones asserts that 'Much Christian decision-making occurs somewhat naturally in the ongoing stream of a life that is orientated towards God; within it roles and rules all have a place, as do the advice and example of others and the background of the church's life and traditions.'⁴⁷ The data suggest that the story of Jesus is very much *in the background* when people make moral decisions. It is worth noting here that in English folk religion as characterised by Edward Bailey, God and Jesus are similarly located. 'God plays a part akin to the part played in the theatre by the backcloth, or the actual floor of the stage.'⁴⁸ However, for regular churchgoers, the gospels will have played some role in the nurturing of a basic orientation and in the generating of particular attitudes and intentions as the data clearly show.

Jan

'He brought a new way of living that isn't condemnatory. I know the history of Christianity doesn't bear out what I am saying, but at its best, it is not condemnatory of other faiths; it is not condemnatory of other races; it is not condemnatory of other ways of living...go thou and sin no more...it is a kind of generosity of forgiving and by living it out, in what seems to have been a modest life-style, that opens up possibilities for us.'

⁴⁶ Keck, *Who is Jesus?*, 167.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁸ Bailey, 'The Folk Religion of the English People', 154.

Bruce

'[Jesus] dealt in a goodly and kindly way with many people who in society at that time were really looked down upon or ignored. And I think that is really the crux of it. It doesn't mean to say that people who may be down at a low level through circumstances, that you should give up on them or that they were beyond help and redemption.'

Jill

'I suppose it moves me very much the way he dealt with people who were unacceptable in society. Because that is one of the things that annoys and moves and irritates me in the world today. I find injustice a very difficult thing in the world today, so that the way he dealt with people who were outside society...[pause].'

What the data do not show is whether the values that are selected and admired (such as the way Jesus related to people) are values which the interviewees would otherwise have always valued, or whether it was through exposure to the story of Jesus that they came to value these particular values.⁴⁹ Basil Mitchell argues that is 'preposterous' to say, as Kant did, that 'Even the Holy One of the Gospels must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection, before we can recognise him as such.' He writes:

It is absurd to suppose that the fisherman of Galilee - when he made the confession: "Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God" - had compared Jesus with his ideal of moral perfection (just as it was before any encounter took place) and had satisfied himself that he had, so to speak, achieved the required standard. He had, of course, judged for himself, and in judging he exercised moral insight, but he could not himself have preached the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁰

Mitchell goes on to make the (hermeneutical) point, following T. S. Eliot's claim that a great artist creates the standards by which he is to be judged, that our own standards are changed in the process of imitating Jesus. 'The model, by its sheer impressiveness, demands our imitation and in so doing not merely develops, but radically revises, our previous notions about what is worth imitating.'⁵¹

Some exemplarists clearly desired, as Richard put it, *'to measure my behaviour and the*

⁴⁹ Back to the *Euthyphro* Dilemma - see above, p. 179.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular*, 152-153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

way I conduct myself in everyday life against what has been happening in the various stories and activities of the gospels.' Jesus is the moral exemplar of some. But there are difficulties: if Jesus is to become a norm for moral life, then, according to Spohn, any return to the story of Jesus must necessarily take into account the best of historical scholarship. Ignorance about the hopes and fears that drove Jesus' culture and the structures that shaped it, will inevitably lead to a misunderstanding of his words and actions, since they were directed, first of all, to his contemporaries.⁵² He argues for a hermeneutic in which the texts have to be read with an eye to what can be known of the particular author's historical, cultural and theological horizons and intentions. In order to understand the teaching the text must be understood in its own context. Jesus' views cannot simply be read off the page. This view contrasts with that taken by Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, who write that the Bible's central contribution to Christian ethics (i.e., its character-forming role) may dispense with 'biblical scholarship'. They adopt a different hermeneutic.⁵³ But Deidun agrees that critical control is especially needed if the Bible is to be used in the formation of character, since 'some of the most virulent forms of bigotry in our day have been promoted by people who have been formed from mother's knee on the Bible unencumbered by biblical scholarship.'⁵⁴

There are clearly formidable problems involved in using the Bible for ethical guidance. One of the problems is the *silence* of scripture. Scripture simply does not speak about vast areas of present-day ethical concern and it is not at all clear how the New Testament ethical teaching can be applied in unforeseen circumstances. There is also its *strangeness*, the worlds of scripture often seem remote and alien. In addition there are the problems of the *diversity* of scripture, the *difficulty* of scripture and the *unfamiliarity* of scripture.⁵⁵ However, the Bible and the gospels are usually used not so much for ethical guidance as such, but for their character-forming role. To what extent biblical scholarship is needed for this, is, as we have just seen, a moot point. In practice it would

⁵² Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 11.

⁵³ Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, 'The use of the Bible in Christian ethics', in Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes OFM (eds), *Christian Ethics: A Reader* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 325.

⁵⁴ Deidun, 'The Bible and Christian Ethics', 27. Deidun highlights some of the problems that can ensue when attention is not paid to the contextual issues surrounding the ethical teaching of the Bible. See esp. 6-20. Hermeneutical issues will be discussed further in chapter 10.

⁵⁵ See Allan Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 50-53.

seem that very little notice is taken of biblical scholarship. Ignatian spirituality, which has recently become popular outside Catholic circles, takes no account of it, and it is also largely ignored in sermons preached to the sample.

Further empirical research needs to be undertaken to assess people's understanding and use of the Bible passages they hear read in church and expounded in sermons. What sense do they make of 'the hard sayings' of Jesus, for example? People will have heard the story about the rich young ruler. How do they respond to Jesus' demand for abandonment of material possessions as a condition of discipleship? How do people interpret the injunctions of Jesus, such as 'Do not resist the evil one'? Which stories, sayings and actions of Jesus are used as a model for moral life, and which are ignored? If the tradition says x is wrong but the believer believes x is right, does she follow her own view or that of the tradition? These are all questions that require further empirical investigation.

The data also raise questions concerning the nature of discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus. What should we do? How much ought we to care? There is disagreement among Christians, and there always has been, about what form of life the Christian should adopt. What does Jesus' way primarily mean? Does it mean care for the outcast? Hospitality to strangers? How important are these sorts of practice to Jesus' significance for Christian lives?⁵⁶ There are widespread differences in perspective among Christians today regarding the bearing of the Jesus of history on the present-day situation.

According to David Ford, 'Jesus' concern with the society and politics of his day is one of the most controversial issues in current Christianity.'⁵⁷ As already mentioned, liberation theologians argue that beliefs about God's preferential option for the poor require a praxis which works to overcome all oppressive social structures. Several interviewees talked about the importance of Jesus' concern for the poor and the outcast. The data are limited, but when interviewees were asked how they saw their beliefs about Jesus' concern for *'the lowly in society'* impacting on their own behaviour, their replies

⁵⁶ Kathryn Tanner, 'Theological Reflection and Christian Practices', in Volf and Bass (eds), *Practicing Theology*, 237. Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), esp. 93-155.

⁵⁷ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 184.

were not generally of a socio-political nature. Their practice is Golden Rule rather than Activist (see above, p. 186). It involves *'helping those who are worse off than yourself'* and *'helping people when you can'*, not changing the whole political system.

The data also raise questions about the relationship between religion and morality. This is another complex issue that cannot be fully addressed here. Suffice it to say that various connections between religion and morality have been proposed. One proposal is that they are linked via the religious ethic of response, which may be thought of 'as a natural response to a belief that a gracious, dependable God is the author of one's life.'⁵⁸ There is evidence to suggest that the morality of some in the sample is motivated and shaped by beliefs concerning the character and activity of God, rather than through any striving to be like Jesus (which is acknowledged to be impossible). The story of Jesus is only part of the story of Christianity; his story is embedded 'in the larger story of God with Israel and the nations, and this larger story is framed by the narratives of God's creation and final consummation.' It is this 'nexus of stories' which provide 'the normative space in which human beings exist as agents of Christian practices.' It is this space which is essential for moral action.⁵⁹

Christian moral action flows from beliefs other than 'striving to be like Jesus.' These beliefs include 'we are all made in the image of God', 'all things come from God' and 'God is the God of peace'. They all have implications for how we should behave. They all 'entail practical commitments.'⁶⁰ For some exemplarists, 'doing good' may be motivated more by a desire to love and serve the Creator-Father God, than through any self-conscious attempt to follow Jesus. Exemplarists' faith is usually theocentric, and (as I shall show later on) Jesus may not be that important for some believers. Moral behaviour can flow from gratitude for who God is (dependable, caring, loving) and what God has done and is doing, viz., his creating and saving activity. I would suggest that striving to be like Jesus is not where moral action primarily springs from; it springs from the living relationship with God. So religion may impact upon the moral life not so much through Jesus specifically, as through belief in God as loving heavenly Father. It is belief

⁵⁸ Jeff Astley, 'Connecting Religion and Morality', *Dialogue* 23 (2004), 32-35.

⁵⁹ Volf, 'Theology for a Way of Life', 251.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 253. On the relationship between beliefs and practices, see 250-254.

in God that primarily makes a difference to the moral life.

The statement 'Jesus shows us how to live' implies that Jesus plays a large part in moral life, but in practice, as we have seen, he may not. However, Jesus' role in ethics cannot be circumscribed by his role as the moral ideal, for Jesus is an archetype for his followers in other ways. It may be that Jesus plays a part in ethics through his role as spiritual even theological, rather than moral, exemplar. Thus Jesus' example as a man of faith may have more direct import for believer's moral lives than his love ethic. Ian Wallis contends that being a Christian is primarily about practising Jesus' faith and that action flow from this.⁶¹ Imitation of Jesus' habitus of faith, such as trust in God, can have profound ethical effects as morality flows from learning the 'mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:14-16).

But such a morality does not consist in conformity to any stereotyped pattern; it consists rather in learning from Jesus an attitude of mind which comprises sensitivity to the presence of God and to the will of God which is the only authority, a constant submission of personal interest to the pursuit of that will in the well-being of others, and a confidence that, whatever the immediate consequences may appear to be, the outcome can safely be left in God's hands.⁶²

We should not therefore be misled by the set soteriological answer, 'Jesus shows us how to live.' Exemplarists also talk about Jesus as *'the conduit,' 'the bridge,' 'the link'* to God, and of Jesus *'showing us what God is like,' 'acting as God' and 'assisting belief in God.'* Jesus may be more important as a *revealer of God,* than he is as an exemplar of human existence.

⁶¹ Ian G. Wallis, *Holy Saturday Faith: Rediscovering the Legacy of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000).

⁶² G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, ed. L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 203.

Chapter 9

SOME FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ORDINARY CHRISTOLOGY¹

In the course of the analysis of the christological and soteriological data in chapters 3 to 8, various formal characteristics of ordinary christology have come to light. In this chapter I seek to address some of these.

Ordinary christology is story-shaped

The importance of story or narrative in ordinary christology has been hinted at already. Several times in the preceding chapters I have talked about people having a story about Jesus. Chapters 3 to 8 can be thought of as explications of the various christological and soteriological stories operating within the sample. A few people tell the story of the pre-existent Son becoming incarnate to save us by his atoning death; many more people tell the story of God creating Jesus, his Son, to show us how to live. It is always a story that is told; ordinary christology is *story-shaped*, narrative is its preferred mode of discourse. This should not surprise since narrative is central in both religion and in human life and experience. Human experience is inherently narrative in form, patterned by time; it therefore requires narrative as its most appropriate and central expression.² Narrative plays a necessary and indispensable role in framing human identity. It is central to our own self-understanding and to our understanding of others, including Jesus. Paul Ricoeur, among others, has emphasized the primacy of symbolic, narrative discourse for religion and the consequent secondary nature of philosophical and theological reflection.³

¹ The term 'ordinary christology', as used here and throughout chapters 9 and 10, is shorthand for 'the ordinary christology of this sample'. I make no claims about the extent to which my findings can be generalized. In qualitative research the reader or user (not the researcher) determines the extent to which findings from a study can be applied to other situations. See Merriam, *Qualitative Research in Practice*, 28-29.

² See Stephen Crites' seminal essay, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (eds), *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 65-88. Cf. Tilley, *Story Theology*, 23-26 and Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 39-49.

³ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347-

The dominant literary form encountered within the Christian scriptures is narrative. Here revelation does not take an abstract or conceptual form, but a narrative one; God and Jesus come to us in story form. The conceptual language of doctrine and theology must therefore be recognised as secondary discourse that has its source and ground in the primary language of narrative. McFague, for example, describes how doctrines are 'funded' by metaphors, and Terrence Tilley asserts that 'The key concepts of Christian faith - creation, fall, incarnation, atonement, church, eternal life, trinity - are all metaphors at rest, metaphors which have become Christian doctrines.'⁴ Cook argues that, whilst theoretical models and paradigms play an important and necessary role in religion, they should not lead to the priority of system over story. 'All human attempts at systematic conceptualization and formulation have their originating ground in stories that have metaphoric impact and must constantly return to these stories as the only adequate context for meaning.'⁵

There has been a turn to narrative in much recent theology, and this has returned priority to the biblical narrative. Narrative theologians are concerned to reclaim the centrality of scripture in modern theology and to ground Christian faith in this story as opposed to some other story, such as that of reason, critical history or human consciousness.⁶ Hans Frei, for example, a leading narrativist theologian, argues that the identity of Jesus is given in the biblical narratives in an irreducible way: Jesus' identity is given in his life, death and resurrection and that can be given only in story. The question, 'Who is Jesus Christ?' is answered by the scriptural story, which is the telling of his identity. Jesus is what he did, the way he did it and what was done to him; and all that cannot be explained, only *described*. The teachings, the actions, the healings, the sayings - all of these together are what give substance to Jesus. 'One can, up to a point - and only up to a point - render a description, but not a metaphysics, of such interactive

357. On the primary language of faith and the secondary language of doctrine, see also Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 68-77 and Kevin Nichols, *Refracting the Light: Learning the Languages of Faith* (Dublin: Veritas, 1997), chapters 1-3, as well as the references cited below in n4.

⁴ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 50 and 22-29. Tilley, *Story Theology*, 3. On the relationship between narrative and doctrine, see also McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 52-66.

⁵ Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 39.

⁶ Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-26.

unity.' 'Jesus *is* his story.'⁷

Ordinary christology can also be thought of as a type of narrative theology in that it too emphasises the story of Jesus. It gives priority to narrative discourse. Gerard Loughlin asserts that any theology that remembers the story is in part narrative or narrativist in character.⁸ Ordinary christology speaks in narrative mode as it remembers the story of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. Indeed it hardly thinks of Jesus in abstract terms or philosophical categories at all, but as a person whose identity and significance is given by the story. Sometimes the story may be seen through doctrinal spectacles, but as we have seen, most often it is not. The stress on narrative can be clearly seen in the responses that were given to questions about the passion and crucifixion, for people invariably responded by telling a story. They have a story about Jesus' passion, not a doctrine. They talk about what Jesus went through - his betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemene, his arrest and interrogation, the carrying of the cross, his cry of dereliction and intense suffering. The doctrinal content of the story - Jesus dying to save the world from sin - is often bracketed out. Similarly, they have a story of the annunciation, not a doctrine of the incarnation.

Story is the 'first voice' of ordinary christology.⁹ And in ordinary christology the first voice of story is usually its last word. It does not develop into conceptual discourse as happens in academic christology, where 'the narratives function within a larger, intellectually-disciplined, investigation . . . so that theology cannot be reduced to storytelling.'¹⁰ Ordinary christology, by contrast, is largely content with storytelling and does not attempt to move into abstract, conceptual discourse. Stories suffice, I would argue, because they meet the religious and spiritual needs of most of the sample. Believers have no need or reason to abstract from them. Hence ordinary christology is more metaphorical and imagistic than conceptual, preferring concrete images and

⁷ Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 35, 42.

⁸ Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, x.

⁹ This phrase is borrowed from William Bausch, who writes, 'Theology is a secondhand reflection of . . . an event; story is the unspeakable event's first voice.' See William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 28.

¹⁰ Robert A. Kreig, *Story-Shaped Christology. The Role of Narratives in Identifying Jesus Christ* (New York, Paulist Press, 1988) 164.

concrete ways of thinking rather than their conceptual language and thought forms. As Bruce put it, *'You can't use abstracts with 95 per cent of the population. It doesn't work. They need something that they can visualise or hang onto.'*

Ordinary christology thus tends to eschew metaphysical speculation. It is not interested in pursuing theoretical questions, such as how Jesus relates to God or how one person can be both human and divine at the same time. It is in good company. According to Frances Young, the theoretical issue of how Christians could 'proclaim one God and one Lord . . . without ending up with two gods' never seems to have troubled St. Paul.¹¹ And Jesus too 'did not analyse; he addressed.'¹² Academic christology on the other hand frequently specialises in metaphysical speculation and usually insists that theological reflection about the person of Jesus requires it. Macquarrie, for example, writes, 'Although the New Testament itself is almost devoid of philosophical terms, we cannot reflect theologically on its claims for Jesus Christ without getting involved in ontology.'¹³ The affirmations that people use, from the simplest, such as 'Son of God' or 'agent of God', to more complex expressions, such as 'Jesus is slightly less than God' or 'Jesus becomes God', all have ontological implications. Academic christology seeks to make these explicit; it is always pressing towards conceptual clarification and ontological explication. Ordinary christology, by contrast, is not concerned with metaphysical conceptualization and speculation; it is content with the story and is untroubled by these metaphysical issues.

