CHAPTER III

THE MODERN CONCEPTION OF CHRIST

"We may certainly assert with confidence that at no period in the history of the Church has the significance and influence of Jesus Christ within the Christian community ever been greater than it is to-day. This is due in part to that increased emphasis on the cultivation of personality introduced by the German Renaissance of the eighteenth century and the Romantic movement; in part, however, it is also due to the intensive labour which the theology of the nineteenth century has expended upon research into the life and the self-consciousness of Jesus, the results of which have been imparted to the Christian community in general through teaching and preaching."[1] These words of a modern theologian, although not uttered for this purpose, could not express more plainly the change which has come over the religious situation. For that which he regards as the reason for the great significance of Jesus Christ within the Christian community might be considered, if it were measured by the standard of the fundamental opposition between the Christian religion and religion in general, as an argument leading to the opposite conclusion. For when we are concerned with the "cult of personality" in the Romantic sense, or with scientific "research into the life and the self-consciousness of Jesus"—when the main tendency runs along these lines, and there is an ardent interest in these questions—it is evident that, from the point of view of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ is regarded as of no importance.

The observation which is formulated in this quotation can scarcely be attacked, only we would draw from it exactly opposite conclusions. It is literally true that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been an extraordinary activity in the study of Jesus Christ from the point of view of the "cult of personality," and of "scientific research into His

[1] *R.G.G.*[1], III, p. 411.

life and His self-consciousness." Interest in a Jesus of this kind is all that is left when Jesus Christ has no longer any decisive message to give us. A growing interest in this Christ "after the flesh" coincides with a decreasing understanding of the "Christ in the flesh."[1] When therefore we note an increase of this kind of interest within the Christian "community," that is, within the Church, this simply means a proportionate disintegration of the Church, if, that is, by the "Church," we mean the fellowship of those who believe in Christ.

In earlier days it was usual to make a distinction between believers in Christ and unbelievers. To-day, however, looking at our period as a whole, and not at the exceptions, we may say that the distinction is now simply between those who admire Jesus and those who despise Him—the indifferent belong to the latter group—or between those who are full of enthusiasm for Jesus and those who hate Him. This change of emphasis in the distinction is the point at issue, not the various possibilities of decision which may be adopted within the new formulation of the problem. The distinction between those who admire Jesus and those who despise Him, between those who are enthusiastic about Him and those who hate Him, is merely relative, for it is a distinction based on an estimate of a human being. An estimate of a human being—even if he were the most important personality in the history of the world—is, in principle, a matter of no importance. No personality in world history affects me personally. When Jesus is discussed from this modern point of view, the very fact that this point of view is adopted makes the question which used to be asked—Yes or No?—meaningless; it has been replaced by an endless multiplicity of varying conceptions. There can only be one conception of Jesus Christ: for apart from this He could not be the Christ at all. But the opinions which may be held about Jesus merely as a man are countless; they coincide with the various points of view from which a human life may be studied. This statement is borne out by the modern literature on the subject of Jesus. What an immense variety there lies between the Socialist picture of Jesus drawn by a writer like Kautzky and Oscar Wilde's representation of Jesus as the One

[1] See p. 157.

who has discovered and given shape and form to the beauty of suffering; between the humanistic picture of Jesus given us by the Liberal theologians and Schopenhauer's parallel between Jesus and the Buddha, between the reverent admiration of Goethe and Nietzsche's anti-Christian ravings, between the complacent *Lives of Jesus* produced about the middle of last century (which venture to give a description of a more or less flawless development of Jesus, and thus to explain Him in a human way) and the "Christ-myth" of a man like Drews, for whom the historical figure of Jesus recedes into the mists of mythology. There is scarcely one of the leading minds of the century which has not his own particular conception of Christ —for how could anyone be a leader in European thought without offering his own interpretation of the most important fact in the history of Europe?—and yet all these views, whether positive or negative in their conclusions, are only variations on one theme: these writers do not believe in Him. For it is as impossible to *believe* in a mere human being as it is to see a sound or to handle a thought. They all see the "Christ after the flesh," not the "Christ in the flesh."

In saying this I do not mean either to deny or to affirm that these modern interpretations have seen something historically real, or that they have even rediscovered it. We shall be dealing with this question in another connection. It may quite well be true that our historical knowledge of Jesus has thereby been essentially either increased or corrected; but this would not in the least alter the fact that we may still know less of Jesus Christ than ever. All the distinctions between these views within their own sphere of reference take place on this side of the boundary line between faith in Christ or unbelief. For they are all distinctions within the human sphere. It makes no difference whether we regard Him from the social-ethical or the individual-ethical point of view, whether we take as our criterion and highest point of view His attitude towards culture, towards art, towards life, towards fellowship and Nature, or His piety, His consciousness of God, His knowledge of God, His life of prayer: the boundary of humanity is never transcended, it is merely an exploration of possibilities within the human sphere.

