

Truly Man: The Humanity of the God-Man

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CANON C. E. RAVEN, in the preface to his book on Apollinarianism, tells how he was stimulated to the writing of the book by a teacher's suggestion that Apollinarianism was the prevalent heresy of today. The author explains that when he started to write the book, he accepted the traditional view of the "impersonal" humanity of our Lord. By the end of the study, it is clear that he has given this up as unsatisfactory and that he has come to share his teacher's view that Apollinarianism is indeed the most widespread modern heresy.¹ This was as long ago as 1923. In 1959 there appeared Dr. Norman Pittenger's volume *The Word Incarnate*, the main thesis of which shows considerable sympathy with the point that Raven was making nearly forty years ago. Dr. Pittenger is obviously convinced that much modern theology does not do justice to the genuine humanity of our Lord. He is also greatly annoyed with Karl Barth, and rightly, for asserting that Jesus was probably not a very interesting or significant human personality.² This is certainly reacting against liberal theology with a vengeance.

It would seem, therefore, that the way is open for a fresh consideration of an old truth, namely the affirmation of the true humanity (the *vere homo*) of Jesus Christ. What do Christians mean when they make such a statement? It is important to underline the word *Christian* in this connection, for the question only raises theological problems when stated in the context of the full Christian claims about Jesus Christ. If Jesus is classified as the greatest of the prophets only, or as the finest flowering of the religious genius of our race, it is clear that no question concerning his humanity will arise. We may have difficulty in explaining the why and how of the emergence of such a genius but this is no different from asking why Mahatma Gandhi appeared in India when he did. Jesus might still be mysterious in the sense in which all human genius has something elusive and inexplicable about it, but this would be a matter of degree. Jesus, by definition, would not be basically different from his brethren. It is only when the Christian asserts the true humanity of Jesus Christ in the context of a similar assertion about his divinity that a theological problem arises in the sense intended here.

There can be little doubt that what Professor H. E. W. Turner calls "the great church" intended to assert the full and complete humanity of

1. C. E. Raven, *Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church* (Cambridge: University Press, 1923), p. vii.

2. W. Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 10.

our Lord. It strenuously resisted all Gnostic attempts to dissolve the physical body into a phantasm, an unreal appearance. The emphasis on the Virgin Birth no doubt did as much to safeguard the reality of the body as the miraculous nature of his entry into the world. Whatever Apollinaris may have intended to say, the church understood him to be denying the complete humanity and condemned him accordingly. The long process of Christological debate which culminated in the Definition of Chalcedon affirmed that Jesus Christ was truly God and *truly man*: the self-same of a rational soul and body (*ek psychēs logikēs kai sōmatos*), consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, the self-same consubstantial with us (*homoousios*) according to the manhood. This seems unequivocal and definite enough. What more needs to be said? Has not the Spirit of God led the church to a definitive judgment on this matter and cannot we leave it at that?

To this may be added the following comments. An authoritative conciliar definition does not in itself guarantee the preservation of a Christian truth. Each generation must grasp and appreciate it afresh. It may also be asked, and this to some will seem lacking in respect, whether the church itself fully understood the implications of what it was saying in A.D. 451. Furthermore, it seems impossible to repress the desire for understanding. *Fides quaerens intellectum* is a permanent situation for all thoughtful Christians in every age. Men are not content merely to assert but wish to understand what they assert in terms that are relevant to their current experience of the world. Before entering into a more technical discussion of the problem we have raised, it may very well be asked what is its practical import and value, particularly to the Christian minister as he proclaims the Word of God Sunday by Sunday. As St. Paul would say, much in every way. Those of us who preach are fond of reminding our people that Jesus was one of us, that he knows and shares our experiences, that he knows what it is to be tested and tried and to struggle against evil, that he has truly lived our life and gained the victory, not in some far-off dream world but in this world of torturing uncertainty and crippling sin. He is our Lord and Saviour, yes, but he is also our elder brother, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. As Irenaeus said long ago, "He became what we are . . . in order that he might make us as he himself is" (*propter suam immensam dilectionem factus est quod sumus nos, uti nos perficeret esse quod et ipse*).³

Those fathers whom we associate most definitely with the orthodoxy of the creeds of the Ecumenical church up to and including Chalcedon all affirm that the Logos became man. Athanasius in the *De Incarnatione* affirms that "He was made man (*enanthrōpēsen*) that we might be made divine (*theopoiēthōmen*)."⁴ Many were content to use the familiar Johannine language, but the ambiguity of the term *flesh* in the face of heretical mis-

3. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, V, pref.