There are always exceptions, of course. Some ordinary believers will be interested in christological speculation, as is Charles:

'What fascinates me is, if the Creator's Son came to this speck of dust to see us humans, what about all the rest of creation? Is he now, for example, visiting the rest of creation? Or are there very many Jesuses? Can God have very many Sons? Are there many Jesus Christs? I don't know. You don't know, I suspect. Who does know? But these are all possibilities.'

¹¹ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 34.

¹² According to Keck, Jesus' teachings 'contain no disciplined reflection on the nature and ground of the good or the just or their opposites . . . he did not explain how his various admonitions and imperatives are related to each other or how they flow from a root principle' (*Who is Jesus?*, 157).

¹³ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 7.

The question of multiple incarnations is still a live issue within some parts of academic theology.¹⁴ But equally there are other academics who want to bring the practice of theology back from its metaphysical to what they regard as a proper, ordinary use.¹⁵ The contextual christologies mentioned in chapter 1 also tend to steer clear of metaphysical issues. According to Macquarrie, this shift away from metaphysical questions is 'part of a wider tendency to understand Christianity in primarily practical terms and to avoid the more strictly intellectual and theological issues.' But, he insists, 'It would be dangerously irresponsible to commend faith in Jesus Christ without having thought as deeply as possible on the grounds for such faith', and he warns against anti-intellectualism.¹⁶ But is 'intellectualism' really necessary for faith?

Don Browning distinguishes between different sorts of reason. Practical reason 'answers the questions, What should we do? and How should we live?' He continues,

The tradition of practical reason or practical wisdom has its origins in Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*. Jesus used the word *phronesis* in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:24) to refer to the 'wise' persons who listen to the message of Jesus and build their lives upon it. Reason as *phronesis* can be distinguished from *theoria* or theoretical reason, which is often thought to ask the more dispassionate, objective, or scientific question of What is the case? or What is the nature of things? It is also distinguished from technical reason or *techne*, which asks the question, What are the most effective means to a given end?¹⁷

Practical thinking is said to lie at the centre of human thinking; both theoretical and technical thinking are abstractions from practical thinking. As we have seen, academic christology tends to concentrate on *theoria* or theoretical thinking whereas ordinary christology prefers *phronesis* or practical thinking. Being a 'wise' person, one who listens to the message of Jesus and builds her life upon it, is not dependent on *theoria* or

¹⁴ Cf. Brian Hebblethwaite, 'The Impossibility of Multiple Incarnations', *Theology* CIV, no. 821 (2001), 323-334.

¹⁵ See Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). Cf. D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 235-237.

¹⁶ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 7-8.

¹⁷ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 10.

intellectual skill. In other words, spiritual depth is independent of intellectual depth. Macquarrie himself acknowledges that 'it is possible to have an existential or "saving" faith in Jesus Christ without assenting to or even understanding something like *anhypostasia*, or without having an opinion as to whether he actually stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee.'¹⁸ Faith in Jesus is not dependent on either right doctrine or cognitive skill; being a disciple hangs on neither. Academic theology is a specialist activity that a few Christians engage in. Theorizing may be a help, if not a need, for some people: intellectualism, as Macquarrie calls it, may be necessary for their faith. But for most peoples faith, it is not. They can do without it; it does not help them in the living of the Christian life. It is not salvific for them. Does this mean that ordinary believers do not engage in doing christology?

Do ordinary believers 'do christology'?

Every believer has a christology, but do they *do* christology? The majority of the interviewees had clearly not given any serious thought to christological questions prior to the interview. (The data show that more thought had been given to soteriological questions.) Unlike the researcher, these believers were not on a christological quest; they were not seeking answers to the questions regarding the nature and significance of Jesus Christ for Christian faith. The existential question, 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?' was not their question. Many openly admitted that they were not interested in exploring their beliefs about Jesus or about God, and they did not want to subject their religious beliefs to scrutiny or enquire too closely into the grounds for believing.

Eleanor

'I don't really think. My faith is just there.'

'I know what I believe and I don't want to...[voice trails off].'

Percy

'I don't really want to analyse it.'

Rose

'I haven't really thought about it too much. I've always said I didn't want to go too

¹⁸ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 21.

deeply into it, because...um...I think people would soon lose...um...you know...if you looked into it too much.'

'I don't want to know. I'd rather just believe in what I believe in and...[voice trails off].'

Elizabeth

'I sometimes think it's better not thinking [laugh] because it is harder to believe.'

'I don't feel that I need to know.'

Lesley

'Oh dear, it's awful to think that you accept so much without questioning things and without really, really being absolutely sure about why you think what you think or why you believe what you believe.'

The phenomenon of reluctance to engage in critical enquiry (understood as *theoria*) is widespread amongst believing Christians. Hornsby-Smith reports that most practising Catholics 'were completely unconcerned' about theology.¹⁹ Theological educators frequently report being appalled at 'the vacuity' of students' christological statements and complain of them arriving at theological college with 'an unformulated, even uninformed, set of beliefs.'²⁰ Unquestioning and uncritical faith is heavily criticised by many who argue that in the life of faith 'no one is excused the task of asking questions or the more difficult one of providing and assessing answers.'²¹ It is every believer's responsibility to seek understanding. 'Mindless fideism' is not an option.²² Daniel Migliore is powerfully persuasive about the need for every Christian to engage in serious theological reflection, describing theology as 'faith asking questions' and the task of theology as 'a continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ.' As an enquiry, theology can never merely repeat traditional doctrines, but 'continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, ourselves and our world.' Christian faith must be a thinking faith. He writes:

If we believe in God, we must expect that our old ways of thinking and living will be continually shaken to the foundations. If we believe in God, we will have to become seekers, pilgrims, pioneers with no permanent residence. We will no

¹⁹ Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England*, 31.

²⁰ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 13.

²¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/4, trans. A. T. Mackay *et al.* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 498.

²² Gerald O'Collins SJ, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Mowbray, 1983), 1.

longer be satisfied with unexamined beliefs and practices of our everyday personal and social world. If we believe in God, we will necessarily question the gods of power, wealth, nationality, and race that clamour for our allegiance.²³

Migliore recognises that theology has not and does not always serve faith. It can become divorced from Christian life and practice and lose itself in 'pointless and endless talk', for there is such a thing as 'unfruitful, abstract theology that gets lost in a labyrinth of academic trivialities.' Theology such as this deserves to come under judgement. By contrast, the understanding that faith seeks should always bring 'wisdom that illumines life and practice.' Yet he argues that commitment to Christ can never be a matter of the heart only, but must involve the whole person, including the mind. Thinking faith does not replace trust in God or in Christ, but deepens it, whereas unquestioning faith 'soon slips into ideology, superstition, fanaticism, self-indulgence and idolatry.'²⁴

All this is well said, but many ordinary believers remain to be convinced of the value of serious theological reflection, which they equate with alien academic study. There is a strong suspicion that studying theology, certainly in the academy, is more likely to destroy faith. There is a genuine fear that asking questions would '*take away rather than build up*' faith. There is also a widespread perception that academic theology '*has nothing much to do with the everyday person who goes to church*' and therefore '*is not something that the everyday person really needs.*' Academic theology is considered to be '*an intellectual exercise*' for an elite minority, and one that has little or no relevance to the faith and life of the ordinary believer.²⁵

It turns out on closer inspection that everyone has come up against intellectual challenges to their faith (of course, everyone does), but these challenges are seldom taken up *intellectually*. Faith does raise questions, but rarely seeks understanding. This is perhaps hardly surprising. After all, many of the questions are extremely difficult.

²³ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 4-5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-9.

²⁵ Cf. Paul Holmer who writes, 'The popular view is that theology is painfully abstract, that it is a specialist's domain, that it is impractical, that it is of no use to the laity, and that it is about matters that do not and cannot concern those who are nonacademic' (*The Grammar of Faith*, 1).

Searching for answers, assuming they are to be had, is an 'arduous', 'strenuous' and 'risky' business.²⁶ In addition, there is the problem, highlighted by ordinary believers themselves, that the 'answers' (about which the experts, in any case, disagree) may not be that helpful to faith. Some academic theologians agree. George Lindbeck complains that most contemporary academic theology is 'useless for spiritual formation', and Browning contends that although academic theology may be less rationalistic than it used to be, it is still 'largely unrelated to the average person.'²⁷

We saw earlier that soteriology raised most questions. But those with soteriological difficulties also talked about not having the time, the inclination or the will to pursue their soteriological (or other) queries. As one respondent put it, '*I don't really have the time to think about it, so let's just move on*'; or as another said, '*I really can't be bothered to find out about it.*' The need to resolve queries is rarely acute. Most of the sample are not concerned about providing themselves with theories or explanations. They can '*put to one side*' their difficulties. Becoming clear is not an issue for them.²⁸ This attitude may be roundly condemned, but the rational, analytic or systematic kind of thinking required for tackling the cognitive challenges of religious belief is very demanding, and not everyone is a *theoria* thinker. As Lindbeck puts it, 'Relatively few people have much aptitude or interest in second-order reflective activity. They . . . have no talent for thinking theologically themselves' (i.e. for *theoria* thinking).²⁹

So do ordinary believers *do* christology? If christology (as a subdiscipline of theology) is defined as the deliberate, critical and systematic reflection (i.e. *theoria* thinking) on the person, being and doing of Jesus Christ, then the answer would have to be 'no, they do not.' However, christology, like theology, can be more broadly defined. If it is defined as 'talk about Jesus Christ' then the answer to the question is no longer clear-cut.³⁰ All of the sample managed to do some talking about Jesus during the interview.

²⁶ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 1-9.

²⁷ George Lindbeck, 'Spiritual formation and theological education', in Astley, Francis and Crowder (eds), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation*, 293 and Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 5.

²⁸ This does not apply to all the sample. At least two of the interviewees were clearly troubled by their soteriological (and other) difficulties.

²⁹ Lindbeck, 'Spiritual formation', 295.

³⁰ McGrath writes, 'Theology may be taken to refer to the views of any individual thinker on the nature of

Does this count? In the eyes of the ordinary believers themselves, it would not. They clearly consider theology to be an academic, scholarly, specialised discipline, and certainly do not think of themselves as theologians. Theology is something that other people (clerics, academics, students) do; it is not for them.

This commonly accepted but narrow view of theology, as a scholarly discipline or activity, has been challenged by many. Edward Farley, for example, has drawn attention to an older understanding of theology (he prefers the term *theologia*) that we have now mainly lost. He argues that for most of Christian history, theology had a broader meaning than that of a scholarly discipline or inquiry. It was used as a term 'for an actual, individual cognition of God and things related to God, a cognition which in most treatments attends faith.' In this sense theology is 'a habit (*habitus*) of the human soul' whose end is personal knowledge of God. This form of theology was not abstracted from its concrete setting, but was concerned with and developed with 'the believer's ways of existing in the world before God.' It was 'a *practical*, not theoretical, habit having the primary character of wisdom.' This kind of knowledge - the sapiential and personal knowledge that attends faith - is a part of every Christian's existence. On this account, theology is not just for the scholar, but is the wisdom proper to the life of every believer.³¹ Theology as a habitus of the soul has to do with learning how to live before God and is firmly rooted in the religious and spiritual life of the believer. It does not require an academic context.

Broader definitions of theology, such as that proposed by Farley, allow for theology to be understood more generically as 'reflection about God' or 'discourse about God'. But should *all* thinking about God or talk about God count as theology? For Macquarrie it does not. Whilst he equates theology with 'God-talk' - 'a form of discourse professing to speak about God' - he immediately qualifies this by saying, 'Not all God-talk would qualify as theology, for we reserve this name for the most sophisticated and reflective

God . . . "Theology" is an individual's "talk about God" ('Doctrine and Dogma', 112).

³¹ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 31, 35-37. Cf. Schreier, 'Theology as Wisdom', *Constructing Local Theologies*, 85-87.

ways of talking about God.³² Astley notes that George Pattison, similarly, has been reluctant to extend the use of the term theology to include the God-talk of every Christian, preferring instead to 'distinguish sharply between the way in which "ordinary" believers use religious language, symbols and practices and what professional theologians do.'³³ But in later writings, Pattison modifies this view, applying the term theology to those outside the academy: 'The language of even the simplest, most unlettered believer is always going to involve some element of reflection, judgement and interpretation and is, thus far, "theological".'³⁴ Astley's own view is that ordinary believers (i.e., those who have not studied theology formally at all) 'are inevitably involved in doing their own theology if and when they speak and think about God, or at all events when they do so with any seriousness.'³⁵

So do the interviewees do christology? Merely repeating set phrases from the tradition hardly seems to count as 'serious' speaking and thinking about Jesus. Farley stresses that 'existence in the world before God requires a wisdom that is not merely spontaneous but self-consciously interpretive.'³⁶ Serious reflection must also surely involve a critical element. Others are willing to identify a critical element to all theology, including ordinary theology.³⁷ However, my data suggest that a few of the sample are highly resistant to any kind of critical reflection and evaluation of their faith. It must be said again that theological reflection and criticism, when this is understood in intellectualist terms, is difficult, even at a fairly basic level, for those who have little cognitive skill. Some may never develop any measure of competence in this area simply 'because there is no significant critical element in their natures to be developed. They will never be "critical thinkers"; but feelers, and doers, or believers.'³⁸

³² John Macquarrie, *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 11.

³³ From an unpublished paper by George Pattison given at Artists and Theologians Colloquium, University College, Durham, 5 September, 1995, cited in Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 123.

³⁴ George Pattison, *The End Of Theology - And the Task of Thinking about God* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 105.

³⁵ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 56.

³⁶ Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 90.

³⁷ For a full discussion of this theme, see Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 140-145.

³⁸ Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, 113-114.

But a closer look at the data reveals that there is a lot more 'doing christology' around than one might at first think. Explicit and implicit rejection of traditional doctrines (and there is a lot of that about) must involve some measure of serious or critical reflection. Here people have thought for themselves, and found the doctrines wanting. I believe that, in so doing, they have been involved in doing christology. Also, if the notion of 'reflection' is broadened out to include 'consideration of' or 'meditation on' or 'contemplation of', then the range of what is allowed to count as theology may be vastly expanded. Whenever a believer is involved in any serious reflection, in this broad sense, on the story of Jesus then they can be said to be doing christology. Now doing christology this way, in a more 'ordinary' way, is going to be a very practical, personal and spiritual activity. Here we encounter a theology that is practical and devotional rather than theoretical and philosophical.

In the interview situation an ordinary believer engaged in ordinary theology may be able to do little more than repeat set phrases from the tradition. They may practice meditative or contemplative reflection on the gospels (i.e. they may do ordinary christology), but have 'only the most meagre ability to articulate and describe their patterns of belief and practice.'³⁹ For them, doing ordinary christology involves turning to the story of Jesus to see, as Jill puts it, '*if there is anything that I can find in Jesus' life that is useful to me, that will help me to look at this differently or help me resolve this issue*' or '*that will help me in living the Christian life.*' This sort of ordinary christology might be said to challenge academic christology to do the same, and so 'produce answers of the kind individual persons are looking for in order to find direction for their lives', rather than to produce 'academic results which clearly are not on eye-level with people's lives.'⁴⁰

³⁹ Lindbeck, 'Spiritual Formation', 292-293.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Schweitzer, 'Distorted, Oppressive, Fading Away? The Dialogical Task of Practical Theology and the Human Image of God', in Ziebertz, Schweitzer, Haring and Browning (eds), *The Human Image of God*, 178. Some theologians do advocate a more concrete, practice-orientated approach to certain theological problems as opposed to an abstract, theoretical one. Kenneth Surin, for example, favours a practical rather than a theoretical approach to theodicy. See his *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Ordinary christology and affective christology

Stories address themselves to the whole person - to the imagination, the will and the emotions as well as the intellect. In academic christology, response to the story usually takes a cognitive turn as it seeks to understand, clarify and explain via 'hard-headed, critical and cognitive reflection.'⁴¹ Ordinary christology, on the other hand, responds to story primarily in an affective mode. The interviewees (particularly women) invariably react to questions about the cross, for example, by giving an emotional (affective) response rather than a doctrinal (cognitive) one, talking about feelings not conceptual theology. The cross is affect-laden rather than theory-laden in much ordinary christology. To give just two examples:

Sheila says, *'I don't understand what "he saved us from our sins" really means'*, and then goes on to say:

'Last year when we were on pilgrimage [...] When we had all gathered [near the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem] we sang "When I survey the wondrous cross". And [starts crying] it just killed me...it was so emotional...so perfect for the occasion...it was just lovely...and for me I find that [voice falters again] a beautiful hymn and for me a perfect expression of the crucifixion. Um...I find it difficult to sing it now...For me...[falters again]...especially the last verse...sums up, you know, my feelings...[falters]...whether I can live up to it or not, but that's the way I would like to be. Does that say enough?'

