Dynamic Christology

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Christology, or what we think of Christ, is at the centre of theological discussion today, which is as it should be. The literature is vast and varied, and so students often need help finding their way in modern Christology. What follows is a brief sketch map of one important area of the present debate.

‘Dynamic Christology’ can be defined as understanding Jesus of Nazareth as the focus of God’s activity in the world, and believing that Jesus’ divinity is best expressed in terms of this understanding, at least within our twentieth-century context.

This is now a well-established way of viewing Christ. Almost no modern scholar has remained uninfluenced by it. Their dynamic concept of the person of Christ is a major reason for the quarrel that the English writers of The Myth of God Incarnate have with traditional Christology; it lies behind much that is said of Christ by progressive Catholic theologians such as Schillebeeckx, Küng and Rahner; and it has

1‘Dogmatics [is] . . . fundamentally Christology’: K. Barth, Church Dogmatics 1/2 (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 123.
recently appeared in Latin American liberation theologians' discussions of Christ.\textsuperscript{2} A large, important, group of scholars have taken it as the central, controlling motif of their Christology. The task of this article is to explain this modern approach, to discuss the main criticisms which have been levelled against it and then, from an evangelical perspective, to ask to what extent we can learn from this movement.

### God in action

Friedrich Schleiermacher is the father of modern Christology, and this is particularly true of the dynamic approach. He planted the two crucial seeds out of which the present situation has grown. Firstly, he held that Chalcedonian\textsuperscript{3} language was inadequate to describe Christ's person to modern man. Secondly, he built his Christology 'from below' — starting with the full humanity of Christ and finding his deity in that.\textsuperscript{4}

1. **Chalcedon.** The modern position therefore begins with an attack upon the traditional Christological formulae. Chalcedon's Definition, that Christ is made up of one hypostasis but two substances, expresses Christology in neo-Platonic thought forms. But why, it is said, should modern man have to talk of Jesus in the fifth century's outdated 'static' terms? Nowadays, we think in a dynamic, evolutionary and existential way.\textsuperscript{5} The task of the theologian is not just to repeat outdated meaningless formulae; it is to present the doctrine of the church to modern man. And so he must use the language of Whitehead and de Chardin, not of Aristotle and Plato.\textsuperscript{6} But this is not just to substitute twentieth-century philosophical categories for those of the fifth century. After all, these too will one day become out of date. It is to return to early New Testament thought forms.\textsuperscript{7} In the Bible, God reveals himself by what he does, in terms of purpose and action. Dynamic Christology is just stating the New Testament's witness to Jesus in Hebraic rather than alien Hellenistic terms.\textsuperscript{8}

2. **True humanity.** Chalcedon is dead. But so is Docetism. Traditional orthodoxy paid lip service to Chalcedon, but never took seriously Christ's full humanity. Christ was seen as a sort of 'Superman' only disguised as a man and only partially human despite appearances.\textsuperscript{9} This can be seen in the implicit anhypostasia\textsuperscript{10} of many orthodox constructions (including Chalcedon itself).\textsuperscript{11} Impersonal humanity is not humanity. If Jesus was not human 'to the lowest depths of his conscious and sub-conscious life, he was not human at all'.\textsuperscript{12}

Jesus must be a man, a person, in the sense in which we are persons — part of the 'organic human process', a product of our past, our social environment and our existential choices. To say he also had a divine nature violates his humanity, for then he would not be a man like us.\textsuperscript{13} It follows that the only way to do justice to his humanity is for his divinity to be expressed in dynamic terms — as the action of God in him and through him. God acts in us imperfectly. He acted in Jesus perfectly and fully.

Jesus is God; but not substantively (and of course not adjectively as Arius believed). He is God adverbially. The divinity of Jesus is the activity of God in him.\textsuperscript{14}

3. **Names and views.** Desiring together to speak of God in Jesus, modern theologians are very much at odds in their expression of that activity. We will briefly sample the diversity.

a. N. Pittenger\textsuperscript{15} is well known for his application of the principles of Process Theology to the incarnation. Adopting the dynamic model of God and the universe propounded by Whitehead and Hartshorne, he defines manhood as partaking of the process of God's action in the world, of being formed by 'reciprocity' with reality. To say that an event in the world is above such a process is to deny it the adjective human. The whole 'event' of the incarna-


\textsuperscript{3} The Council of Chalcedon was held in AD451 to define the church's Christology in the face of contemporary heresy. Text of the definition is in H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London, 1967), p. 51.