The same may be said of the endeavour to comprehend the personality of Jesus. In our speech personality means two things: both the totality and the depth of human existence. We cannot deny that in the period in which we live, and indeed in this century as a whole, there has been an unprecedented attempt to understand and represent the personality of Jesus in both senses of the word: in the totality of His appearance in the contemporary world of history, and also in the innermost secrets of His nature, the growth and the being of His mental, moral, and religious personality. There is indeed a whole literature on the question of the self-consciousness of Jesus, the inmost point of human spiritual existence. It is, of course, obvious that in all this the main task and the chief point is the effort to understand the religious personality, in contradistinction to the interpretation of Jesus current at the period of the Enlightenment, when, as a rule, people were quite satisfied to regard Him as an ethical Teacher and a moral Example. Indeed, one eminent theologian of recent days has taken the interior life of Jesus as the proper object of the interest of Christian theology. But, whatever may be said about all these endeavours, with their countless shades of opinion, in any case, from the very outset, there is one thing which can be said without beating about the bush: all these endeavours have nothing at all to do with the Christian problem of Jesus Christ. They all ignore Him. The personality of Jesus, even when this is interpreted in a very interior and spiritual way, with all due regard for the moral and religious importance of this question, is, in this statement of the problem, always the "Christ after the flesh," who, as such, stands outside the sphere of faith and its interests.

Again, it is the same when we approach the problem from the point of view of historical interest in the personality of Jesus, or of the existence of Jesus, or of the Gospel of Jesus. "Whoever has a fresh and living power of grasping the reality of living things, and a true sense of that which is really great must see it"[1]—that is, the Gospel and the figure of Jesus, and "the question of the testimony of Jesus to Himself cannot be insoluble to anyone who will examine our Gospels with an

[1] Harnack. See above, p. 65.

open mind."[1] This judgment corresponds to the general principle laid down by the same theologian: "What we are and what we possess—in the highest sense of the word—we have and possess through and in history, only in that, however, which has produced results within the historical sphere." In point of fact, the human sphere is historical, and the historical sphere is human. So far as we are human beings at all we are capable of understanding history. It is quite true that we only need "a living insight into all that is vitally alive," even in order to accept Jesus as an historical personality, even in order to understand the self-testimony of Jesus, in this general human sense. Only we must be quite clear in our own minds that when we speak of "seeing" or "meeting" Jesus in this way, we mean something entirely different from that which is implied in that mysterious scene in which, for the first time, a disciple made this confession: "Thou art the Son of the Living God!" and Jesus answered: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee"; we mean a "seeing" and a "hearing" of a different kind from that suggested by the words: "he that hath ears to hear, let him hear; to you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them that are without all things are in parables."

In principle all that lies on the historical human plane is accessible to every human being. But, for this very reason, this historical interpretation of Jesus, however true and profound it may be, differs entirely from that of the witness of Christ in the New Testament, which, according to its own evidence, can only be gained through the special grace of vision which has been "illuminated by faith."

This "figure of Jesus" which forms the object of so many historical, biographical, psychological, humanitarian studies is on the same plane as that "personality" of Jesus (to which allusion has just been made). All these representations of Jesus are as far removed from the Jesus Christ of faith as the mystery of God is removed from the intellectual conception of God, as "general" revelation (which is really no revelation at all) is removed from "special" revelation, as the

[1] *Wesen des Christentums*, p. 79.

Word of God is distinct from moral and religious humanity. This interpretation of Jesus is an explanation in general terms; this does not mean that it is a universal empirical fact, but—as we have just heard from the lips of an excellent historian—that it is everywhere possible. This is precisely why it is not the interpretation offered by faith. Within humanity as such there is no faith, only the relation of immanence, the acceptance of another as essentially on the same plane as myself, an interpretation within that comprehensive whole, which is always and everywhere present, of reason, or Nature, or general revelation; essentially this is interpretation in terms of history.