Rose responded to a question about the cross by saying:

'...at Easter you sort of, the services there, like Good Friday and things, you do feel...there is something inside that you feel about that cross isn't there? Well, I feel there is. Um...[long pause]...it's almost like losing someone yourself isn't it? It is a sad...um...I know I come away feeling differently after that...about this cross...um...well the death I suppose. I don't know. I just feel...[voice trails off].'
'It's not the same sort of feeling...um...like Maundy Thursday and things like that...there are feelings that...yes...there is something. And then you come to Sunday and I mean it is a completely different thing isn't it...the feeling about it.'
'There is a feeling of...I suppose it is like grief isn't it, in a way. But there is a sadness, isn't there? Um...I can't explain it, but you do get these sort of feelings. As I say it is not perhaps the same every year. It can be different [...] I suppose it is how you are feeling at the time though as well sometimes, isn't it. You know, other things as well [...] I think

⁴¹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 143.

[Jesus' death] is something that you can relate to isn't it? [...] I think you almost tend to go through it don't you, day by day.'

The multidimensional character of christology was mentioned in chapter one, a little more detail may be added here. A believer's christology, like the rest of their religion, involves cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of the human person. These different dimensions are interrelated and interacting. They can only be distinguished from each other by treating them 'as *conceptual abstractions* from the concrete whole that is a thinking-feeling-experiencing-acting person.'⁴² The Christian educationalist, James Michael Lee recognises this in arguing for a position he calls 'holistic functionalism.' Holistic functionalism recognises that human cognitive and affective activities are contrasting but also interrelated and interdependent functions of the same person: cognition refers to intellectual functioning, whereas affect has to do with the feeling and emotional aspects of human activity. He writes:

The holistic concept of *homo integer* suggests that no human function or activity exists independently of other key aspects of the person there is no intellectual activity without some sort of concomitant affect, and there are no affective functions taking place without cognitions being somehow involved Cognitive activity is never un-affected. In short, every human behaviour has its cognitive component, its affective component, its psychomotor component, and so forth. What makes one activity cognitive and another affective is the basic mode and axial thrust of the particular human behavior or set of behaviours.⁴³

John Bernsten also recognises that all human acts are cognitive-affective and that solely cognitive or solely affective acts do not exist. 'Consequently we should not contrast emotion and thought, reason and passion or, ultimately, religious experience and doctrine. They are not opposed but entail each other.' Emotions accompany beliefs and beliefs accompany emotions. Hence religious teachings can 'be held in the mode of the emotions.' He describes Christian religious education as primarily a matter of 'the

⁴² Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, 113.

⁴³ James Michael Lee, *The Content of Religious Instruction: A Social Science Approach* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1985), 130-131.

shaping of religious emotions and affections in the context of teaching doctrine.⁴⁴ Lee and others also espouse an holistic understanding of Christian religious education 'in which the different elements (cognitive, affective, lifestyle behaviour) are all present in dynamic integration, so that the whole person is addressed.'⁴⁵

Academic christology is rarely holistic in this way. It is primarily a cognitive affair, addressing the cognitive function of the human person and tending to abstract out the more affective and volitional aspects. Much ordinary christology, by contrast, is affect and action centred. It tends to abstract out the cognitive dimension of christology, as evidenced by the lack of interest in doctrine and the emphasis on feelings and behaviour. Many would argue that in religion, affections and/or behaviour are the more important elements. William James is reported as saying almost a century ago, 'I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.'⁴⁶

Astley, similarly, argues that affectivity is the most important element in religion and also that religious learning is primarily a matter of learning feelings. 'No one can be fully and properly Christian who does not feel appropriately.'⁴⁷ Affect is said to be more distinctively human, and stronger, than cognition, so it should not surprise that ordinary christology, to use a slogan, 'feels' rather than 'thinks.'⁴⁸

The affective content of religion (which, as mentioned above, always has cognitive content too) is characterised by feelings, emotions, attitudes and values. All of these phenomena are difficult to define and classify, and I will not venture to do so. Suffice it to say that although the words 'feelings' and 'emotions' are often used interchangeably in common speech, from a philosophical perspective the latter is a more complex category.⁴⁹ Attitudes are also difficult to analyse. They are generally taken to be

⁴⁴ John A. Bernsten, 'Christian Affections and the Catechumenate', in Astley, Francis and Crowder (eds), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation*, 229-233.

⁴⁵ Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, 120.

⁴⁶ Cited in Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, 10 (original source not cited).

⁴⁷ Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, 135. Cf. 111-156.

⁴⁸ See Lee, *The Content of Religious Instruction*, 199, 205-206.

⁴⁹ On the difference between feelings and emotions, see *ibid.*, 210-216. For a philosophical analysis of emotion, see Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, 135-136, 235-241 and the literature cited there.

predominantly affective, acquired, and relatively permanent dispositions 'to act in a certain manner and/or to show a certain emotive reaction to someone or something.'⁵⁰

Values can be thought of as generalized attitudes which have become integrated into a broader pattern.⁵¹ Both are central to the notion of 'believing in' someone or something, an activity that is no mere belief that they exist, but an affective celebration of or commitment to that person or cause.

For this, in highlighting the affective dimension of christology, ordinary christology reminds academic christology that there is more to christology than factual beliefs. Christological feelings, emotions, attitudes and values are important too. In particular, learning pro-attitudes towards Jesus, such as trust and loyalty, and learning to value him, such that there is a deep affective bond between the believer and Jesus, is arguably the greater part of christology. To *believe in* Jesus is to give one's heart to him and to be moved by him (cf. Sheila above). For this, affect is indispensable. Right doctrine is not. A believer may have very limited or unorthodox beliefs about Jesus (as both Sheila and Rose do), yet be passionately committed to Jesus and his cause. Doctrinal orthodoxy is no measure of this belief-in Jesus.

The importance of affect in christology will come up again later on in this chapter and in the next. I want to say here, however, that the feelings and emotions generated by the story of Jesus may *not* develop in this way into attitudes and values. Feelings and (most) emotions are usually treated as transitory occurrences, attitudes and values as enduring dispositions that lead to corresponding actions. The feelings and emotions evoked by reading the gospels, or watching Franco Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth*, or by singing, 'When I survey the wondrous cross', or participating in Holy Week services, may or may not develop into longer lasting and more stable states. Affective responses that do not lead to volitional action, or to transformation of the person in any other way, perhaps deserve to come under criticism. Affective christology that only entertains warm feelings is superficial. Many argue that the regular pedagogy of spiritual practices can help train the religious affections. Dispositions can be evoked and trained by the

⁵⁰ Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 104.

⁵¹ On attitudes and values, see Lee, *The Content of Religious Instruction*, 216- 229.

language of prayer and ritual. The practice of giving thanks to God, for example, can inculcate a disposition to be grateful to God and others, just as the practice of telling the truth can deepen into the disposition to be honest. The disposition of gratitude 'notices and appreciates the generosity of others. In this way, it engenders a character-based readiness to act generously towards others. It makes no sense to appreciate a quality without wanting to embody it ourselves.' These dispositions, Spohn insists, 'carry over into ways of action that are consonant with the disposition.'⁵² In other words, affectivity *motivates* behaviour, as the extract from Sheila's interview demonstrates. However, data from other respondents suggest that sometimes there is little movement beyond feelings and emotions. The passion and death of Jesus can move the believer to feel a short-lived pity and/or compassion and/or sympathy for Jesus, but not lead to a commitment to him or his 'cause'.

On not learning christological dogma

As we have seen, another characteristic of ordinary christology is that it is resistant to learning christological (or other) doctrines. Nearly every week functionalists recite the Nicene creed. How are they reading it? According to McGrath, the Nicene creed is a brief summary of the main points of Christian belief 'which every Christian ought to be able to accept and be bound by.'⁵³ Functionalists, especially those of the traditionalist kind, typically respond to the creed by saying, '*It sums up what I believe.*' '*It's putting it in a nutshell really.*' '*I can agree with it all. This is what I believe.*' And then they can say little else. As Marion puts it, the creed '*is something I just say parrot fashion... You say these things because you have always said it. Habit.*' Or as Eleanor says, '*Well yes. Yes. Well I just do believe it... But I have never really thought about it, you see.*' People say that they '*totally and utterly*' believe in the creed, but what they actually believe in is not Nicene orthodoxy.

The creed of the Council of Nicea, on which the Nicene creed is based, was intended to

⁵² Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 37, 41-42.

⁵³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 17. Cf. G. W. H. Lampe who writes, 'According to Augustine the creed is a brief compendium of the truths that lie scattered all over the scriptures, and it provides a summary of what Christians must believe for novices and those who do not yet enjoy a full acquaintance with the Bible itself' ('Appendix B: The Origins of the Creeds', in *Christian Believing*, 56).

define orthodox teaching. It bristles with anti-Arian clauses which were somewhat awkwardly interpolated into an existing baptismal creed, with the explicit intention of excluding Arianism.⁵⁴ But as we saw in chapter 3, Arianism persists. Functional christology is effectively Arian. One might suppose that one of the key faith-images of Jesus to have had a paradigmatic impact on the Christian consciousness would be the image of the pre-existent Son in the Nicene creed.⁵⁵ The doctrine of the pre-existent Son represents a crucial shift. In effect it separates conceptually the eternal relation of Jesus to the Father from his concrete existence in time as mediator of God's creative, revelatory and salvific activity. This means that 'an epoch-making paradigm shift has taken place between scripture and Nicea; the same message of Jesus as Son of God appears in a completely different "thought system" or interpretative system.'⁵⁶ But the functionalists have not learned this doctrine of pre-existence and do not make this shift into a different conceptual framework. They do not transpose Jesus as Son of God into an eternal relation with God the Father. Rather, for them, Jesus as Son of God remains firmly anchored in the human, historical life of Jesus.

There are some clues in the data as to how the Nicene language referring to the eternal relation of Jesus to the Father is being understood. Thus the anti-Arian phrase 'begotten not made' is commonly understood as referring to the special creation of Jesus.

Diane

'Well I think, "begotten", well that is obviously an antiquated word, but he obviously wasn't conceived in the way that normal people are, so I suppose "begotten" would be the word you would use to describe Mary coming with child.'

Lesley

"Begotten"...what does that mean?'

'I guess "not made" refers to [laugh] that he wasn't made in the conventional way.'

Edward

E I suppose 'begotten not made'...I suppose I would regard that as making a differentiation in terms of the process of creation of Jesus.

A So the word 'begotten' would be to do with the virgin birth?

⁵⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 255.

⁵⁵ Cf. Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 7, 109-146.

⁵⁶ Küschel, *Born Before All Time?*, 503.

E *Conception. Yes.*

To take another example, the phrases 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God' are typically passed over with no comment, or else the following kind of comment is made.

Suzanne

'These words mean nothing to me. And it is not really something that I have looked at or thought about.'

'So to actually look at the meaning of the words, that's not...[voice trails off].'

'I mean the first [prayer] that we say in the service, "Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open", that means a lot to me and I can understand all the words. But I think the [creed], I think I just tend to roll it off without thinking about the words.'

'I mean, "We believe in one God", you can say that with all your heart because that is what you believe, but the other paragraph further down...I suppose really, some of it...To me it is very theoretical. It is way above my head...Until you get to this bit here, "For our sake".'

Diane

'I don't know that I ever think about that. It is sort of sad to say that you say these things, but you don't always sort of, every time you say them, think, well what does that mean?'

'You know, you do it every Sunday because it is laid down in the forms of worship. It is easy to carry on saying it and your mind can often be somewhere else...you sort of switch off.'

Harvey Whitehouse has explored the problems of habituation and the difficulties of learning and remembering complex theological concepts. He asserts, 'When people end up performing rituals largely as a matter of automated habit, they become far less likely to reflect explicitly upon the possible symbolic meanings of these rituals

Audiences can obviously become habituated to doctrinal repetition and can simply switch off.' He also argues that complex 'hard-to-acquire' theological concepts are invariably 'vulnerable to reformulation in cognitively simpler terms.'⁵⁷ The conceptuality in which the creed is cast is clearly difficult for most ordinary believers to grasp. They do not adopt its metaphysic; they have a simpler monist and absolutist metaphysic, more akin to Arius. The key anti-Arian clause, the *homoousion* (translated as 'of one Being' in Common Worship), is interpreted in the following way: Jesus and

⁵⁷ Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*, 5, 129.

God are 'of one Being' because 'you can't separate them.' As Edward puts it:

"Of One Being with the Father". I suppose what I would take from that is that you can't separate the two. You know, all one Being. Somehow they are so strongly connected that whilst as I say I wouldn't say Jesus was God, they are...you know...connected.'

'Of one Being' is thus taken to signify a relational not an ontological identity between Jesus and God. It patently does not carry the doctrinal meaning intended for it; it is not read as an ontological statement or as philosophical, conceptual language, but as figurative, poetic language describing Jesus of Nazareth's relationship with the God he called Father. Similarly, 'Son of God', in functional christology, remains firmly metaphorical or analogical in character and is not turned into an ontological term. Son of God has undoubtedly been a key, if not *the* key faith-image of Jesus that has had a paradigmatic impact on the Christian consciousness, but for functionalists 'Son of God' is not shaped by Nicene orthodoxy. 'Son of God' takes its meaning from the story of Jesus' life (from the birth stories primarily and from other stories, such as the story of Jesus' baptism where he is declared to be 'the Beloved Son') as well as from the 'vast network of commonplaces associated with paternal and filial behaviour' that we all have.⁵⁸ The word Son is here firmly associated with the concrete historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, not the Second Person of the Godhead.

The modernisation of the term *homoousion*, from 'being of one substance with the Father' to 'of one Being with the Father', has been criticised for introducing new heretical meanings. The reaction of the panel responsible for the revision 'seems to have been: "Well, they'll know what we mean".'⁵⁹ The data show just how naive this response is. Martin Stringer, a liturgist trained in anthropology, provides a helpful perspective on this issue. In his article on 'Situating Meaning in the Liturgical Text' he explores the nature of meaning in liturgy.⁶⁰ The problem of meaning, says Stringer, is a hermeneutical one: is the meaning of the liturgy to be found entirely within the texts of the liturgy or is the 'meaning' of the rite to be found primarily in the minds of those

⁵⁸ See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 113. For a discussion of creedal language, see 111-117.

⁵⁹ David L. Frost, *The Language of Series 3* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1973), 10.

⁶⁰ Martin Stringer, 'Situating Meaning in the Liturgical Text', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 73, no.3 (1991), 181-195.

who attend it and thus be subject to individual variations?⁶¹

Stringer describes how from the fourth century through to the revisions of the 1960s, apart from a brief interlude during the Reformation, liturgical language has always been accepted as 'archaic'. Church members were not expected to understand its 'meaning'. When liturgical revision came, in both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church in the 1960s and 1970s, the express purpose was to make the language of the liturgy more understandable. But, says Stringer, it became increasingly apparent 'that most of the ordinary members of the congregation still did not understand what much of the text actually "meant"'. This is simply because most ordinary people did not really understand the meaning . . . of many of the technical theological terms that were constantly being used.⁶² As a result, the pressure has continued to build for a language which people can understand, a language that is 'concrete and tangible rather than abstract and theoretical', a language that makes the liturgy more approachable 'for the vast majority of people who cannot handle the jargon of academic theology.'⁶³

Locating meaning exclusively in the text, argues Stringer, leads to liturgical language having to be as understandable as possible in order for it to bear the full weight of responsibility for meaning. This in turn leads to meaning being *imposed* on the rite and raises further questions of power and authority. Furthermore, the imposed meanings are still 'theological meanings, meanings that were, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant to the majority of people who actually used the rite.'⁶⁴ Liturgists, says Stringer, should accept 'that religious language will never be fully "understandable of the people" and never should be.'⁶⁵ He turns to other sociologists of religion for support. David Martin, in his critique of Anglican liturgical revisions, has argued that liturgical language has a 'meaning' which goes beyond the particular dictionary definition of the words that are being used. He suggests that the words themselves are not words with meanings as such,

⁶¹ Stringer's dichotomy between meaning as a function of the text *or* of the worshipper is, quite rightly, criticised by Bridget Nichols. Following Gadamer, Nichols argues that 'meaning *happens* in liturgy' in the fusion of horizons between text and worshipper. See her *Liturgical Hermeneutics: Interpreting Liturgical Rites in Performance* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 18-40.