\textsuperscript{4} We have no space here to discuss the third constituent of modern Christology that he supplied — scepticism about the New Testament evidence, but this also underlies the modern approach. J. Macquarrie, 'Recent thinking on Christian beliefs — Christology', *Expository Times* 88 (1976), p. 36.


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., pp. 114-117. Others are less convinced that we can speak of the twentieth century's philosophical language; J. Hick, 'Christology at the Crossroads' in F. G. Healey (ed.), *Prospect for Theology* (Welwyn, 1966), p. 151.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 152.


\textsuperscript{9} See the discussion in D. M. Baillie, *God was in Christ* (London, 1948), pp. 11-20. Docetism is the belief that Christ was not fully human, but that he only seemed to be so.

\textsuperscript{10} Anhypostasia states that the Logos took impersonal humanity in the incarnation.


\textsuperscript{12} J. Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 68.


\textsuperscript{15} See *The Word Incarnate* and *Christology Reconsidered.*
tion (and here Pittenger means much more than the moment of birth itself) must be interpreted in this light.

Now the activity of God can be best expressed as God's love, so Jesus is the classic statement of God's love. But the love of God revealed through him cannot be of a different nature to that revealed through all of God's actions in the world, or even of a different nature to our love for each other and God. If that were so, Christ would not be human. Others like J. Hick also see the main forms of God's dynamic activity as love. Hick, however, argues for the full uniqueness of Christ.

b. D. M. Baillie uses the 'paradox of grace' as his summation of the divine activity. Grace is the crucial concept to use in understanding the activity of God. The initiative in all God's actions comes from God himself, yet it is performed in and through human beings. 'I live, but not I, Christ lives in me.' Jesus was the one in whom the paradox became absolute. He lived (the humanity), but not he; God lived in him (the deity).

c. G. W. H. Lampe's well-known interest in the work of the Holy Spirit is the key to his dynamic interpretation of the incarnation. His is a 'Spirit Christology'. Jesus was the man in whom the activity of God, by his Spirit, is seen. The Spirit possesses Jesus utterly and this divine activity through the Spirit is the divinity of Christ.

d. E. Schillebeeckx adopts what he calls a 'functional Christology', which he sees, like Hick as more Jewish than one expressed in 'essential' categories. The function of Jesus is revelation. He reveals what God is like and he reveals what man can be like, both in one person, and this is his interpretation of the Chalcedonian definition. H. Kung and some other modern Roman Catholic theologians also present their Christology in functional terms, expressed more in revelational than in ontological categories.

Further diversity could be illustrated in the constructions of J. A. T. Robinson, H. W. Montefiore, M. Wiles, N. Ferré and many others who allow dynamic principles to dominate their discussion of the nature of Christ.

An inadequate theme
This general standpoint has not been without its critics. We now look at two difficulties facing these theologians.

1. Theodotus redivivus? One charge which has been levelled against them is that their final position is akin to dynamic monarchianism, a blend of monistic and adoptionist thought alien to mainstream Christianity.

Critics have pointed out that it is very hard to talk meaningfully of the second person of the Trinity if the deity of Jesus is just the activity of God, or of God's Spirit, in a man. Furthermore, it seems that this Christology is only concerned with the period of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. So how can it support an adequate doctrine of pre-existence, or a satisfying post-existence as Lord?

a. For some of the men mentioned above, this difficulty is in fact one of the advantages of the theory. Lampe speaks appreciatively of 'monistic' as opposed to trinitarian theology (although he realizes that simple believers will feel the loss of the comfort brought by the traditional doctrines).

b. Many, however, make a limited attempt at re-interpretation of these classical doctrines in order to fit them with their Christology. Pittenger, following Wiles, wished, in presenting his views, 'to deal faithfully with the tradition of the Christian church' and fulfill the ancient fathers' objectives. But Wiles and Pittenger leave very little of the tradition of the church undamaged.