4. Athanasius, *De Incarn.*, 54.

interpretation compelled the framers of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of A.D. 381 to add *and was made man* (*enanthrōpēsanta*). The verbal affirmation that the Logos became not only flesh but man is firmly embedded in the thinking of the pre-Chalcedonian period. How is this to be interpreted? It is often assumed that humanity is an easy term to define, that we know precisely what is involved in being fully human, and that it, therefore, is merely a simple statement of fact about the Jesus of the gospels that he was truly man. Yet the history of the debate concerning the person of Christ shows that things are not as simple as they seem and that in fact Christian thinkers are deeply divided as to what "truly man" means in this context. The two positions are roughly as follows.

There are those who maintain that it is possible to determine what constitutes "humanity" by an empirical study of man. "The proper study of mankind is man," and by taking advantage of all that the various disciplines can reveal as to the nature of man, a definition is possible. Biology, psychology, sociology, history, philosophy—the cumulative result of all these studies is to enable us to define what it means to be "*truly man*." Having arrived at our definition of humanity, we can then apply it to the historic Jesus. If we wish to assert that he was truly man, then it must be in the sense that these previous studies have already given to the term. The ordinary man with his lack of specialized knowledge in the exact and social sciences assumes that he knows what "humanity" means on the basis of his own experience of himself as a thinking, willing, purposive being. He knows love, hate, fear, temptation, sin, failure, remorse, the pull of the ideal. If Jesus was truly human, then he must have shared fully the kind of experience with which he, the ordinary man, is familiar. He too, like the more sophisticated thinker, assumes a prior knowledge of the nature of genuine humanity which he can then bring as a norm or standard by which to define the "truly human" of the Word Incarnate.

Against this is the vigorous protest of those who assert that this is a false and dangerously misleading starting-point. It is true that we may fashion some kind of "anthropology" by studying man as he is in his empirical historical existence. The trouble is, it is asserted, that we have no means of deciding which of these various doctrines of man is true. By what right and according to what norm do we select between Platonic and Aristotelian man, the man of Hobbes or Rousseau, Marxian man, Freudian or Watsonian man, existential man *à la Sartre*? We cannot choose until we know man's *telos*, man's goal in which his true nature is realized.

This *telos* cannot be known in the Christian sense until we know what end God has in store for man. To look at man empirically is to see him in bondage to corruption and sin. To look into myself is not to see genuine humanity but to see man estranged from God, to use Tillichian language, and divided from his fellow man. Such an empirical study of man is, it is contended, a dead end. The only solution is to turn to study the Word made man, to see the "truly man" not in the characteristics of empirical

man in general, but in the perfect manhood assumed by the God-Man, Jesus Christ. To know what true humanity means, we must look at the "humanity" of our Lord. When we do this, we discover that his humanity is not necessarily an exact duplication of ours. From the point of view of sinful and empirical man, his human nature will be seen to be unique, since in the light of the premise from which this argument starts, no actual man displays "true humanity" in the sense that God intended it to be. The "truly man," therefore, cannot be defined in terms of human nature as we know it but in terms of the "humanity" assumed by the Word, and this is by no means the same thing. This is the point of view argued with passion and learning by Karl Barth, and many who are not Barthians will sympathize with much that he has to say at this point. "I believe," says Leonard Hodgson, "that a great deal of error in christological thinking is due to our taking ourselves as the standard of manhood, and asking how far the Jesus of the Gospels conforms to that standard. But if the Christian faith be true, we are poor specimens of manhood, even the best of us, not only imperfect but corrupted by sin."⁵

Are we confronted here with two irreconcilable points of view? Is it a plain either-or? If we cannot know what it means to be human by studying empirical man, how can we distinguish the humanity of our Lord from his divinity? Would we not be completely without a norm by which we could decide such a question, except by arbitrarily choosing certain features from the gospel portrait to designate as human? In any case, the gospels are so sparing in the detail they give us about the inner life, the psychology of the God-Man, that it will be no easy task to define manhood from the meagre information provided. Of course, the reason for this reticence on the part of the evangelists may be that they assumed that human nature in him was the same as ours, and that its readers did not need to be told what it means to be human. There must be something in common between our unregenerate human nature and Christ's sinless human nature. Otherwise, we would have to say that sinful men are no longer human, and this is an assumption that creates too many difficulties.