⁶² Stringer, 'Situating Meaning in the Liturgical Text', 184.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 183, 188.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

but religious texts almost devoid of any real meaning that have some kind of power or mystery in their own right. Martin writes, 'Religion is less a rule book than a set of spells by which people are bound in a certain direction. A community is held spell bound by an image, transfixed by a verbal incantation.'⁶⁶ Martin's main argument is that texts, as items in themselves, often relate people to their own past and must be retained as whole texts because of their personal associations or wider symbolic values. Stringer also emphasises the symbolic nature of religious language and its capacity to accumulate a depth and range of meaning, some of which will be entirely personal and individual. The hankering after understandability is viewed by these writers as mistaken. It misses the whole purpose of liturgical language, which is to be 'evocative and ambiguous' rather than 'understandable.'⁶⁷

The data confirm Stringer's thesis that ordinary believers do not understand the technical meaning of certain theological terms used in the liturgy (how could they, without proper instruction in their use?), and that liturgical language has primarily an expressive and emotive function (see below, pp. 222-229). A professional theologian will be attuned to the technical/doctrinal meaning of the creed, ordinary theologians are not. Clearly, technical phrases, such as the *homoousion*, can and do take on new meaning and significance when they are released from their moorings in academic theology and let loose in the world of ordinary religion. As Martin and Pluck write, 'The meaning which inheres in any set of words may be far from self-evident and may rest less in its apparent intellectual content than in its context: the verbal formula may convey a range of different meanings depending on custom and context.'⁶⁸ So Graeme Smith reports from his experience of talking to people inside the churches, that although they use the words and phrases of the liturgy, when the meaning of these words are explored in greater depth the meaning attached to the words is rarely that of 'the orthodoxy of the Churches' official statements.'⁶⁹

⁶⁶ David Martin, *The Breaking of the Image: A Sociology of Christian Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 82. Cf. Mary Douglas, 'The Bog Irish', *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1970), 59-76. Douglas highlights the tendency for symbols to take on cultural and social significance over and above their original religious function.

⁶⁷ Stringer, 'Situating Meaning in the Liturgical Text', 184.

⁶⁸ Martin and Pluck, *Young Peoples' Beliefs*, 8.

⁶⁹ Smith, 'If You Can't Beat 'em...', 15.

Another approach to the meaning of the *homoousion* is provided by George Lindbeck. Influenced by Wittgenstein, he suggests that religions can be compared to languages, with religious doctrines functioning as rules for religious language. As such, doctrines should not be understood as propositions making ontological truth claims, but as a way of regulating language. Doctrines have a second-order grammar. Thus, the *homoousion* should not be understood as making an ontological reference, but as regulating language concerning both Jesus and God. Whatever is said of the Father must be said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father. Whatever we say of Jesus, we must not suggest that he was only a man or only God, nor that he was some sort of hybrid God-man.⁷⁰ In functional (and sceptical) christology, however, the *homoousion* does not function either as a first-order proposition making an ontological claim *or* as a grammatical rule. Functionalists simply have not learned the grammar of orthodox christological discourse. They do not say of the Son what they say of the Father. Yet they are following rules, but other rules. As Lindbeck acknowledges, beneath the ancient creedal *homoousion* rule lie three other, deeper rules, which 'have been abidingly important from the beginning in forming mainstream Christian identity.' These three rules are: first, there is only one God; second, Jesus was a real human being; third, that every possible importance should be ascribed to Jesus which is not inconsistent with the first two rules.⁷¹ It is these three simpler, uncontroversial rules (which are compatible with subordinationism and Arianism) that our functionalists follow, rather than the more complex *homoousion* rule. For functionalists, the *homoousion* rule would appear to be a grammatical mistake, not correct grammar.

Lindbeck claims that one acquires an understanding of religious language through performance.⁷² Paul Holmer similarly claims that a religious concept 'is learned by

⁷⁰ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984), 94. Lindbeck's setting aside of the ontological reference of the *homoousion* has come under criticism. McGrath demonstrates that the regulative function of the *homoousion* in the patristic period was based on its substantive content. He writes, 'Given the ontological relation of Father and Son, the grammatical regulation of language concerning them follows as a matter of course.' In other words, the rule must be kept because Jesus *is* God (*The Genesis of Doctrine*, 29). Avis concurs: 'Doctrines do indeed have a cultural-linguistic function, but they only have that because they have a primary and determinative cognitive function' (*God and the Creative Imagination*, 168).

⁷¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 94-95.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 34.

mastering the way the word is used' in the tradition. To learn how the word 'God' is used is to learn theology. When we learn that God is 'the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth' we are learning theology. 'Theology is a name, then, for the ruled way, the correct way, of speaking about and worshipping God.'⁷³ Understanding the concepts of faith is thus a matter of learning the grammar and vocabulary of the tradition. The data suggest that Holmer, like Lindbeck and other postliberals, presents an idealised and idealistic account of ordinary theology. He describes what he thinks should happen. A study such as the present one shows what actually happens and suggests that most ordinary believers do not come to understand key concepts such as 'incarnation' or 'atonement' or 'salvation' through performance. However, more detailed empirical work still needs to be done in this area. What would count as having learned and understood these concepts? Clearly most of the sample do not have (or cannot articulate) a cognitive/intellectual/technical understanding of these terms, but they may have acquired an affective/non-cognitive/non-technical 'understanding'. It is the non-cognitive dimension of ordinary christology that I want to address in the next section.

Is ordinary christology essentially non-cognitive?

Many would claim that the primary function of liturgical language is not to convey information but to act as a vehicle for Christian religious affections.⁷⁴ Its purpose is to lift the hearts and minds of believers to God in worship and to act as a vehicle for the controlled expression of religious emotion and feeling. As Avis puts it, 'Liturgy exerts a profound effect on the worshipper by expressing Christian religious affections in a restrained and disciplined form that protects the worshipper from being overwhelmed by an experience of the numinous Thoughts that defy expression, emotions that are too strong for human nature to bear, are constrained, contained and made manageable' by the traditional liturgical forms.⁷⁵ Astley, drawing on Ninian Smart's definition, contends that 'worship is an activity which *expresses* certain religious attitudes, affections and experiences and tends to *evoke* them. In their worship, Christians express

⁷³ Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith*, 133, 199-204.

⁷⁴ See Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 85-89. Cf. also Stringer's comments above.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

Christian attitudes and emotions.⁷⁶ On these accounts, the language of worship primarily performs non-cognitive rather than cognitive functions. It is the non-cognitive aspect of religious language that I want to focus on here.

Some clarification of terms is required first. Cognitive statements are statements that are either true or false (i.e. 'factual' or 'truth-claiming'). Non-cognitive expressions, on the other hand, are neither true nor false. They include commands, exclamations, expressions of feelings and attitudes. Unlike cognitive language, non-cognitive language does not directly assert facts or provide descriptions. A non-cognitive approach to religious beliefs therefore 'treats them as expressions of feelings, emotions or attitudes to life or of commitments to a certain way of behaving. On this view, rather than imparting information, religious language arouses and deepens attitudes and emotions and stirs people to moral and religious action.'⁷⁷

Logical positivists notoriously argued that statements only have meaning if they can be empirically verified or are tautological. Since the propositions of religion (as well as those of aesthetics, ethics and metaphysics) clearly were neither, they were regarded as cognitively meaningless. Religious and ethical statements could therefore only be regarded as expressing attitudes or feelings towards life, not as statements of fact. They do not make cognitive claims, at best they are expressions of emotion and feeling possessing what was sometimes described as 'emotive meaning.'⁷⁸ Similarly, the empiricist philosopher, Richard Braithwaite, argued that religious beliefs do not, properly understood, make cognitive claims at all, but they still have a *use* despite the fact that they are not empirically verifiable or falsifiable. He held that religious beliefs shape our attitudes and the way we live mainly by expressing our commitments. Christianity and other religions provide a fund of stories - stories which need not be true

⁷⁶ Jeff Astley, 'The Role of Worship in Christian Learning', in Astley, Francis and Crowder (eds), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation*, 245.

⁷⁷ Jeff Astley, *Exploring God-talk: Using Language in Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 71.

⁷⁸ Fergus Kerr, 'Religious Language', in Hastings, Mason and Pyper (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, 608-610. For a summary of logical positivism and the falsification challenge, see Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 37-58. A brief, classic exposition is Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2nd ed. 1946).

- that express attitudes and inspire people to live a certain moral way of life.⁷⁹ More recently, thinkers such as Don Cupitt have also adopted a wholly non-cognitive approach to religious belief. For Cupitt, no religious truth is descriptive or factual, all are practical and necessarily subjective. For him, a corollary of non-cognitivism is non-realism. Christian non-realism, as espoused by Cupitt, asserts that, 'Belief in the God of Christian faith is an expression of allegiance to a particular set of values, and experience of the God of Christian faith is experience of the impact of those values in one's life.'⁸⁰ This non-realist viewpoint interprets religious language, not as referring to a transcendent reality, but as expressive of our emotions, our basic moral insights and intentions, or our way of seeing the world, or as referring to our moral and spiritual ideals.⁸¹

Whilst acknowledging the important non-cognitive dimensions of religious language, however, most scholars have continued to insist that religious language does additionally refer to a transcendent reality, and that it does make cognitive claims either directly or by implication. Ian Ramsey, for example, held that religious language serves to evoke religious experience and 'disclosure situations', but it does also indicate - admittedly in indirect and approximate ways - something of the content of the disclosure. In other words, religious language represents as well as evokes the divine. It is not completely non-cognitive.⁸² Many others defend a realist position, whilst acknowledging the emotional power of religious language. Frederick Ferré is another example of a realist who asserts that religious language first and foremost is profoundly evocative of feelings and formation of attitudes, shaping our ways of seeing, feeling and behaving 'more than we may know'. Religion has a 'kind of power over our emotions and our legitimate aspirations,' he writes.⁸³

⁷⁹ Richard B. Braithwaite, 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief', in Basil Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 72-91. For further examples of religious language treated as wholly non-cognitive in form, see Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 67-72.

⁸⁰ Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 69.

⁸¹ John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-Realism: Defining the Issue', in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 7.

⁸² Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1957).

⁸³ Frederick Ferré, 'Metaphors, Models and Religion', *Soundings* 51(1968), 331, 338. See also, 327-345.

Speech-act theory has also highlighted the non-cognitive dimensions of religious language. John Austin showed that much of our ordinary language is rarely limited to straightforward cognitive statements. Speech-act analysis reveals that language can perform many different functions. In every act of saying something (the locutionary act), we also do something (the illocutionary act or acts). Austin identified a number of different kinds of illocution, including commands, requests, promises, warnings, expressions of attitude and so on. In addition, he also distinguished between these illocutions (what is done *in* saying something) and what is done *by* saying something. He called these actual effect of the request, command, promise, expression, etc., the perlocutionary act. Despite an early distinction between 'performatives' and statements, Austin finally concluded that descriptive statements, or 'constatives' as he called them, are also a form of illocutionary act. Constatives are the only type of illocution that can be judged true or false; that is, that are cognitive. All other types of illocution are non-cognitive.⁸⁴

Speech-act analysis can be fruitfully applied to the language of religious worship. Such an analysis shows that very many illocutions of worship language are non-cognitive. Expressive illocutions, for example, express what the believer thinks or feels. Utterances such as 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory' or 'My soul thirsts for God' contain or 'carry' an expressive. Expressives can be expressions of attitudes or feelings (such as trust, longing, joy, guilt, awe, praise) or expressions of convictions, beliefs or intentions, as in the utterance, 'In all things God works together for good with those who love God.' (This illocution also has constative force, i.e. it is not *just* expressive.) The language of worship may contain a variety of other illocutionary acts, including prayerful requests and commitment to an action or way of behaving, all of which are non-cognitive.

Speech-act theory highlights the complexity of religious language and shows how rarely it consists simply of descriptive statements. Much of the language of worship consists of non-cognitive expressives (and/or commissives and prescriptives). Sometimes it might not be directly asserting facts at all, although non-cognitive illocutions are

⁸⁴ John L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

usually considered to *imply* or *presuppose* a constative, i.e. a cognitive illocution. Thus Brümmer argues that we cannot express our own trust in or thanksgiving to God 'without presupposing that this God exists in fact.'⁸⁵ We may take the affirmation, 'The Lord is my shepherd' from Psalm 23. This is more of an expression of an attitude and an intention than a statement of fact, but it presupposes that there is a Lord and that the Lord acts benevolently towards his people and would 'misfire' if there were no 'Lord.'⁸⁶ For non-realists like Cupitt, however, non-cognitive illocutions do *not* imply any constative or cognitive claim about the real existence of God. For them, God is only an idea or ideal. All of the sample we are analysing here, however, have a realist understanding of God. They would not agree that 'there is no other God other than the God we have made' or that 'religion is, *without remainder*, a human creation.'⁸⁷ All are realists and at the heart of realist faith is the belief that God (albeit variously conceived) exists in reality and not solely in the mind, or in culture or language.⁸⁸ So when this sample make non-cognitive illocutions, as they do during worship, a constative is usually implied or presupposed.

However, it may be that much ordinary christology is *primarily* (but not wholly) non-cognitive, in that its *focus* is on the expression and evocation of certain feelings, emotions and attitudes towards Jesus, and not on the declaration of facts about him. It is clear from the data that for most of the sample the christological language of worship functions primarily as a carrier of affection rather than of cognition, and is therefore primarily emotionally not cognitively significant. As we have seen, most of the sample do not have a doctrinally rich spirituality. They use liturgical language, but '*do not understand what the words mean,*' which suggests that they are using it primarily non-cognitively.

Clearly, the words of scripture, liturgy and hymnody (cf. a painting or a piece of music or a poem) do not have to be cognitively/intellectually/technically understood in order

⁸⁵ Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, 268.

⁸⁶ Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 84.

⁸⁷ Colin Crowder (ed.), *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism* (London: Mowbray, 1997), 3-4.

⁸⁸ It may be the case, of course, that a highly transcendent realism or apophaticism is in practice indistinguishable from non-realism.

to have an effect. Patrick Sherry reports how the words of Isaiah on the Suffering Servant, 'He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief . . . surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows . . . with his stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53:3-5) move him. They are words that appeal to his 'heart and imagination' rather than his intellect.⁸⁹ Similarly, several of the interviewees report being profoundly moved by certain words or phrases or hymns, whilst having little cognitive understanding. Pat says that the words 'our sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ' mean a lot to her, even though, as she put it, '*I don't understand the cross.*' We might say that the words have affective/non-cognitive meaning, rather than cognitive/intellectual meaning. As we noted above, the hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross' is for Sheila a powerful vehicle for her to express religious affections - of penitence, trust, adoration, commitment, etc. This hymn also contains a certain theology, but the data suggest that it functions *primarily* as a vehicle for religious affections rather than as a carrier of explicit theology. That this is so is confirmed by other comments Sheila makes, such as, '*I like singing Charles Wesley's hymns...they mean a lot to me,*' but '*I don't understand redemption.*' It is as if the explicit theology is neither here nor there. It is enough to know that Jesus' death is an act of love that somehow benefits believers, without having to understand why or how this might be so. Only 'oblique, aesthetic assent to the realities presupposed or celebrated in the hymn' seems to be necessary.⁹⁰

If, for Sheila, the hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross' functions primarily as performative (non-cognitive) discourse rather than doctrinal (cognitive) discourse, then it may be said to do something rather than state something. It expresses and evokes pro-attitudes towards Jesus and makes the believer feel differently about herself. Similarly, singing the words 'My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose went forth and followed thee. No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine!' has a (perlocutionary) cathartic, therapeutic, salvific effect on the believer, without her ever having to understand particular theories or doctrines of atonement. It is Avis' contention that liturgy has aesthetic power rather than rational power, that its meaning is grasped

⁸⁹ Sherry, *Images of Redemption*, 1-3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

by the imagination rather than the intellect, and that it functions as evocative poetry rather than fact-asserting prose.⁹¹ In other words, the liturgy primarily structures feeling and generates emotive/affective meaning rather than intellectual/cognitive meaning. It functions as a container for spirituality.⁹²

Sheila also sings 'Died he for me who caused his pain', but the rest of the data from her interview show that she does not have a substitutionary theory of atonement. The words do *imply* a doctrine of substitutionary atonement, but she does not appear to make these implications. This suggests that she is using the language primarily non-cognitively. However, because she does not explicitly deny the implications, we cannot adopt a wholly non-cognitive analysis of her discourse. What is clear from the data is that the constative or cognitive claim that is explicitly implied or presupposed by many in this sample is rarely that of orthodoxy. When functionalists confess 'Jesus is Lord', for example, they are not making a cognitive claim about how Jesus exists in the hierarchy of being. They are making a different cognitive claim, viz., that he is '*a pre-eminent person*' (Richard). It thus seems that many use what appears to be cognitive language in order to make only the vaguest cognitive claims. The analytic chapters have shown that the cognitive content of many people's faith is '*very vague*'. They may accept the saving efficacy of Jesus' death, for example, but for them the content of the concept of atonement is amorphous and ill-defined. All this suggests a primarily non-cognitive theology.