Within this sphere there are of course heights and depths, peaks and depressions, masses and leaders, heroes and hero-worshippers, geniuses and average human beings, independent and dependent personalities. And just as in every chain of mountains there is always one peak which towers above the rest, so we must admit that even among the leaders of humanity there must be—at least from a certain point of view—one who stands out above all the rest. Hence in all this modern talk about Jesus discussion centres round this question: whether, and in what sense, properly speaking within what dimension and from what point of view Jesus may be regarded as the highest point attained by humanity. Within these possibilities there is, of course, a maximum; this is represented by the well-known testimony of Goethe in his old age (in his conversations with Eckermann), in which he says that in the Gospels we catch "the vital reflection of a certain majesty which radiated from the personality of Christ, an influence as divine as any manifestation of the Divine which ever has appeared upon earth. If I am asked whether I feel I can—whether it is in accordance with my nature—to offer Him reverent worship and homage, I reply: Certainly! I bow before Him as the divine revelation of the highest principle of morality."

Note that significant phrase: "whether it is in accordance with my nature." It indicates both the knowledge and the organ through which this knowledge is received: human nature, the nature of Goethe, understood wholly in the sense of the spiritual nature, of the deepest humanity. We must also

note that the speaker goes on to say: "Does someone ask me whether it is in accordance with my nature to worship the sun, again I reply: Certainly! for the sun is likewise a revelation of the highest, and it is indeed the mightiest force which we children of men can perceive." This is not an irrelevant quotation, introduced at this point simply as an example of Goethe's "paganism." No, I quote it simply in order to show in what category Christ is placed, and regarded as a Revealer: it is the "natural light," the category of general revelation, explicitly defined as such both as to object and subject. Both the content and the recipient of the revelation are regarded in a general light, although of course the revelation is not manifested everywhere to so high a degree. Revelation is a symbol, Christ is the supporter, the representative, of a general principle, like many others, only more complete than many of them, perhaps the most complete of them all; these other men are, however, still "divine revelations of the highest principle" just as He is.

The preoccupation of the nineteenth century with Jesus, as has already been suggested, has also led to quite different results: it has been emphatically denied that Jesus is the One who has done most to shape and influence the general moral life of man. In spite of all the admiring homage which has been paid to this figure of Jesus, some have been offended by the picture of the "uncultivated Asiatic" (Naumann), or with Nietzsche they have made Him responsible for the slave revolt of the herd-man, for the ethic of retaliation. On the other hand, others, who were nearer to the Christian Church, have supplemented the testimony of Goethe on the religious side by laying special emphasis upon His leading position in the realm of religious knowledge; they point out that it is not only moral but, above all, religious force which radiates from Him towards us in incomparable majesty, and further, that He was the first to give us these standards which have now become our own, the first discoverer of the ultimate general truths, religious principles, and norms. But all these variants, however instructive and valuable they may be, however true—or untrue—have nothing to do with the faith in Christ of the Bible and of the Church. Even the most enthusiastic panegyric about

Jesus, the most ardent expression of homage, the recognition of Him as the highest of all religious revelations, does not necessarily imply that the speaker has the faintest spark of real faith in Christ. For all such expressions still belong to the sphere of general revelation, to the sphere of humanity, with its outstanding leaders in thought and life.

The names used to describe these outstanding personalities vary greatly; this is especially true of the highest of them all: the personality of Jesus. People speak of "heroes of religion," of "mediators," of "great souls," "elect souls," "prophets": or, if they wish to single out Jesus as the One above all others, they speak of His uniqueness, of His nature as One who is "more than prophet," as the Revealer. They use the name which the New Testament uses for its testimony to Him: He is the "Son of God," the "Redeemer," the "One who atones"; indeed, some even venture to go so far as to speak of the "Divinity" of Christ. Words are free, and we cannot forbid their use, but we must not allow ourselves to be misled by them. We must not allow the use of language to confuse the categories of our thought. Everything depends on whether these Christian expressions mean what they were coined to express, or whether they simply denote a description of the highest summit which can be attained within the sphere of humanity. If the latter supposition be true, then essentially—in spite of the use of the highest Christian terminology—the creed which these words imply differs no whit from that other point of view, where people do not use these expressions because they respect their meaning. On the whole, in this connection the "children of this world," for obvious reasons, use plainer language than the theologians. A great part of the theological history of the last century represents the labour of filling old wineskins with new wine, but the wine was offered as if it were old. When a man's real belief in Christ consists in regarding Him as leader, hero, the *primus inter pares*, the highest point in the history of religion, the loftiest peak in the moral and religious history of humanity, he would do better, for the sake of simplicity and truth, to renounce the use of the terms Christ, Son of God, Redeemer, Mediator, Reconciler, for all these terms mean something quite different.