Let us approach the matter, therefore, from the empirical point of view. What kind of definition of human nature will we arrive at if we keep to such information as ordinary observation and introspection afford? There is no need to trace the history of philosophical and psychological thought from Aristotle onwards. The following conclusions appear to emerge with reasonable certainty.

1. To be truly human implies the possession of a genuine physical body with certain instincts, passions, desires, and so on. I am aware that instinct is out of fashion among many modern psychologists, but our definition here does not demand our adherence to any particular school of psychology. No one disputes that men eat and drink, seek their own preservation, and engage in sexual behaviour.

2. Despite the behaviourists, man is also a conscious being. More than

5. L. Hodgson, *Christian Faith and Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), p. 67.

that, however, he experiences a dynamic psychic life, part of which is in the subconscious or the unconscious. If William James, Freud, and Jung are even partially correct, human nature everywhere will possess this wider and deeper psychical life. Dean Matthews has rightly asked what bearing this modern understanding of our human psychology will or should have upon our understanding of our Lord's genuine humanity.⁶

3. A genuine human life involves gradual growth to maturity in interaction with the human and the non-human environment.

4. A human being possesses rational, moral, and spiritual capacities that distinguish him from the animal world. This is true whether we are thinking of the Australian aborigine or the most refined product of a Christian culture. Whether such capacities involve the "objectivity of values" or a theistic world-view or a particular philosophy can be left on one side for now. Men do communicate through intelligible language; they think; they fashion tools; they have a sense of "ought," however explained; they worship, however diverse may be the objects of their worship. It is an anthropologist, not a Christian theologian, who tells us, after studying the significance of symbolic language, that there is an "irreducible distinction in kind between the mental functions of man on the one hand, and that of the animal kingdom on the other."⁷

5. All human learning involves trial and error and progress from inadequate to more adequate knowledge. There is what Wheeler Robinson has called the "ministry of error" as the means of arriving at fuller truth.⁸ Would a genuine human nature permit a harmonious growth in knowledge without the ministry of error entering in?

6. Human nature, as we know it, involves being subject to temptation in the sense of being enticed by evil. Empirically, all men seem to have yielded to temptation, and this appears to be a fact, apart from any theological explanation of the origin of sin or the way its consequences have been transmitted from one generation to another. Can there be a genuine human nature subject to temptation but not necessarily yielding to it? Meanwhile, we must assert that a genuine human nature involves at least the possibility of being tempted.

7. Finally, all the previous points have implied the existence of an enduring "ego" as the active centre of personal life. A Humian or Buddhistic dissolution of personal unity into a mere juxtaposition of psychological states would render null and void our previous contentions. The self becomes a string of pearls with no string to hold them together. James Ward's defence of the "organizing self" in his *Psychological Principles*⁹ still remains in my judgment to be refuted. The well-known witticism that modern

6. W. R. Matthews, *The Problem of Christ in the Twentieth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

7. D. Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 4.

8. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation* (New York: Harper, 1942), ch. 11.

9. James Ward, *Psychological Principles*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1920), ch. 15.

psychology first lost its soul, then its mind, and finally lost consciousness no longer seems so applicable in the modern situation. In spite of what Dr. Mascall calls Professor Gilbert Ryle's highly sophisticated behaviourism, there are powerful voices being raised against the absurdity of a psychology without a self. We may note in the first place Professor A. A. Bowman's remarkable *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, which deserve more attention than seems to be given to them these days.¹⁰ Among slightly newer works, Dr. Mascall's own treatment of the question in *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, Dr. A. M. Farrer's *Finite and Infinite*, Professor C. A. Campbell's recent Gifford Lectures, Professor John Macmurray's *The Self as Agent* and the essay on soul in *Faith and Logic* all add up to a formidable case.¹¹ Now we have Professor Brand Blanshard's acute criticism of Logical Atomism in *Reason and Analysis*.¹² A human nature without a self bears no relation to the nature of the person whether viewed from the angle of an adequate psychology or philosophy or from the daily experience of the so-called average man.