The analytic chapters have also shown that the majority of the sample are effectively liberal in both their christology and their soteriology. Liberals are said to be, to a greater or lesser extent, non-cognitivists in their understanding of some aspects of Christian doctrine.⁹³ Wiles and Hick, for example, both contend that incarnation language is essentially expressive (i.e. non-cognitive) rather than fact-asserting. For Wiles, incarnational language is a very effective way of expressing the significance of Jesus

⁹¹ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 85-89.

⁹² On the relationship between liturgy and feeling, see Nichols, *Refracting the Light*, 72-95. See also Davies, *Anthropology and Theology*, 86-90.

⁹³ See Paul Badham, 'The Religious Necessity of Realism', in Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, 183-184. It should be noted, however, that liberal theology is regarded as only 'semi-realist' by thoroughgoing non-realists such as Don Cupitt. See, Cupitt, *Life Lines* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 92-104 and 221.

and should not be understood 'in a strict metaphysical way.'⁹⁴ For Hick, 'the real point and value of the incarnational doctrine is not indicative but expressive, not to assert a metaphysical fact but to express a valuation and evoke an attitude.' The traditional liturgical language which speaks of Jesus as God the Son, God incarnate, God from God, is considered by him to be the language of devotion and 'the hyperbole of the heart.'⁹⁵

Lindbeck observes that the Nicene creed itself 'has acquired liturgical and expressive functions that are in some respects more important than its doctrinal use for large parts of Christendom. The act of reciting it is for millions a mighty symbol of the church's unity in time and space.' The chanting of the Nicene creed 'can be an immensely powerful symbolization of the totality of the faith even for those who do not understand its discursive propositional or regulative meanings.'⁹⁶ For some Christians the creed is undoubtedly of signal doctrinal importance and they do use it *doctrinally*, one might say, rather than expressively. But this is not the case for the sample being analysed here. John, who has a sceptical christology and cannot give intellectual assent to the creedal christological dogmas, is unusual in that he *knows* he is not using the creed doctrinally, yet he continues to recite it because '*it is important to go along with what is given.*' He views the creed as an important marker of Christian identity: by reciting it he is identifying himself with the Christian community both past and present. The functionalists, however, may *think* they are using the creed doctrinally, but it would appear that they are (at least primarily) using it expressively. My conclusion, therefore, is that it would seem that much ordinary christology is primarily non-cognitive (i.e. it uses christological language to express attitudes, rather than make fact-asserting statements), with cognitive implications of only the vaguest kind. More detailed empirical work would help confirm or deny this analysis.

⁹⁴ Wiles, *Explorations in Theology*, 24.

⁹⁵ John Hick, 'Jesus and the World Religions', in Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 178, 183.

⁹⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 95, 19.

Chapter 10

CHRISTOLOGY AS PROCESS

All of the sample, irrespective of the doctrinal positions they hold, engage to a greater or lesser extent with the story (or more accurately stories) of Jesus, and identify with the figure of Jesus. I want to begin this final chapter by addressing, albeit briefly, this complex process which lies at the heart of ordinary christology. Yet again I am moving into territory with a substantial literature and am approaching a field that can be looked at from a variety of perspectives. In this chapter I primarily raise questions that require further empirical investigation, rather than provide answers. I also develop further issues raised in previous chapters.

Engaging with the story of Jesus

Human beings live in a world of multiple stories or myths. We are all grasped or enmeshed by stories and our identity is shaped by them. Dan Stiver distinguishes between '*the* story, the canonical scriptures; our story, the cultural narratives and myths that form the background framework of our lives; and my and your story, the personal autobiography and biographies that constitute a central part of our identity,' noting that, '*our* story is always a narrative context for *my* story.'¹ James Fowler talks of 'master stories' - stories by which we live; Stephen Crites of mundane stories and sacred stories, describing sacred stories as 'like dwelling places' which people 'live in'.² It is often said that *the* story, the canonical scriptures and in particular the story of Jesus, is the story by which Christians live their lives. It is the tale that they inhabit.³ It should be the dominant story by which they live, the myth of their lives, their 'master story'. It is said that 'through faith, those who believe in Christ are somehow caught up in him, so that *his* history becomes *their* history . . . His death is their death, his life is their life.'⁴

¹ Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 135, 137.

² James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 277-279. Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', 70.

³ See Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 6; Sykes, *The Story of Atonement*, xi.

⁴ McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 54.

Nicholas Harvey goes so far as to say, 'Jesus' story and our story are one story.'⁵

Church services are the usual means by which the sample engage with the story of Jesus. The liturgy, prayers, readings, sermon and hymns are the 'text' with which the believer holds a hermeneutical conversation. But what kind of hermeneutical conversation do they hold? What hermeneutical strategy do they employ? I cannot hope to answer these questions fully without further detailed empirical investigation of the kind undertaken by researchers such as Andrew Village. He has carried out a quantitative investigation into the way lay Christians interpret the Bible and the factors affecting interpretation.⁶ There is a paucity of empirical research in this field (as there is in ordinary theology generally), but the academic study of hermeneutics is well developed. According to Paul Ricoeur, a master of hermeneutics, 'what is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities.'⁷ Rather than a Romantic hermeneutic that searches for the author's intentionality 'behind the text', or a hermeneutic that seeks for meaning 'in the text', through the identification of structures, Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach, like that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, looks for meaning 'in front of the text.' This hermeneutical approach speaks of a fusion of horizons between that of the narrative and that of the reader. On this view, the meaning of a text does not emerge solely as a function of the narrative itself; the reader also makes a contribution to the meaning of the story. We may envisage, then, an hermeneutical circle, or spiral, between text and reader - or one could say between text and context, in recognition of the fact that each reader is to a high degree shaped by their specific contexts. In a true dialogue there is a fusion of horizons in which new truth emerges and in the process of interpretation the horizon of the reader is transformed and restructured by the horizon of the text (cf. see above, pp. 26-27).

This hermeneutical perspective has been adopted by Christian educationalists who

⁵ Harvey, *The Morals of Jesus*, 9.

⁶ See Village, 'Biblical Interpretation among Church of England Lay People.' It is ordinary believers interpretation of the biblical text, rather than the liturgical text or any other 'text', that I am primarily concerned with in this chapter.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, 'Philosophy and religious language', *Journal of Religion* 54, no.1 (1974), 79-80.

argue that for Jesus' story to become in any way our story there must be an 'interpretative, dialogic, "conversational" relationship of correlation or "resonance"' between our story and the story of Jesus.⁸ In the context of theological education, this conversation is essentially critical and usually cuts both ways 'so that the tradition is critiqued by our contemporary experience as well as vice versa, and there is mutual correction and mutual enrichment of the conversational partners.'⁹ In other words, there must be 'an engaged reading' in which the reader brings her own questions and concerns into 'the world of the text', interrogating it from new angles, and at the same time she must let the text interrogate her, allowing its strangeness to challenge her familiar frameworks and assumptions.¹⁰ Cook, employing Paul Ricoeur's insights, argues that appropriation of the text

demands that we move from the immediacy of the experience of the text (Ricoeur's first naiveté) to a critical appropriation of the text. This involves both bringing critical questions to the text (historical, literary, etc.) and allowing the text to maintain its own integrity and otherness so that in turn it questions us. The full process of appropriation can only take place, however, when we return to the text with a second, post-critical naiveté and allow the text's evocative power to be truly transformative in our lives.¹¹

Borg also recommends that we read the text in a state of post-critical naiveté. He argues that 'a post-critical reading does not disavow the critical but brings the critical with it.'¹² Like many others, he insists that the historical-critical stage cannot be abandoned if the reading is to be responsible (cf. see above, p. 195). But a sophisticated Ricoeurian

⁸ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 144.

⁹ Ibid. Cf. Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), chapters 9 and 10. Groome proposes at the heart of the Christian process a form of dialectical hermeneutic between the Christian story and vision and our story and vision that has as its telos or intended goal further Christian praxis that is faithful to the Christian story and vision.

¹⁰ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 16. One could say that there are a spectrum of 'engaged readings': at one end of the spectrum the horizon of the text can swamp that of the reader (i.e. the text is merely repeated or reproduced) whereas, at the other end, the reader's horizon can swamp that of the text (i.e. the text is ignored). For Gadamer, 'To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one's own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were' (*Truth and Method*, 341).

¹¹ Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 57.

¹² Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 249.

post-critical naiveté lies beyond the scope of most ordinary believers, for they do not come to the text having pursued a critical quest. Historical-criticism does not impact on their interpretation of the Bible.¹³ But these days their lack of criticism is not always criticised. Postmodern approaches, for example, declare that the historical-critical method is not necessary for an engaged reading of the text.

For the postmodernist, the key to the meaning and truth about anything or anyone is the narrative itself, for all supposed knowledge is finally an interpretation of (a long series of) interpretations of images, metaphors, stories and narratives

What is important in christology is what believers have in front of them - the stories, the beliefs, and the testimonies - all known through the biblical texts

Jesus is the Jesus of the narrative; there is no other Jesus.¹⁴

From this perspective, whether the gospels are read as fiction (the postmodern approach) or as history (the premodern or precritical approach) does not really matter, for they carry a truth that can change people's lives. What matters is that the stories are allowed to shape those lives. And the data do indeed show that neither biblical scholarship nor awareness of one's own pre-judgements are essential to a transformative encounter with the text. However, their absence is fraught with danger, as we shall see.

According to Spohn, Jesus' story becomes our story 'as we appropriate it progressively through imagination, emotions, convictions and actions.'¹⁵ He argues that the analogical imagination is the main bridge for forging links between the story of Jesus and the story of the believer. The believer must use their imagination to enter into the details of the life of Jesus - the parables, encounters, sayings and events - and envision new possibilities in their own context. The movement from Jesus' story to our story 'usually occurs by analogical extension, not by abstraction', taking 'the more intuitive route of the analogical imagination rather than the high road of abstraction.' Spotting the

¹³ Cf. Village, 'Biblical Interpretation among Church of England Lay People', esp. chapter 1.

¹⁴ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 23-24.

¹⁵ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 12.

relations between our situation and Jesus thus takes 'more than intelligence and cleverness.' It requires a discerning *imagination* and a willingness to be affected and transformed by the story.¹⁶ Ordinary believers, especially those with spiritual wisdom, insight and imagination, or with what psychologists have described as 'interpersonal', 'intrapersonal' or 'emotional intelligence', may fulfil these requirements better than many academics.¹⁷ Christian educationalists have often recognised that the process of correlation between the Christian story and our story requires imaginative and affective skill, as well as cognitive skill.¹⁸ If what matters in christology is that Jesus' story is allowed to shape our story, then skills other than cognitive skills become significant and a creative imagination and an earnest desire to embody the way of Jesus are arguably more important than either doctrinal or historical-critical skill.

But to what extent does Jesus story find its way into our story? Just how significant a story is it? According to Michael Root, 'a profoundly significant story would be one that in penetrating and thoroughgoing ways illumined and transformed that world and life.'¹⁹ It is, of course, impossible to tell from one interview the extent to which the story of Jesus penetrates an interviewee's life or shapes her identity, but there are enough hints in the data to suggest reasons why Jesus' story does not easily find its way into our story.

Difficulties of engagement

The problem of cultural distance between the world of the text and the contemporary world has been mentioned already (see above, p. 195). Here I want to focus on other difficulties. An engaged reading presupposes that believers actually want to 'learn to "sacrifice" themselves, over and over again, to the community's narrative texts' and that they consent 'to be interrogated by these texts in such a way that they learn, slowly,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50, 65.

¹⁷ See Howard Gardner, 'The Personal Intelligences,' in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (London: Heinemann, 1984), 237-276.

¹⁸ See Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 186-188.

¹⁹ Michael Root, 'The Narrative Structure of Soteriology', in Hauerwas and Jones (eds), *Why Narrative?*, 265.

laboriously and sometimes painfully, to live the way of Jesus.²⁰ But, clearly, not everybody does. Earlier it was mentioned that the majority of this sample do not have the habit of reading the Bible. They hear the Bible read in church, but they do not read or study it for themselves. They are familiar with many of its stories, and fond of them too, but they see no need to pay further attention to them and do not seem interested in doing so.

Eleanor

'I don't particularly want to know the Bible terribly, because I know what I believe and I don't want to...I don't particularly want to know what has gone on beforehand because it has got no relevance really. I don't feel I need to know.'

Valerie

'I have read the Bible, some years ago now. But I wouldn't say that I sort of think about the stories and parables a great deal.'

The Bible is not used to nourish or inform personal spirituality and in practice is given little authority. Village observes that 'Many Christians seem able to maintain their faith without ever having to read the Bible for themselves.'²¹ One of the reasons why believers do not pay much attention to the text is that *they already think they know* what the Bible teaches and what pattern of life Jesus commends: the believer already knows what 'the rules' are and what is involved in behaving Christianly. But an engaged reading of scripture would not presume to know what Jesus' message is or what he was about. Neither would it presume that Jesus' values are largely identical with 'the Christian ethos' or 'the British way of life.' Such presumptions tend to produce a culturally accommodated version of Christianity. Allowing oneself to be *interrogated* by the text means being open to the possibility that certain, already existing values and patterns of behaviour deemed to be 'Christian', may have to be deconstructed, rather than reinforced.²²

It is at this point that historical study of Jesus and awareness of one's own pre-

²⁰ Kenneth Surin, *The Turnings of Darkness and Light: Essays in Philosophical and Systematic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 217.

²¹ Village, 'Biblical Interpretation among Church of England Lay People', 31. 'Golden Rule Christians' rarely, if ever, participate in Bible study groups: 'Their usual mode of church participation is reasonably regular Sunday morning attendance, nothing more' (Ammerman, 'Golden Rule Christianity', 208).

²² Surin, *The Turnings of Darkness and Light*, 217.

judgements become important. Gadamer insists that we must become aware of the nature of our own pre-understandings, and we must allow our pre-understandings to be corrected and revised by the text, if we are to truly understand a text from the past. Commenting on Gadamer, Vincent Brümmer writes, 'We do not come to know the past by eliminating these conceptual prejudices that constitute our horizon of understanding, but precisely by trying to achieve an explicit awareness of them.'²³ Lucien Richard similarly insists that self-interpretation is essential to the process of hermeneutical reflection: 'self-interpretation involves the attempt to understand how one has become what one is in and through the appropriation of one's own tradition.'²⁴ But there is little evidence to suggest that many in the sample have given much thought to how the tradition has shaped them or how their present horizon has shaped their understanding of that tradition. Without critical self-awareness there is the ever present danger that we unconsciously project our own pre-understandings onto the story of Jesus and fashion Jesus in our own image. He is then who we want him to be; we remake Jesus to fit easily into the moral (or other) life we already have (perhaps, the British way of life and mores). An engaged reading, by contrast, tries to maintain the otherness of Jesus. 'Only the Jesus who is other, different, intriguing, frustrating, fascinating can change what one already is. A Jesus who is like the self only reinforces what is already in place.'²⁵

Since a text has a life of its own, as it were, independent of its original author, audience and situation, it is open to multiple meanings and interpretations. The reservoir of meaning of the text can never be exhausted. But routinization often sets in, so that believers no longer listen to the familiar stories expecting fresh meaning to be generated. It is said that parables, for example, 'can shatter worlds', disturb and unseat conventional understanding and generate new possibilities for those 'who have eyes to see and ears to hear.'²⁶ But familiarity breeds, in this instance, complacency and in a complacent reading the parables no longer generate surprise or shock. They lose their impact and become stale, familiar, routine. They no longer disarm the listener or

²³ Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 238.

²⁴ Richard, 'Theology and Belonging', 151.

²⁵ Keck, *Who Is Jesus?*, 162.