Knox's approach is typical of many. He tells us that Christ's pre-existence must be thought of in the sense that 'any human career is an integral part of an entire organic cosmic process'. On post-existence, he says that Jesus is still alive in that 'his humanity has become a divinely redeeming thing'. (However, we need not make any changes in our doctrine of the

16 Hick, 'Christology at the Crossroads'.
17 Baillie, op. cit.
18 Lampe, op. cit.
20 Cf. the discussion in K. Runia, op. cit., pp. 11ff (see n. 2). For a useful discussion of the background to present-day Catholic progressive thought, see D. F. Wells, Revolution in Rome (London, 1973), pp. 46ff. et passim.
22 Dynamic monarchianism was a form of unitarian thinking in the early church, seeing the Father as the personal Godhead, and the Logos and the Spirit as extensions of him. Christ was adopted as the Son of God by the energizing of the Logos. Its main exponents were Theodotus and Paul of Samosata. For this charge, see B. A. Demarest 'Process Trinitarianism' in K. S. Kantzler and S. N. Gundry (eds.), Perspectives on Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids, 1980).
25 Christology Reconsidered, pp. 4f.
Trinity!\textsuperscript{26} Incarnational theology and all the 'myths' associated with it are often abandoned with a sigh of relief.\textsuperscript{27} It seems to many that people taking this position, despite their professed intentions, do not make a serious attempt to be faithful to the witness of the New Testament and to that of the church.\textsuperscript{28} It is a faithfulness on their terms, the case of Procrustes and his bed all over again: the bed must not be changed, but the content of the bed must be made to fit it. So they lop off pieces of the doctrine here and there to accommodate it to their ideas, then claim that they have fitted the 'essential truth' into their Christology.

c. A third group, including such Protestants as Baillie and, in general, the present-day Catholic progressives, are at pains to keep the new wine in the old wineskins, to remain within historic Christianity. But we have a right to ask how successful they have been; whether they halt before the momentum of the new thought carries them over the boundary of the permissible.

Baillie has been accused (with some justification) of producing a very inadequate view of Christ.\textsuperscript{29} Schillebeeckx's Christology has been designated inadequate by the Roman Catholic hierarchy.\textsuperscript{30} King, it seems, ends up with a functional, economic Trinity rather than an essential one.\textsuperscript{31} d. All argue vigorously against the charge of adoptionism. Baillie denies it, since there was no time in the earthly life of Christ when he was not 'God' in this dynamic sense.\textsuperscript{32} Lampe agrees and adds that it is an essential characteristic of adoptionism that the adoption takes place on the basis of the adopted person's merits, which is never implied in dynamic Christologies.\textsuperscript{33} But, however different the present-day pattern is from that of the third century, the adoptionism is essentially the idea of a man being elevated to deity. When the divinity of Christ is explained as God's activity in him, we have a fundamentally adoptionist situation.\textsuperscript{34}

2. Is Jesus unique? One of the starting-points of dynamic Christology is that Christ must be a man like us; that the activity of God in him is of the same nature as the activity of God in every man, indeed, the world. So, a second accusation which these scholars have to meet is that the Jesus they present is different from you or me only in degree and not absolutely, in kind. Many advocates of a dynamic Christology feel this accusation keenly and devote much space to its refutation.\textsuperscript{35}

a. Baillie's concept of grace was immediately attacked on this point. In reply, it has been said that for him the difference in degree was so absolute as to constitute a difference in kind. But that is playing with words.\textsuperscript{36} Hick sees the uniqueness of Christ at the heart of the present discussion. He notes that Pittenger and Ferré accept that we cannot speak of Christ as different in kind to us, but strongly disagrees with them, calling Pittenger a neo-Arian.\textsuperscript{37} Nevertheless, his own solution that the agapé of Jesus is numerically identical with that of God is rightly condemned by Pittenger as neo-Apollinarianism!\textsuperscript{38} Pittenger attacks Hick and Thornton for lacking the courage to draw the logical conclusion of their premise and so to deny the absolute 'otherness' of Christ.\textsuperscript{39}

b. Lampe, Pittenger and others concede the point; thus they move the debate on a stage further. If Christ is not fundamentally and absolutely different from us, why need he be unique? Could not God act similarly a second time in a man? Can we say that it is impossible that another man will one day arise (or has already arisen) who is completely open to the love and activity of God? The implication seems to be that there is such a theoretical possibility, even if it is normally denied as an actual possibility.