Of the seven points we have mentioned, is there any compelling reason either in the records themselves or in theological reflection upon the same that should lead us to refuse to ascribe them to Jesus of Nazareth? The reality of the human body is hardly beyond dispute. It is nowhere suggested that he could dispense with food and drink, even if spiritual succour enabled him to endure long periods of fasting as in some striking modern instances such as Gandhi. That Jesus did not marry must surely be ascribed to his single-minded concentration on his divine vocation and not his freedom from sexual instinct or the feelings and desire that form an integral part of the marriage relationship. Or are we really prepared for a dualism of a thoroughgoing kind which thinks that Jesus could not possibly have had our instincts? If we are prepared to say that Jesus had in common with all men certain rational, moral, and spiritual capacities, and that his life was a genuine, not an artificial or unreal, growth "in wisdom and grace," does this not involve limitations of knowledge and power which such a real development would seem to demand? Or again are we prepared to say that the baby Jesus controlled the planets from his cradle, that the man Jesus knew the secrets of nuclear fission but refused to divulge them, that the whole of future history was consciously in his mind, even to the end of the age (a claim which he expressly repudiates in Mark 13)?

It may be objected that all this simply means that the Christian must accept what the secular mind has established empirically about human

10. Cf. A. A. Bowman, *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1938), vol. II, ch. 22.

11. Cf. E. L. Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science* (London: Longmans, 1956), ch. 6; A. M. Farrer, *Finite and Infinite* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1943), *passim*; C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), pp. 73-94; J. Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber, 1957), *passim*; J. R. Lucas, "The Soul," in Basil Mitchell (ed.), *Faith and Logic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), pp. 132-48.

12. B. Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962).

nature and asserted of Christ, sin excepted. In a sense this is true, though the use of the word "secular" may hide from us the fact that the human nature thus studied is the result of God's creative act, if man is really made in the image of God. If this is not so, then we must find the divinity, not in a perfected human nature *homousios* with ours, but in the exercise of unlimited power or the possession of unlimited and infinite knowledge. It is difficult to imagine how any man could be "man" in any sense meaningful to us and be completely without any limitations of consciousness, power, and knowledge. The Jesus of the gospels revealed by even the most conservative study would seem to make such a conclusion impossible. Donald Baillie's "no more docetism" must be accepted, and we must have the courage to mean what we say.¹³ It has been fashionable in some quarters to go a step further than this and say that the Word assumed our "fallen" human nature. What could this possibly mean? Those who assert this evidently do not wish to say that Jesus was sinful in any precise sense, for this would run counter to the orthodoxy to which they are otherwise committed. They do, however, wish to defend a notion of the "fall" which has permanently affected human nature as we know it. "Fallen human nature" is defined by Dr. H. Johnson as follows: "It is a nature that has been affected by the Fall and by the sin and rebellion of previous generations. When we come into the world we are born into a spoilt species in the sense that the power of the will has been weakened and the balance of the instincts upset. We share in all the propensities and drives of human nature as they are now in our present post-Fall human situation, we are born into a rebellious race that by its insurrection has been alienated from God." Later he says, "He assumed what was imperfect, but he wrought out of it a life that was perfect."¹⁴ In order to maintain this position, it would appear to be necessary to maintain that the fall was historical in a very exact and literal sense, that the result of it was a permanent dislocation of human nature, passed on by heredity from generation to generation, that sin is a kind of substance that can be transmitted, that every newborn baby must of necessity sin. It is not at all certain that Dr. Johnson would want to assert all this, but if he did, he would need to answer more convincingly than he has done the formidable criticisms of F. R. Tennant.¹⁵

Whether we are prepared to go thus far and use this kind of language or not, at least it reinforces our plea that the humanity of our Lord has something in common with the human nature that an empirical study reveals. This means that we cannot summarily dismiss what a so-called "secular" anthropology reveals as though it were irrelevant to what we mean when we speak of the true humanity of our Lord. It may be asked what there is in this defence of a genuine humanity incompatible with what Chalcedon