²⁶ Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 50. See also 50-52 for a brief summary of how parables 'work'.

generate disorientation and unease. The tension of the tale gets lost and its point is missed.²⁷ Similarly, with Jesus' own story: we know he dies on a cross and simply cannot get worked up about it. We have become desensitised to it. Whitehouse observes that 'One effect of hearing the same parables and teachings over and over again can undoubtedly be varying degrees of boredom.' This can lead to what he describes as 'the tedium effect - a state of low morale arising from over familiarity with religious formulae and routine.'²⁸

There is evidence to suggest that some believers do switch off when the scriptures are read (as perhaps they do when the sermon is preached?). The familiar stories wash over them and they do not look to make connections between their own story and that of Jesus. As one respondent commented, '*Sometimes, rarely probably, can you apply what you read to your own circumstances...many times you can't apply it at all because it is something that...um...hasn't affected you or is irrelevant.*' A 'classic' text is said to have perennial human relevance because it communicates effectively in a variety of historical and cultural circumstances. But for some, the text often seems to be largely irrelevant, with nothing much to say to their lives. It does not communicate effectively and they do not easily connect with it. Others '*have a suspicion of texts*' and consider aspects of the text to be alienating rather than transforming. '*They are not very helpful to us.*' Feminist hermeneutics has convincingly shown that not all of scripture is helpful, and texts that foster sexism, exclusive nationalism and other forms of oppression are considered to be scandalous. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a prominent feminist hermeneutics scholar, proposes that the canon of scripture is hopelessly androcentric and should be replaced by a new canon or norm of faith. She argues that the liberatory experience of women should be the norm against which the biblical materials should be judged.²⁹ What to do with scandalous texts or offensive soteriological discourse or stories that do not easily communicate is an issue that cannot be ducked by Christian

²⁷ See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 14-15.

²⁸ Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*, 98. On the routinisation of religion and 'habituation', see also 5-6, 97-104.

²⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon, 1984).

communicators.

Another reason why believers resist an engaged reading is that they do not want their identities to be reshaped or their present ways of behaving challenged. They do not look for any realignment of values or change of attitudes. An engaged reading might well lead to the overturning of certain values that are dear to them. It may involve 'a crucifixion of some of our dearest and most closely held values, including the values of self and security, and especially the values of worldly status, authority and power.'³⁰ No wonder engaged readings are resisted. As Spohn writes, 'Spiritual practices and the message of the New Testament have moral dimensions inherent in them', but all too often 'these dangerous implications remain latent, and any attempt to bring them to the fore will be resisted by those who want to keep their piety safe and comforting.'³¹ Time and again people talked about how comforting their religion was, not about how *challenging* they found it.³² There is evidence to suggest that at least some of the sample are not really that interested in becoming disciples and making Jesus 'the stack-pole around which life is organised and lived.'³³ They do not think of themselves or describe themselves as disciples. A disciple cannot make Jesus superfluous. It would seem that some of the sample do (see below, pp. 246-256).

But even when there is an earnest desire 'to put one's life under [Jesus'] aegis',³⁴ forging links between the story of Jesus and one's own story is not easy. Take the event that climaxes the story of Jesus, his passion and death. How does this event link with our own lives? The story of Jesus' passion and death, unlike some of the stories and parables in the gospels, is a story that believers can easily relate to and identify with in so far as it generates an emotional response, in much the same way as any other story of the tragic death of an innocent victim would. But Jesus' death is not just a story like other stories, it is the story which is to shape Christian discipleship. The Christian must

³⁰ Astley, *Choosing Life?*, 117.

³¹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 14. He later writes 'our churches only rarely become communities of serious moral discourse and personal challenge', 186.

³² See John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), esp. 141-143, where he describes 'the spirituality of passivity' that avoids the challenges of 'the dreaded belief system'.

³³ Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus*, 181.

³⁴ To borrow a phrase from Keck, *Who Is Jesus*, 161.

consciously appropriate the work of Christ on her own behalf and take up the cross. Macquarrie writes, 'To believe in or to have faith in the cross of Christ is well expressed by Bultmann when he says that it is "to accept Christ's cross as one's own, to be crucified with Christ". But what does that mean?'³⁵ Following the story of the passion and death of Jesus is one thing, figuring out its application for life today quite another. What does it mean in the life of a believer or a community of believers to take up the cross? Or to be obedient to Jesus' own challenge, 'If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me?'³⁶ For Macquarrie, and others, to take up the cross as one's own involves 'a turning away with Christ from the temptations of the world, the temptations of power, wealth, sensual indulgence and so on, to the things of the kingdom of God.' It is a life of self-sacrifice, understood as the offering of the self to God. Being joined to Jesus means 'joining in the self-offering of his sacrifice, and so living to God and for God rather than for any merely selfish or worldly ends.'³⁷

There is little evidence in the data of any deliberate or intentional hermeneutical reflection on what it means to accept Christ's cross as one's own. The implications of the story for life today are not self-consciously drawn out. However, there is evidence of implicit learning. Through continual re-entry into the story of Jesus believers do learn, often unconsciously, *something* of what it means to take up the cross. Some clearly intend to live 'to God and for God rather than for any merely selfish or worldly ends.' But further empirical work would need to be carried out into the significance of the cross for believers' lives and faith before any firm conclusions can be drawn. It is said that through spiritual practices such as the Eucharist believers are drawn into the story of Jesus, and their attitudes and values are implicitly shaped by it. Spiritual practices, such as attendance at the Eucharist and intercessory prayer, 'indirectly train the imagination and reorient the emotions to produce a character and way of life consonant with the story of Jesus.'³⁸ Unfortunately, remarkably little is actually known about the impact of the story of Jesus on ordinary believers' attitudes, values and behaviour, or

³⁵ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 402.

³⁶ Mark 8:34.

³⁷ Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 403.

³⁸ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 3.

how the cross relates to their lives, if at all.

Those who do engage in the spiritual practice of Bible study and/or meditative Bible reading (around one third of the sample) are perhaps more likely to be shaped by the story of Jesus, than those who do not, since they are actively seeking to make connections between their own story and the story of Jesus. The majority of the sample, it would seem, do not deliberately seek to enter into a conversation with the story of Jesus and are largely unaware of the impact that the story has on them. When conscious correlations or resonances do occur they are largely unsought. They occur *en passant*, as when the preacher's sermon suddenly strikes home or a Bible passage heard several times before suddenly comes alive. Regular meditation or devotional reading can help make the images and stories of the gospels 'the background music of life,' so that they become 'affective paradigms for moral dispositions', an 'internalised norm' that we bring to bear on our relations and decisions.³⁹ When Jesus (or more accurately an image of him) is deliberately and persistently internalised, he becomes 'habit forming.' His words and actions 'come readily and naturally to mind because he has already shaped one's disposition, will and way of being in the world.'⁴⁰ Leander Keck reports how Emily Dickinson had become so much a part of a friend's outlook that in one situation after another the poet's words would come naturally to mind, 'not as the expert's oracle but as a perceptive resource that is simply there, a companion on the way. Jesus too can be such a "text".'⁴¹ Of course this can only happen if there is an engaged familiarity with the gospels, not just a casual acquaintance, and this needs to be combined with a genuine desire to embody the way of Jesus in one's life and community.

Some might argue that the emphasis I have placed on engagement with the story of Jesus (prompted by the data) is misplaced, however, since what really matters is not the believer's response to the story but their response to the risen, living Christ. Whilst seven of the sample exhibit a pietistic attachment to the risen Christ (see above, pp. 145-149), the data suggest that many others are puzzled by the idea of Christ or Jesus as

³⁹ Ibid., 120, 141.

⁴⁰ Keck, *Who is Jesus?*, 166-167.

⁴¹ Ibid., 167.

a present contemporary reality. For them Jesus is a figure of the past, who was here for a while, but not anymore.

Eleanor

'Well I suppose I just think of him as...just...well...I don't really think of him as anything. He is just there I suppose with God. I don't really think about it.'

Valerie

'Jesus was important for a short space of time, but then became subsumed into God once he left us through the resurrection. And sort of doesn't exist anymore. He has become part of God.'

Edward

'[Jesus] happened 2000 years ago. I wouldn't stretch it quite so far as to say he doesn't exist now, but I sort of...I pigeon-hole that a bit.'

Jesus has entered into the life of God; he has *'dissolved back into God'* and to all intents and purposes does not exist anymore. Talk of Jesus as a present, living reality often *'just makes everything so complicated'* and so is avoided. There is a tendency to bracket out the post-existence of Jesus. For many, the concept of a post-existent Jesus or Christ seems to be just as problematic as the concept of the Holy Spirit.⁴² The data suggest that for some, maybe many, Jesus is present, not as a living, spiritual reality, but as *'a memory.'*

'Jesus is alive in that...in the sense of alive in the memory.'

'Jesus is a memory.'

'Jesus is alive in the community of believers because we are all here trying to carry on his work.'

'People from my past are still affecting the way that I behave...just as Jesus does.'

'Jesus is alive rather like Elvis Presley is alive.'

These comments chime in with an existentialist view, such as that of Bultmann, which speaks of Jesus being present in the Christian proclamation. Through this kerygma, Jesus lives on. He is present, not as a spiritual presence, but in the sense of the remembered Jesus, as remembered in the liturgy, preaching and teaching; and the

⁴² The interviews also generated data on the Holy Spirit. Over a third of the sample openly admitted that they had little or no understanding of the Holy Spirit. *'How is the Holy Spirit different from God?'* was the main query. If the encounter of God, the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit with the believer is really one and the same encounter then, they seem to reason, why not just say so? These respondents avoid trinitarian talk, preferring instead to *'keep it simple'* by talking only of God and God's presence with them.

church, by remembering Jesus, continues to draw people into the force-field and impact of Jesus. Hence the importance of existential engagement with the story of Jesus.⁴³

The story and salvation

It is as believers engage with the story of Jesus that salvation can occur. Or putting it another way, the story of Jesus is salvific as it grasps people or impacts upon them in ways that are salvific. Several examples of the salvific power of the story have already been given (see especially chapter 6). Ordinary christology thus highlights the centrality of narrative for soteriology as well as for christology. It shows that the story of Jesus is indispensable to soteriology and that salvation can never be thought of as a purely abstract or theoretical affair, divorced from the story of Jesus. The task of soteriology is to explicate how Jesus saves. Ordinary christology shows that salvation is constituted by the actual relations that exist between the story of Jesus and the story of the believer. So soteriology must show how the believer is included in the story of Jesus and how the story is or can be the story of that person's redemption; and in any ensuing soteriological explanation the particular 'storied connections' between the life of the believer and the life of Jesus must 'bear the final explanatory weight.'⁴⁴ Ordinary soteriology may therefore challenge academic soteriology to produce soteriological explanations that are grounded in the concrete soteriological patterns, 'the web of storied connections', that actually exist between the believer's story and the story of Jesus.⁴⁵ Based on the data from my sample, this would include a shift away from the cross as the focal point of Jesus' saving work towards his life and ministry. Inbody, in his account of six different atonement theories, begins by citing six concrete examples, thereby grounding each theory in an individual's experience of salvation. In each case, salvation occurs as the story of Jesus and the story of the believer intertwine and salvific connections are made, in six very different ways. Each salvific encounter is heavily conditioned by the social location of the believer and is dependent on the believer

⁴³ See Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', esp. 40-43. Cf. Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 248-267. Mackey draws on existentialism and the work of Bultmann to explain how Jesus can be said to live today. See also Lampe, *God as Spirit*, esp. chapters 1 and 6.

⁴⁴ Root, 'The Narrative Structure of Soteriology', 274.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

coming to a new understanding of both the story of Jesus and their own story.⁴⁶

Michael Root argues that soteriology must construct augmented, expanded forms of the story of Jesus, viz., narrative redescriptions of the story of Jesus that include the ongoing experience of the believer/community, so that our stories are included in the story of Jesus. Soteriology must bring to light patterns in the story of Jesus which make the redemptive character of the story clear. He notes that 'while the patterns in the text may be able to place limits on soteriological construction, they are not sufficiently specific to dictate a particular soteriology and thus eliminate the need for contemporary soteriological construction.' The story must be recast then, and 'it is precisely in this creation of a new version of the story that the soteriological task is carried out.'⁴⁷ Tilley, similarly, sees one of the main tasks of narrative theology to be the *transformation* of the narratives of a tradition to bring them into the context of our own stories. New ways are therefore needed to tell the story of creation, just as new ways are needed to tell the story of how Jesus saves.⁴⁸

Atonement theories can be thought of as augmented narratives, explaining how the story of Jesus is the story of redemption.⁴⁹ We saw in chapter 7 how telling the story of Jesus' death as an atonement for the sins of the world or as satisfaction of God's justice or as penal substitution fails to connect with many believers' lives. Storied connections cannot be made. The data show that new ways of telling the story of how Jesus' death is redemptive need to be found. We urgently need augmented narratives of the death of Jesus which point out patterns by which believer and non-believer alike can readily recognise the redemptive significance of his death. Joel Green and Mark Baker give examples of how this is being done in various contemporary contexts, acknowledging that the traditional way of telling the story of how Jesus' death saves (viz., by his atoning death) 'has not been heard as "good news" in contemporary cultures in and outside of the West which are not guilt based.'⁵⁰ In what ways is the cross of Christ

⁴⁶ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 141-150.

⁴⁷ Root, 'The Narrative Structure of Soteriology', 275-276.

⁴⁸ Tilley, *Story Theology*, 14.

⁴⁹ Root, 'The Narrative Structure of Soteriology', 267.

⁵⁰ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 32. They argue that for many guilt is a non-

good news in Japan, for example, which is a shame-based rather than a guilt-based culture? Jesus' death is redemptive by providing 'liberation from shame through revealing God's love, through vicarious identification, through exposing false shame and through removing alienation.'⁵¹ Telling the story of Jesus' death in this way enables storied connections to be made.

When it is recognised that salvation comes through engagement with the story, it becomes clear that Jesus' whole career is decisive for salvation and not just his death. No particular aspect of the story saves us, 'but the whole life touches our life as a whole' and 'the whole configuration of word, deed and career capped by death' has salvific potential.⁵² And this salvation will always be particular and personal, arising out of the various connections that are made between the believer's story and the story of Jesus. What 'saves' one, will not 'save' all. A particular Bible verse or story, for example, may have a profound salvific effect on some, yet leave others cold. Salvific encounters are 'diffuse and far-ranging in the experience of individual persons' and can never be fully explicable in terms of theoretical generalisations.⁵³ The generation of salvific connections between the story of Jesus and the story of the believer does not seem to be dependent on a network of doctrines, hence Jesus can and does save irrespective of whether one holds the right doctrine about him. Peter Hodgson writes:

[Jesus] teaching continues to work salvifically, not in a magical way, but by providing resources through which, again and again, human beings can break the grip of the dominant paradigms, battle against illusion and fear, find purpose in life, be pulled out of preoccupation with self into an unrequited love for others, and participate in the open-ended, never-finished project of building a new world, God's project.⁵⁴

issue. Cf. Kay Carmichael, *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Carmichael attempts to understand the nature of sin and forgiveness in a post-Christian society and argues that the traditional link with guilt no longer serves our needs.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵² Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus*, 177.

⁵³ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 408. Cf. Root, 'The Narrative Structure of Soteriology', 274.

⁵⁴ Peter C. Hodgson, *God's Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 140.

The story of Jesus is a story with salvific power or force. As we have seen, its impact can be 'merely emotional' or it can be such that it causes a deep change to take place in the mind (as is clearly the case for some of the sample). Insights from psychology can help in understanding *how* the story of Jesus can effect a change in the mind. Paul Fiddes draws on the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and R. S. Lee to help understand how hearing the story or seeing the image of the cross, for example, can have a profound effect on the human psyche: breaking the self-centredness of the ego (Niebuhr) or healing the conflict between conscious and unconscious levels of the mind (Lee).⁵⁵ For Lee, identification with Jesus promotes the growth of the ego in dealing with the real world. Jesus' pattern of life shows all the features that the ego needs for healthy development, so that when we take the character of Jesus into our imagination we are absorbing a model which enables both ego and super-ego to find fulfilment. Both interpretations supply insights into psychological processes through which the story and image of Jesus - both as teacher and as the crucified one - can help transform the mind and, to this extent, effect salvation.

When we 'look and see' what people's experiences of salvation actually are we discover that salvation does not come through Jesus' story alone, but through other stories also, most notably those of the Hebrew (Old Testament) scriptures. God saves through Jesus, but he also saves in other ways. God the creator is a personal, loving, and saving God who, as creator, offers God's self in loving, covenantal relationship with human beings: God's presence therefore saves. In much ordinary soteriology the concept of salvation is not in fact tied so closely to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and there is no bifurcation between God's general salvific and creative action, on the one hand, and the particular story of God's saving action in Jesus, on the other. This chimes in with the theological principle that wherever there is wholeness, wherever there is healing, whenever things go right, then '*God is at work*' and salvation occurs. This fundamental claim is well expressed by Ruether, who writes:

⁵⁵ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 147-150. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941) and R. S. Lee, *Freud and Christianity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

Redemption happens whenever we resist and reject collaboration with injustice and begin to taste the joys of true well-being in mutual service and shared life. When life is lived in solidarity with others in mutual well-being, every act of sustaining life becomes a sacrament of God's presence, whether this is bread broken and shared, sexual pleasure between lovers, tilling the ground, making a useful product or giving birth to a baby. God calls us into abundance of life here on earth.⁵⁶

Living within the all-embracing power and love of God is salvific. So, some seem to say, why bother paying attention to the story of Jesus?

Is Jesus really that important?