Baillie confirms this deduction when he says that the thing which limits this manifestation to Jesus is that grace is prevenient. In other words, the reason we have only one Christ is that God has decided that it should be so — otherwise, it is quite possible.\textsuperscript{40} Lampe tells us that there can be only one Christ, since our experience of God is in some way derived from him.\textsuperscript{41} Nevertheless, it is significant that dynamic Christology has been welcomed in some quarters as opening the possibility for mutual respect and dialogue between Christianity and other religions.\textsuperscript{42}

We conclude that modern theology is walking down a path that leads outside the city of God (to utilize Augustine's phrase for the historic church).

\textsuperscript{26} Knox, op. cit. (see n. 8), pp. 108, 111, 109.
\textsuperscript{28} K. Runia, op. cit., pp. 19ff.
\textsuperscript{29} J. Hick, 'Christology', pp. 147ff.
\textsuperscript{30} The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith began proceedings against him early in 1979.
\textsuperscript{31} K. Runia, op. cit., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{32} Baillie, op. cit., pp. 129ff.
\textsuperscript{33} Lampe, op. cit., p. 125.
\textsuperscript{34} Hick, op. cit., p. 145.
\textsuperscript{35} N. Pittenger and J. Hick in particular.
\textsuperscript{36} Reported as a remark of his brother, J. Baillie. Source unknown.
\textsuperscript{37} Hick, op. cit., p. 148.
\textsuperscript{38} N. Pittenger, Christology, p. 18. Apollinarianism was the view of Apollinarius (c. 310-390) that the Logos took the place of the human soul in Christ.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., pp. 18ff.
\textsuperscript{40} Baillie, op. cit., p. 131.
\textsuperscript{41} Lampe, op. cit., p. 127.
\textsuperscript{42} Cf. J. Hick's contribution to J. Hick (ed.), The Myth of God Incarnate.
Some theologians are halting at the gate, unwilling to follow the road that they have chosen to its logical end. Others are already walking free in the open countryside. But they are no longer specifically Christian theologians.

An evangelical response
Despite the criticisms noted above, the modern dynamic approach to Christology should not be dismissed by the evangelical as worthless. The following are a few thoughts on an evangelical attitude to this movement.

1. The way of the world. a. To begin with, the movement has drawn attention to the way our Christology is conditioned by our cultural world view. It is no use saying that Christians should have nothing to do with secular interpretations of the world. Kierkegaard and Whitehead have already influenced the way we think, whether we like it or not, and it is best to recognize the fact. Furthermore, our evangelistic duty requires that we understand modern man and present the gospel in a way that he can understand.

The issue is not between ‘worldly’ world views and ‘godly’ world views. It is between the fifth-century world view and the twentieth-century world view. Neither of them has a special claim to godliness.43

b. However, we must be clear that the Christian is under no obligation to accommodate his faith to the current world view. Instead, the content of his faith must determine what he accepts and rejects from the thinking of his time. He is at perfect liberty to use modern thought forms and terminology when it can adequately express the truth encapsulated in the biblical terminology.

He is also at liberty to reject them when they prove inadequate. To say that the whole of Christology must be expressed in exclusively dynamic terms is to build a huge building on flimsy foundations that cannot bear the weight, and many dynamic Christologies are like that.44

c. It has been pointed out that this movement, from ontological to dynamic terminology, is a return to the Bible,45 that the Hebrew mind works in this way. But this is only a half-truth. Knox and others show that the development from a dynamic to an ontological, incarnational theology occurs within the New Testament canon as the writers reflect on the momentous act of God in Christ.46 In the New Testament, we have recorded the act of God, and John’s and Paul’s ontological conclusions drawn from that act.

O. Cullmann and C. F. D. Moule point out that in the New Testament, the disciples are grappling with a unique situation which, in the end, transcended their old Jewish thought forms, since these proved inadequate to express their Christology.47 Why should we give up the freedom they won for us and return to a world of thought which the apostles found inadequate?