13. Cf. D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (London: Faber, 1948), pp. 9-20.

14. Harry Johnson, *The Humanity of the Saviour* (London: Epworth Press, 1962), pp. 24, 27.

15. Cf. F. R. Tennant, *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* (Cambridge: University Press, 1902).

was trying to assert about the human *physis* of our Lord. In principle, perhaps nothing, though the way in which Chalcedon has sometimes been interpreted could hardly be taken as a full defence of the position here maintained. The *Tome* of Leo, with its doctrine of the two natures which the council confirmed, is much too naive in its distinctions between them. Human nature is identified with hunger, thirst, weariness, sleep, pity; divinity with the nature miracles.¹⁶ Sheer power is here regarded as the manifestation of the "divine" nature, while weakness and compassion is human. But if God is love, the voluntary acceptance of these latter may be more divine than the most impressive nature miracle. It is well known that when the elderly Nestorius heard of the council's decision he felt that he had been vindicated. Nevertheless we know that Chalcedon could be and was in fact interpreted in a Monophysite direction. This suggests that the Definition does not of itself guarantee the truths that its framers were no doubt seeking to express. Karl Barth has defended the "impersonal humanity" on the grounds that it has been misunderstood. He contends that *impersonalitas* did not deny individuality in our modern sense of "real human personality" but only the existence of an independent and self-subsistent humanity which could exist apart from its hypostatic union with the Word.¹⁷ Even if this is so, it does not alter the fact that orthodox Christology has found it difficult to do justice to a full humanity in the sense we would wish to give to the term. It is extremely puzzling, for example, to find Dr. Mascall asserting that limitation of knowledge and omniscience both exist in the one divine-human Person of our Lord.¹⁸ It may be possible to restate and defend the ancient doctrine of *enhypostasia*, i.e., that the human nature retains its identity and integrity only as the agent of the divine Logos. It has no independent existence apart from the latter. Dr. H. M. Relton evidently thinks it possible to defend the real "personality" of Christ in the modern sense while continuing to assert that the centre of such personality was the divine Logos itself.¹⁹ Karl Barth also thinks that the doctrine of *enhypostasia* preserved this precious truth and can be defended. Dr. Pittenger, however, correctly observes that it is very difficult to state this doctrine without implying that Jesus must have lacked any "strictly human personal centre."²⁰ Yet this again brings us to the conclusion that the Logos took a special kind of human nature, not quite the same as the nature of those he calls brethren.

How then are we going to escape from the dilemma of recognizing either a dual Nestorian Christ or a Monophysite divine Christ in which the human nature has been swallowed up to the point of its disappearance in any sense that would meet our previous account of human nature? Only, it would

16. Leo the Great, *Epist.* 28, 4.

17. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 164.

18. E. L. Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church* (London: Longmans, 1946), pp. 53ff.

19. H. M. Relton, *A Study in Christology* (London: SPCK, 1934), pp. 223-74.

20. W. Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, pp. 100ff.

seem, by restating the problem and posing it in fresh terms. It is not enough to affirm that Chalcedon is giving us an ontology and not a psychology of the God-Man, and that this is its strength. We cannot refuse to try to frame a Christology that does reasonable justice to the Jesus Christ who emerges from the pages of the gospels. It would be extremely difficult, as Wheeler Robinson asserts, to see how two wills could ever coexist as such in any genuine personal activity.²¹ It is equally difficult to see Jesus of Nazareth as having two wills in the sense asserted by some theologians. The only way out of the difficulty is a more adequate doctrine of human personality. When Dr. Relton tries to defend his form of *enhypostasia* by arguing that human nature, apart from the Word (i.e., its relation to God), is not a true human nature, he is saying something important and vital. That man only fulfils the potentialities of his human nature in relation to and in dependence upon God is something all Christians must affirm. This, however, does not alter the fact that there is "some human centring which makes him an integrated person" even when this relationship to God is incomplete and inadequate because of sin and rebellion. It would seem preferable therefore to start from human personality as we know it in the actuality of our own experience and that of other men. We can, then, tackle the problem of Christology from the premise that the most important aspect of personality is "its potential relation to higher forms of its own reality."²² Instead of trying to dovetail the human into the divine, or *vice versa*, the problem of Jesus Christ will be solved by a "deeper view of what human personality already is."²³ Human personality will then be seen as a fitting vehicle of the divine under the limiting conditions of a particular historical environment.

To develop this in a way that would enable us to construct an adequate Christology and to do justice to Christ's divinity would demand a re-examination of certain assumptions about God, such as his impassibility, and a reaffirmation of the kinship between human and divine in terms of our modern understanding of personality. This paper has no space to carry this further. Its purpose is to clarify the minimum requirements of a satisfactory definition of the time-honoured phrase, "truly man." Obviously, there is more to be said by every Christian but at least this much must be said if we are to safeguard the true glory of the gospel that God became truly man for us men and for our salvation.

21. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation*, p. 208.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 210f.