It has to be admitted that the story of Jesus may not be that significant a story for every Christian. There are enough hints in the data to suggest that some people do not actually pay that much attention to it. Of far more importance is their '*belief in God*' or their '*spirituality*'. Jesus just does not seem to be that important. Traditionally, Jesus is said to be important for Christian faith because he mediates God's salvation and the Christian understanding of God, insofar as it is specifically Christian, must lead back to Jesus as its source, origin and foundation. 'This does not mean that the Christian lacks other historical sources or data for reflection on ultimate reality. It does mean, however, that for the Christian Jesus is the central normative witness to the reality of God.' This requires allowing 'one's imagination to be shaped by Jesus' person and actions in such a way that he becomes a source for understanding the what and the who of God.'⁵⁷

McGrath makes the same point when he asserts that all our ideas of God and human nature should be defined in the light of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. God should be 'Christologically specified.'⁵⁸ Or as John V. Taylor and others put it, 'God is

⁵⁶ Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, 103.

⁵⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 338, 358-359.

⁵⁸ McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 174-175.

Christlike.⁵⁹ Such views all place a heavy emphasis on revealed religion.

It goes without saying that all the interviewees, to a greater or lesser extent, have been shaped in their thinking about God by the Christian scriptures and the story of Jesus. It could not be otherwise. What is less clear is whether Jesus is their *primary* source for understanding God or for encountering God. Many in the sample place a heavy emphasis on natural religion as a source for experiencing and understanding God; in their case considerable stress is laid on creation (nature) as a source for knowledge of God. There are obvious links to be made here with the type of religiousness Towler describes as 'theism'.⁶⁰ Theism, according to Towler, is the foundation of all western styles of religion. It focuses on God and God's creation and is grounded in a sense of wonder and awe in the face of the beauty and order of nature. The creator God of theism is a benevolent God whose presence can be discerned in and through the natural world. With such a strong sense of the presence and power of God in and through creation, theism accords to Jesus a place of only secondary importance. It does not accept that Jesus is God and rejects the doctrine of the Trinity as an image of God. Theism is firmly monotheistic and the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus is 'a gratuitous extra' that only detracts from a proper attitude to God and human nature. Nor is human nature essentially wicked and in need of a redeemer. Why would another redeemer be needed to save the world, when the world has a perfectly good Creator-Saviour God already present? Theism is typically unchurched, not because theists do not need to express and celebrate in ritual form the sense of the eternal dimension, but because the church fails to provide the appropriate means for doing so. Theists who do attend church survive by ignoring doctrine and by imposing their own meanings and interpretations on the services.⁶¹

It hardly needs to be said that attitudes such as these are not uncommon among the sample. What theism does is highlight the enduring importance of natural religion.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *The Christlike God*, 5. This phrase of Taylor's is inspired by Archbishop Michael Ramsey's famous remark, 'God is Christlike and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all', in A. M. Ramsey, *God, Christ and the World: A Study in Contemporary Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 98.

⁶⁰ Mention of classical Western theism has already been made in connection with functional christology. See above, p. 72.

⁶¹ Towler, *The Need for Certainty*, 55-67.

Natural religion, according to Towler, is 'the bed-rock of all religion.'⁶² It may be recalled that it was the sense of a universal human experience of the sacred and belief in a common 'object' of worship that accounted for over two-thirds of the sample adopting a pluralist approach to other religions. Traditional Christianity has generally downplayed natural religion. Whilst it is generally accepted that a natural knowledge of God may be possible, this knowledge serves only as a prolegomenon to revealed religion. Humanity has to be *told* what God is like; revelation is indispensable. Only through God's self-disclosure, which reaches its climax and fulfilment in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, can humanity come to a *saving* knowledge of God. Religious experiences, 'from a general sense of the numinous or holy on the one hand to a sensation of being directly addressed by a transcendent being on the other', have generally been viewed with suspicion. Religious experience, it is said, cannot be trusted as a ground for faith - it is far too subjective and inconclusive, although it may serve to recall people to the sources of their religious traditions.⁶³ But, as Taylor points out, the opposite often happens and many of the most significant religious experiences have often distanced people from their religious traditions rather than draw them back.⁶⁴

Certainly in contemporary Britain interest in the spiritual dimension of life flourishes as attendance in mainstream churches declines.⁶⁵ Few turn to institutional Christianity to explore or deepen their spirituality. Many would claim that popular spirituality, which eschews religious tradition, and authentic spirituality which does not, both arise out of the same convictions: that there is another dimension of reality and that contact with this dimension can heal personal alienation and fragmentation. Popular spirituality's pursuit for the sacred often takes the form of regular practices such as walking in the woods or on the beach, meditating to music, seeking solitude, or engaging in an assortment of New Age spiritual practices. It does not locate its practices in a religious

⁶² Ibid., 56.

⁶³ This was the view of the Report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *We Believe in God*, 8-9.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *The Christlike God*, 23.

⁶⁵ This phenomenon is well-documented and is confirmed by the results from a recent empirical study carried out in Kendal, Cumbria, the aim of which was to map contemporary forms of religious and spiritual activity. Its main finding was that holistic spirituality was flourishing, whilst congregational religion was declining. See Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

tradition with articulate beliefs, normative values, and communal worship. Popular spirituality is religion deinstitutionalised and stripped of any exclusionary doctrines. One can be a spiritual person without having to belong to a religious tradition.⁶⁶ Spohn is highly critical of this 'pop spirituality'. He writes, 'Without the intellectual and ethical resources of a larger community that can critically assess spiritual experiences and practices, these individual forays into the spiritual are susceptible to narcissistic good feelings which are ripe for self-deception.'⁶⁷ Spohn is here articulating the position outlined above, namely that religious/spiritual experiences must be evaluated by tradition.

But the data suggest that much churchgoing theism, like pop spirituality, pays little attention to the doctrines of the tradition. Like pop spirituality it says, '*I am more of a spiritual person than a religious person*', and like pop spirituality it feels close to God '*in the garden*', '*walking along the hilltop*', '*looking up at the stars at night and wondering*', '*walking on the beach*', '*listening to classical music*'. In natural religion and pop spirituality the encounter with God is mediated via creation and not through Jesus. In other words, salvation comes through encountering God in and through the created world; it does not come explicitly through Jesus.⁶⁸ The mystical tradition, we may recall, upholds a direct, immediate and intuitive experience and knowledge of God. Glenn Chesnut identifies 'nature mysticism' as one form of mysticism in which God is apprehended directly in and through the natural world. Unlike 'pure' mysticism, nature mysticism does not rely on blocking out the world of the five senses to achieve ecstatic union between the soul and God. Nature mysticism relies on the senses to experience God in the grandeur and beauty of the physical world. Examples of nature mysticism can be found in the work of Wordsworth and the Romantic tradition. Wordsworth, in his poem *My Heart Leaps Up* calls nature mysticism 'natural piety', distinguishing it

⁶⁶ See Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 33-36. See also, Paul Heelas, 'The Spiritual Revolution: From "Religion" to "Spirituality"', in Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami and David Smith (eds), *Religions in the Modern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 357-377.

⁶⁷ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 34-35.

⁶⁸ I am only too aware that the terms natural religion, popular spirituality, and God are all being used in ill-defined ways here, and that pop spirituality would not name its 'object' as God. My point here is merely to draw attention to the fact that salvation is mediated via sources other than Jesus.

from the piety derived from reading the Bible.⁶⁹ As we have already seen, the majority of the sample do not spend time reading the Bible, but they do happily spend time 'walking the dogs' or 'out in the garden' (and going to worship, of course) and this is where they 'find God.' Natural piety as opposed to scriptural piety seems to be the preferred option for many and their belief in God is grounded largely, but not exclusively, in natural religion.

Tom

'You can't go out on a clear night and not look up and believe.'

Ben

'I suspect that belief in God is world-wide. That's why I feel that different religions are a form of expression of one's belief.'

'[Everyone has] at some stage wondered and I think that is the starting point. You know, you are sitting there at night, looking up into the universe and you can't help but say, "I wonder."'

Valerie

'Sometimes you can be anywhere and you get that feeling of being complete and life is good. And I think that is the Holy Spirit...As I say you could be driving the car...or when you are walking on the cliffs or it is a particularly beautiful day...and everything feels good and you feel happy... "Spots in time", as Wordsworth would say.'

Elizabeth

'I think it is something...you feel it more in certain situations than you can in others...you can sometimes feel that there is something there...I'll tell you where I always feel near to God and that's the garden. I always think you are communing with him somehow out there. It's, well, you can see nature and God's creation...things growing...and it's all God.'

Kathleen

'Religion is a gut feeling with a lot of us isn't it. Primitive people were worshipping. It is a need within people to worship.'

The assumption here is that religion is a basic human constant, that the various religions are diverse expressions of a common core experience of transcendence and that this experience is the motive power for belief in God. Common human experience has been the starting point for Christian theology in the liberal tradition. Schleiermacher based

⁶⁹ Chesnut, *Images of Christ*, 57.

his theological system on religious experience and feeling: 'a feeling of absolute dependence,' a 'sense and taste for the infinite,' 'God-consciousness' or 'intuition'. His main thesis was that religious experience was the basis of all religion and that Christianity was a particular stream of religious consciousness in history.⁷⁰ This is the foundation of the liberal theological perspective represented by such as Maurice Wiles, for whom 'Christianity has roots in a religious sense of awe and wonder that seems to be a fundamental aspect of almost all human experience.'⁷¹ The principal objection to this approach is that there is very little empirical evidence for such a common human experience. The idea is easily postulated but virtually impossible to verify, since it is impossible to isolate a common core experience from religious language and to demonstrate unequivocally that the latter is an articulation of or response to the former.⁷²

I do not propose to pursue here the complex interplay between experience and language. All I want to say at this point is that religious experience and '*the feeling that God is there*' is clearly of prime importance for many in the sample, and in the case of their religiousness, which is centred on God, on '*something bigger*', revealed religion may not play the major part. Jesus may not be all that important. In the attitude that says, '*When I say the creed I can stick with "I believe in God" and can do without the rest*', revealed religion is only of secondary importance. It is '*a hook on which to hang belief from...which in our case is Christianity. In other people's cases it can be any one of many religions.*' '*Christianity happens to be the way that we come to God.*' Belief in God is more important than the 'hook', i.e., the network of beliefs and practices that go to make up a particular religion.

As we have seen already, the majority of the sample have a theocentric not a christocentric faith. God is at the centre, not Jesus. These data therefore challenge the *a priori* assumption that for Christians, Jesus is the central object of worship, adoration and wonder. For the majority of the sample, he clearly is not. God is. God is the object

⁷⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, esp. 5-52.

⁷¹ Wiles, *Reason to Believe*, 80.

⁷² See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 15-45. Cf. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 20-26.

of faith - with a qualification. As Tom says, *'We cannot have Christianity without Christ. When I come to pray I'm thinking of Jesus as well'* (cf. see above, pp. 71-72). Kuitert, similarly, talks of having Jesus in mind when we say God, and God in mind when we say Jesus. He writes:

Jesus isn't himself God Jesus is a further description of God Jesus as it were belongs 'in God', in the picture of God by which Christianity ventures to live, only in the picture of God. Jesus 'in God', Jesus as a closer definition of God - that seems to me to reproduce adequately what the apostle Paul meant in II Corinthians (5.19) by 'God was in Christ' The Christian church proclaims God, and nothing else, but God with the character of Jesus.⁷³

Most of the sample say that they go to church to worship and praise God the Father/God the creator. Just as they feel close to God in nature, they also feel close to God in church. They *'get a tremendous sense of God in church'*, which is why churchgoing is important to them. The building, the music, the prayers all mediate a sense of the presence of God. They evoke *'the feeling that God is there'*, just as a beautiful sunset or the birth of a child can. The liturgy acts as a vehicle, a channel for apprehension of and relationship with God, providing the opportunity for encounter with God and the chance to *'get plugged back into the mother-ship'*; to *'recharge your batteries'*, *'have a time to sit and be quiet and actually put things in order'*; *'to contemplate and to think beyond the routine.'* Many report feeling *'a lot better for going.'* Churchgoing *'puts you right for the week doesn't it?'* It is restorative, healing and life-giving. In short, it is salvific.

Golden Rule religion emphasises the sense of God's presence in Sunday worship, in nature and in critical moments in the life cycle such as births and deaths.⁷⁴ There are links here too with Celtic spirituality and creation-centred spirituality, both of which have a profound sense of God's presence and the goodness of creation. (Interestingly, Pelagius, whom we have come across already in relation to the christology of the

⁷³ Kuitert, *Jesus: The Legacy of Christianity*, 184-185.

⁷⁴ Ammerman, 'Golden Rule Christianity', 207-208.

functionalists, is considered to be an early proponent of creation spirituality.)⁷⁵ These spiritualities, like nature mysticism, emphasise salvation as living in God's presence, and knowing that in him we live and move and have our being and that 'our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.' From this perspective, salvation is no more and no less than an awareness of being in relationship with God.

So what of Jesus? What part does Jesus actually play in the salvation of the churchgoing theists? I cannot give any definitive answer to this question. It is not possible to excise christology from the complex that is the Christian tradition and describe its impact with precision on churchgoing theists. My only aim here, in this closing chapter, is to propose that Jesus may not be as important for Christian spirituality as we (quite naturally) often suppose. Whilst the content of Christian faith may be dominated by the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, it is clear that his story does not dominate the spirituality of every believer. In a spirituality that is firmly focussed on the creator God, Jesus may not be that important. Gerard Zuidberg, in his empirical study of the spirituality of Roman Catholic pastors in the Netherlands, found that Jesus was not the centre of spirituality for the majority of pastors interviewed. 'The central point is God as ground of existence, as source of life, whereas Jesus is far more a figure who puts us on our way.' Jesus is important as an example, orientation, guide and way: 'Jesus is the way. He is not the centre, nor the final point.'⁷⁶

The dominant christology in this sample treats Jesus as the exemplar and revealer of God. Jesus '*shows us how to live*' and Jesus '*shows us what God is like*.' It would appear, then, to be a christology that claims that Jesus shows what authentic human existence looks like, and that Jesus shapes the what and the who of God. But is Jesus really that important for defining the concept of God or for shaping human existence? We have looked at the latter issue already. What about the former: does the story of Jesus really determine the character of God? Is the God of churchgoing theists Christ-

⁷⁵ See Matthew Fox, 'Creation-Centred Spirituality', in Gordon S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 99-100. Cf. Fox, *Original Blessing*.

⁷⁶ Zuidberg, *The God of the Pastor*, 127, 131. Cf. In Hopkins' pilot study referred to earlier (see above, p. 98, n1), ten out of the thirty women interviewed said that Jesus played no role in their lives (*Towards a Feminist Christology*, 17).

like or christomorphic (Christ-shaped)? John V. Taylor asserts that very few religious people ever stop and think about God. He writes:

The thought of him may often be in their minds, but they do not explore it. It does not grow, is not allowed to change. His name may be on their lips and a sense of reality in their prayers, but giving God a thought, however devoutly or frequently, is not the same thing as *thinking* about him. Many people have lived for years with an unexamined stereotype of God which inspires great loyalty and provides much comfort in an uncertain world, but its changelessness is more like the fixity of an idol than the trustworthiness of a *living* God.⁷⁷

He goes on to say that most people, believers and unbelievers alike, simply assume that everyone knows what the word 'God' means. They have a pre-packaged idea of God - a stock icon or agreed stereotype - that envisages God as 'a Supreme Supernatural Personal Being who, since he made and rules the universe, must be All-Powerful (able to do anything he chooses) and All-Seeing (including the knowledge of future events) and is therefore responsible for everything that happens.'⁷⁸ This stereotype derives from theism and is independent of Jesus. According to some, for most Western Christians 'belief in God is equivalent to theism. The God of philosophy, theology, and piety is the theistic God.' The theistic God is 'the Monarch in whom divine causality and omnipotent power are the primary characteristics.'⁷⁹ The data suggest that many of the sample have a concept of God deriving from classical theism, but numbers are difficult to pin down here because the data are incomplete.

The theistic concept of God has come under attack from several quarters in postmodernity.⁸⁰ It is argued that the Christian God is neither the theistic God nor God the Monarch/Father. The Christian God must be defined, it is said, by christology and neither the theistic God nor God the Monarch/Father are so defined. These concepts of

⁷⁷ Taylor, *The Christlike God*, 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷⁹ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 44, 47. See also Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, 11-31.

⁸⁰ For an overview of some of the challenges of postmodernity to theism and reconstructions of the concept of God in the light of christology, see Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 43-47, 59-67.