Why should their mature reflection be less reliable than their first impressions of Christ?48 As K. Runia points out, behind modern speculation there is a fundamentally wrong attitude to Scripture.49

d. However, it is evangelicals who have rejoiced in the past when scholars have stressed the Jewish background to John’s and Paul’s thought (over against Hellenistic influences). It would be inconsistent to ignore it in our Christology. Yet we have effectively done so in the past using the New Testament as a mine of proof-texts for Chalcedon. It is time to recognize the Jewish, dynamic elements in the New Testament picture of Christ.50

2. Christ the Saviour. a. Greek Christological thinking (especially in its implied anhypostatic form) is all of a piece with much of Greek soteriological thought: Christ took humanity in general, so as to deify it, or restore in it the image of God.

b. The Reformers preferred to emphasize a more Hebrew idea of salvation from guilt by sacrifice. And yet they did not, with the possible exception of Luther,51 permit it to affect their whole-hearted support for the Greek Christological terminology of the early councils, since it was politically expedient to show a catholic face to the world. Their Christology was therefore expressed in Greek terms and their soteriology in Hebrew terms. They thus accentuated a tension in western theology which has contributed to the contemporary explosion of the radical new Christology.

c. Evangelicals perpetuate that tension by applauding Luther’s exposé of the inadequacy of such

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44 B. H. Brethwaite, op. cit. (see n. 23), pp. 216f.
45 Hick, op. cit., p. 152.
50 On functional or ontological Christology, R. T. France writes ‘The answer must be to refuse the “either/or” and insist also on a “both/and”. They are not opposites; rather each requires the other;’ op. cit., p. 15. Cf. J. Macquarrie’s exposition of K. Rahner, op. cit. (see n. 4), p. 38.
Aristotelian words as ‘substance’ to explain the mystery of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper; yet, at the same time, become defensive when the validity of the fifth-century word ‘substance’ is questioned as applied to the mystery of the incarnation.

We should put Christmas and Easter together in a more thoughtful way. All of us are agreed that the significance and validity of Easter depends on the full deity and full humanity of Christ, being united at the first Christmas. But if, with the Reformers, we see fourth- and fifth-century Greek soteriology as inadequate, there is no great merit in swallowing whole, terminology and all, the Christological approach on which it depends. We must be willing to hold up Norman Pittenger and Chalcedon to the light of the Bible.52

3. Ultimate mystery. To deny that we can fully explain how Christ is both true God and true man is not ducking the issue. It is preserving the mystery. This conclusion, the full divinity and full humanity of Christ, is an essential part of Christian theology.53 Chalcedon has been much maligned, but it was not trying to do more than defend this truth. And in that sense as Barth points out, it was not captive to any particular ontology.54 We have to make our own defence, in our own situation, with our own terminology today.

We cannot use any concept to ‘clear up the problems’ posed by the incarnation. Such an approach shows an inadequate regard for the essential mystery of the act of God in Christ.55 It is this mysteriousness in the fact of human reason which forces Christology, beyond a certain point, into a negatively defensive stance.56

Dynamic Christologies have, in fact, helped us to a more adequate defence of this primary statement. They have shown us that more attention needs to be paid to defending the full humanity of Christ. We can never return to the semi-docetism of previous generations.57 If we conclude that dynamic Christology’s anhypostatic divinity is inadequate,58 then anhypostatic humanity is also inadequate.

Reverent Christological speculation is a part of the theological task in all generations. Another part of that same task is to draw the boundaries of that speculation in the thought forms of the contemporary world as far as it is possible. This was what Chalcedon did for its day and it is what we must do for ours. Such a task makes no reputations in ‘modern’ theology, but is worthy of the ‘well done’ reserved for those who contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. Let us never be ashamed of doing that.

K. Barth, Church Dogmatics 1/2, p. 125.
55 H. D. McDonald, following K. Barth, sees the very trinitarian nature of God as the starting point for Christological speculation ‘The Person of Christ in Contemporary Speculation and Biblical Faith’, Vox Evangelica XI (1979), pp. 12ff.
56 K. Barth, op. cit., p. 129.
58 Runia (criticizing P. Schoonenberg), op. cit., p. 13.