God exist independently of christology. When christology is made the starting point then a very different concept of God emerges: the power of God gets redefined and the relationship of the power of God to human suffering and injustice is thoroughly rethought. Taking christology seriously means taking the life, ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus as decisive for both the concept of God and the meaning of true humanity. Anyone who does this, it is said, 'will speak about the suffering and transforming God whose nature and mode of activity is to will and to work for the transformation of human suffering and the establishment of justice.'⁸¹ In these ways, the narrative of Jesus asks us to rethink 'the meaning of true divinity and genuine lordship by depicting the actions and sufferings of the humble servant who gave his life unconditionally for the renewal of the world.' If Jesus really does show us what God is like then 'a radical conversion of our ordinary understandings of the words "God" and "Lord" is required.'⁸² Certainly the stereotype of God as Absolute Power and Omnipotent Power (which many of the sample appear to have) needs to be thoroughly rethought. But the extent to which Jesus does actually determine people's understanding of the character of God remains unclear.

The data also challenge the assumption that Christians are those who are committed to Jesus. It is not obvious, however, that they all are. Evidence of 'a personal, existential and imaginative commitment to a person and a presence' is limited.⁸³ The story of Jesus happens to be the story that Christians tell. It does not follow that all get caught up in it or absorbed into it. The story is listened to and remembered, but it can be largely ignored. The figure of Jesus does not have to be taken seriously. After all, once one knows that '*God is our loving heavenly Father who looks after us and answers our prayers and is always there when we need him*', or that '*God is always there as a sort of rock that I can lean on*'; then why bother paying attention to Jesus? Jesus is not really needed. Churchgoing can be salvific without attending to the story of Jesus. Jesus can be superfluous to requirements: a mere cipher. When belief in God is what really matters, then Jesus can end up playing a subsidiary role, a minor part. It has to be

⁸¹ Ibid., 66.

⁸² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 149.

⁸³ Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 174.

concluded that for some Christians, Jesus is not really that important.

But this is not the case for all. For some theocentric Christians, Jesus is of prime importance as a mediator of God's salvation. They do take him very seriously. They *are* people who 'submit and attach themselves to Jesus with an ultimate commitment or infinite passion as the point where, or the person in and through whom, the power of God on whom they are absolutely dependent is mediated to them.'⁸⁴

Concluding remarks

To return in conclusion to the question with which I began: who do ordinary believers say that Jesus is and what significance do they attach to him? As we have seen, the majority of ordinary believers in this sample (evangelicals and some traditionalists excepted) do not say either that Jesus is God, or that his significance resides primarily in his atoning death. They do not adhere to christological norms (as defined in chapter 1). Right doctrine is clearly not that important for their christology. While the traditionalists will say that right belief *is* important, for them it is the fact of believing rather than the content of that belief that seems to matter most. Golden Rule religion, which dominates the sample, 'is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise. Rather, it is based in practice and experience.'⁸⁵ It is the central experience of God that matters most. Again, doctrine is not that important. The majority of the sample can do without the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of the incarnation (traditionally understood) or any doctrine or theory of atonement. They do not need them for their religion/spirituality. They would agree with Schleiermacher who argued that Christian doctrines and dogmas, 'that many take to be the true essence of religion . . . are not necessary for religion itself, scarcely even for communicating religion, but reflection needs and therefore creates them.'⁸⁶

One of the major conclusions to be drawn from this study is that ordinary believers only

⁸⁴ Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, 45.

⁸⁵ Ammerman, 'Golden Rule Christianity', 211.

⁸⁶ F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to its Cultured Critics*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1969), 140.

take what they need. That they do not need much conceptual theology is perhaps not surprising. What is more surprising is that they do not need Jesus to be God or to have saved the world through his atoning death. Inbody is instructive here. He writes:

The Jesus of christology is also as we need him or want him to be within the contexts of our own contemporary religious, moral, and social agendas (whether they be fundamentalist, evangelical, liberal, feminist, liberationist, countercultural, or libertarian) Not one of us in our christology, no matter how fundamentalist, evangelical, creedal, liberal, scholarly, revolutionary, or cynical, will ever permit our image of Jesus to be anything more or anything less than we find necessary for salvation, whether salvation be pardon from sin, or reunion with God, or sanctification, existential decision, gnostic enlightenment, or postmodern irony!⁸⁷

In other words, christology is always governed by soteriology, which in turn is governed by religious needs. Many in the sample seem to have no felt need for an atoning saviour, and therefore they simply bypass what I have called the traditional theology of the cross as irrelevant to their religious needs. These findings have clear missiological implications. If the ancient mythological stories of how Jesus saves have lost their power for many churchgoers, then what about those outside the churches? Hilary Wakeman asserts that doctrines such as the divinity of Jesus, the fall, atonement and resurrection drive people away from the churches and that new ways of expressing old beliefs are needed if Christianity is to capture again the imagination of our contemporary world.⁸⁸ Telling the story of how Jesus saves using the traditional categories of sin, guilt, forgiveness, atonement and eternal life has little relevance to the lives of most modern men and women. It also fails to convince: the mythological narrative in which the story of salvation is set is simply unintelligible for modern minds. Historical consciousness also undermines the mythological narrative. 'If there never was an Adam and Eve, a Fall, or a prehistoric promise of a Redeemer, and if the troubles of world history have gone on pretty much the same after Jesus as before, how

⁸⁷ Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 41.

⁸⁸ Hilary Wakeman, *Saving Christianity: New Thinking for Old Beliefs* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003).

does Jesus' story gain universal salvific meaning?'⁸⁹ New stories of how Jesus saves need to be told - stories that address the religious needs of our contemporary world and that are credible and believable for modern minds.

Such stories may not require Jesus to be God in the ontological sense that orthodoxy has demanded. Does this matter? The majority of the sample clearly do not need Jesus to be God in this way for him to function as saviour. For them Jesus saves as exemplar and revealer, and he does not need to be God to do this. The data thus challenge the claims about the necessity of continuing to speak of Jesus in the exalted terms of Niceneo-Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Do we really need to make such lofty (some might even say, idolatrous?) claims for Jesus? The findings from this study would suggest that we do not. For the majority of the sample it is enough to claim that Jesus is 'as-if-God' for them. As we have seen, most have a functional not an ontological christology. They do not make the momentous move from 'God was in Christ' to 'Christ is God', for they recognise no soteriological reason for doing so. So the data might be said to call into question the requirement for people to make the move from functional (biblical) to ontological (ecclesial) christology.

The data also challenge the necessity of continuing to speak of Jesus as the only way of salvation or of Christianity as the one true religion. The believers in this sample experience God's salvation through Jesus but most do not conclude, and it does not follow, that God only saves through Jesus. To affirm that Jesus is the definitive or decisive revelation of God (which for Christians he is or should be) need not imply that he is the only revelation of God. 'Definitive' or 'decisive' does not mean 'only'. The findings from this study clearly have far-reaching theological and missiological implications. It is Avis' contention that 'We have not faced the fact that social-cultural-spiritual changes demand a strenuous act of theological reinterpretation, a huge intellectual wrench for the churches, and a concerted strategy for sustained evangelisation and pastoral nurture.'⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Johnson, 'Jesus and Salvation', 7.

⁹⁰ Avis (ed.), *Public Faith?*, viii.

One might argue, in the light of these reflections, that the christological norms which have largely governed the interpretation of Jesus for so long need to be widened (or abandoned?) and the legitimacy of a multiplicity of christologies recognised. Clearly not any and every interpretation of Jesus will do. There has to be some continuity between what the New Testament says about Jesus and what we say about Jesus today. But insisting upon one norm - that of orthodoxy - to which all are expected to conform is at best unhelpful and at worst divisive, and besides it does not *work*, as this study has shown. Christological orthodoxy canonizes one christology (namely incarnationism) as *the* christology. But as Tilley observes:

No story about Jesus can be elevated to the status of THE story about Jesus. When a single story is taken as final and absolute, it becomes an idol. When a single story is taken as *the* key to the canon, the others are degraded to a lower status. The multiplicity of stories of Jesus prevents this idolatry and degradation. When one story is raised above all others, it should be 'jostled' out of place by others in the tradition. If Christians could have and tell the final and absolute story about Jesus, they could understand his person and his significance. But the presence of many stories in the New Testament warrants the traditional claim that no human story will be fully adequate to tell of him.⁹¹

All christology, be it canonical, ecclesial, liturgical, academic or ordinary, is both selective and perspectival. It cannot be otherwise. Most of the sample appear to have selected a fragmented synoptic christology. They do not appear to have a christology that has been shaped in any substantial way by either the gospel of John or the Pauline corpus. (As has already been stated, the majority of the sample do not adhere to orthodox incarnational christology, which has its roots in the gospel of John, or interpret Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice, an interpretation that is prominent in the epistles, but not in the synoptic gospels). Their preference is for narrative christology not conceptual christology.

⁹¹ Tilley, *Story Theology*, 141. Sallie McFague makes the same point about theological multi-model discourse more generally (*Metaphorical Theology*, 139-144).

Ordinary christology puts the stories of Jesus, not doctrines about him, at the centre of christology. It shows that christology at its core is a hermeneutical process not a doctrinal system, and that what matters most in christology is not right doctrine but letting Jesus' story have its way with us. It shifts the emphasis in christology away from right belief (orthodoxy) to right practice (orthopraxis). An over-emphasis on orthodoxy can lead to the perception that what is important in Christianity is right belief, in which mental assent to a set of propositions becomes *the* criterion for deciding who is/is not Christian. But if adherence to christological norms is used as the criterion for what counts as Christian, then the majority of this sample of faithful churchgoers and concerned Christians would fall outside the category of Christian. But if Christianity is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but a way of life, then disciples can follow Jesus as the Way without having to give assent to (or even understand) the christological doctrines of the church. All the biblical models of discipleship predate there being a set of doctrines about him. If being a Christian is essentially about commitment to this person/story/set of values then what is made of Jesus doctrinally is largely irrelevant.

So perhaps the most important question to ask of believers is not who was/is Jesus or what did/does he do, but *do you follow him?* Does his story shape your story? For at the centre of christology 'is not an idea to which one must assent, but a story, not an entertaining story but rather a dangerous one, a story not only to be told but to be lived.'⁹²

⁹² Johann Baptist Metz, 'Theology Today: New Crisis and New Visions', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985), 7.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In the thesis, three main christologies are identified: these are designated as functional, ontological and sceptical. The characteristics of these three christologies are as follows:

Functional christology

Functional christology considers Jesus to be the Son of God, but not identical to God and has no doctrine of either pre-existence or the immanent Trinity. The virginal conception is considered to be the point in time when God created Jesus and Jesus' existence as the Son of God began. Jesus is divine, but only in the sense that the characteristics of divinity can be predicated of him, thus giving rise to a degree christology. Functional christology uses functional language, rather than the ontological language of orthodoxy: Jesus is God's agent, not God. It may be classified as subordinationist and effectively Arian. It can also be said to affirm a doctrine of the incarnation understood as the incarnation of God's creative, revelatory and salvific power in the person of Jesus; but not a doctrine of the incarnation understood as the incarnation of God the Son, Second Person of the Trinity. Functional christology dominates the sample.

Ontological christology

Ontological christology holds the orthodox doctrine that Jesus is God. It uses the ontological language of orthodoxy, rather than adopting any species of functional language. It affirms a doctrine (of sorts) of the immanent Trinity, of pre-existence and of the incarnation of God the Son. It can be classified as a three-stage, descent-ascent incarnational christology. Ontological christology exhibits both tritheistic and docetic tendencies.

Sceptical christology

Sceptical christology doubts or denies altogether the divinity of Jesus. It does not consider Jesus to be God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, incarnate (ontological christology), or God's Son created by God to be God's agent or representative on earth (functional christology). Rejection of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus is based on an inability to believe in miracle and on the challenges arising from historical research. In sceptical christology, Jesus' significance lies in his humanity not his divinity, and in his status as the representative human rather than the supernatural redeemer of humanity.

Three main soteriologies are also identified: these are named as exemplarist, traditionalist and evangelical. They have the following characteristics:

Exemplarist soteriology

Exemplarist soteriology emphasises the life and death of Jesus as exemplary and rejects outright the traditional interpretation of the death of Jesus as an atonement for human sin. It sees the cross as a symbol of man's inhumanity to man; of historical evil trying to overcome good; of self-giving love, etc. The significance of the cross lies in its impact on human beings. That impact may take the form of inspiration and encouragement to the believer to model herself upon the moral and/or religious

example of Jesus or to persevere in situations of human suffering. For some exemplarists, the most important aspect of the cross is that it demonstrates the love of God.

Traditionalist soteriology

Traditionalist soteriology is characterised by a lack of any explicit atonement theology. It cannot articulate a theology of the cross at all and questions about the cross elicit little response beyond the repeating of set formulae. A cluster of accepted beliefs coalesce around the death and resurrection of Jesus, but these beliefs do not form a logically coherent whole or system. What traditionalist soteriology has is a story - an outline of the Christian mythos - which is held in fragments rather than as one overarching, coherent epic.

Evangelical soteriology

One hallmark of evangelical soteriology is the substitutionary theory of atonement. Another is the personal relationship of believers with Jesus. So in this type of soteriology Jesus saves in two main ways: he saves through his atoning death and he saves by being a constant companion

Many in the sample admit to various **soteriological difficulties**. Chief among these are difficulties with the 'traditional' theology of the cross, and the idea that God's forgiveness is dependent on Jesus' atoning death. These people effectively bypass the traditional theology (they have no need for it) in favour of a theology based on God's free forgiveness for penitent sinners. Such a theology obviates the need for an atoning death. Christianity without atonement would seem to be the dominant theological position in this sample.

The research findings also bring to light various **formal characteristics of ordinary christology**. The ordinary christology of this sample is story-shaped; more metaphorical and imagistic than conceptual, preferring concrete images and concrete ways of thinking rather than their conceptual language and thought forms. It thus tends to eschew metaphysical speculation and is largely uninterested in pursuing theoretical questions. It focuses on the affective dimension of christology and tends to abstract out the cognitive dimension, as evidenced by the lack of interest in doctrine and the emphasis on feeling and behaviour. Consequently, much ordinary christology is primarily (but not wholly) non-cognitive, i.e., it uses christological language to express attitudes, rather than make fact-asserting statements.

All of the sample, irrespective of the doctrinal positions they hold, engage to a greater or lesser extent with the story (or more accurately stories) of Jesus, and identify with the figure of Jesus. The research thus shows that ordinary christology is at its core a **hermeneutical process rather than a doctrinal system**, and that what matters most in christology is not right doctrine but letting Jesus' story have its way with us.

Some suggestions for further research

- Further empirical investigation into (for example):
the experience of Jesus as a present contemporary reality

the impact of Jesus on the moral life of the believer
the process of engagement with the story of Jesus
the affective and non-cognitive dimensions of christology
the importance of Jesus for believers

- Exploration of the same topics employing different qualitative research tools, e.g. focus groups, case studies.
- Exploration of the same topics employing a larger-scale quantitative study based on the qualitative findings
- Extending the empirical research to other denominations
- Developing the missiological and theological implications of the research findings

APPENDIX A: A TYPICAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- Can you begin by telling me about your churchgoing? Have you always been a churchgoer?
- As I mentioned earlier, the focus of this piece of research is on people's thoughts, feelings, beliefs about Jesus. Perhaps we could begin by thinking about who Jesus was. How would you respond to this question (hand over sheet with question on).

I think of Jesus during his earthly life as:

*an ordinary human being
 an exceptional human being
 a human being specially chosen by God
 fully human and fully divine
 God in human form*

- Probe their understanding of Jesus as divine/God.
- What was Jesus like? Was he perfect?
- Did Jesus claim to be God?
- Do you believe in the virgin birth? Probe their understanding of Jesus as Son of God.
- Would you think of Jesus in any way existing before his birth?
- What does the Trinity mean to you?
- The central symbol of Christianity is the cross. Can you say anything about what the cross means to you?
- Christians claim that Jesus is the saviour of the world. Do you think of Jesus as your saviour?
- Christians claim that Jesus died to save us from our sins. What sense do you make of this claim?
- Why do we need a saviour/redeemer?
- What was Jesus' message and purpose?
- Do you pray to Jesus?
- Do you consider yourself to have a relationship with Jesus? Probe understandings of the risen Christ and Jesus as a present contemporary reality.

- Can you sum up what significance Jesus has for you? How important is Jesus to you?
- Do you think that Christianity is the only true religion?
- How would you define a Christian?
- I suppose it might have been easier for you to talk to a stranger rather than someone you know?

APPENDIX B: AGE AND GENDER DETAILS OF SAMPLE

Age	Male	Female	Total
Up to 30 years	-	-	-
30 to 39 years	Paul Richard Edward	Hilary Valerie	5
40 to 49 years	Peter Bruce	Dorothy Jill Lesley Linda	6
50 to 59 years	Tom	Pat Suzanne Jan Susan Eleanor Margo Kathleen Diane	9
60 to 69 years	John Charles Ben	Rose Elizabeth Sheila Hannah Maureen	8
70 to 79 years	-	Marion	1
80 to 89 years	Percy	-	1
Total	10	20	30

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