Jesus Through the Centuries

Jaroslav Pelikan, 1985 & 1999

Introduction

The Good, the True, and the Beautiful

From his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace.

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of supermagnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings" (Heb. 13:8–9). With these words the anonymous (and still unknown) author of the first-century document that has come to be called the Epistle to the Hebrews admonished his readers, who were probably recent converts from Judaism to Christianity, to remain loyal to the deposit of the authentic and authoritative tradition of Christ, as this had come down to them through the apostles of the first Christian generation, some of whom were still living.

"The same yesterday and today and for ever" eventually came to have a metaphysical and theological significance, as "the same" was taken to mean that Jesus Christ was, in his eternal being, "the image of the unchangeable God, and therefore likewise unchangeable."[1] But

for the purposes of this book, it is the historical, not the metaphysical or theological, import of this phrase that must chiefly engage our attention. For, as will become evident in great and perhaps even confusing detail before this history of images of Jesus through the centuries is finished, it is not sameness but kaleidoscopic variety that is its most conspicuous feature. Would we not find it more accurate to substitute for the first-century formula "the same yesterday and today and for ever" the twentieth-century words of Albert Schweitzer? "Each successive epoch," Schweitzer said, "found its own thoughts in Jesus, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live"; for, typically, one "created him in accordance with one's own character." "There is," he concluded, "no historical task which so reveals someone's true self as the writing of a *Life of Jesus*."[2]

This book presents a history of such images of Jesus, as these have appeared from the first century to the twentieth. Precisely because, in Schweitzer's words, it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character, it will be an important part of our task to set these images into their historical contexts. We shall want to see what it was that each age brought to its portrayal of him. For each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often, *the* answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny, and it was to the figure of Jesus as set forth in the Gospels that those questions were addressed. If we want to comprehend the answers these previous centuries found there, we must penetrate to their questions, which in most instances will not be our own questions and in many instances will not even be explicitly their own questions. For, in the provocative formula of Alfred North Whitehead,

> When you are criticizing [or, one may add, interpreting] the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them. With these assumptions a certain limited number of types of philosophic systems are possible.[3]

During the past two thousand years, few issues if any have so persistently brought out these "fundamental assumptions" of each epoch as has the attempt to come to terms with the meaning of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

For that very reason, however, the converse of the relation between what Whitehead calls "the philosophy of an epoch" and its picture of Jesus will also hold true: the way any particular age has depicted Jesus is often a key to the genius of that age. We who seek, whether as professional or as amateur students of history, to understand and appreciate any segment of the past are continually frustrated not only by the inaccessibility of many of the most revealing monuments of that experience (since only small fragments, and not necessarily the most representative ones, have come down to us), but also by our lack of a proper antenna for picking up the signals of another time and place. We cannot, and we must not, trust our own common sense to give us the right translation of the foreign languages of the past—all of whose languages are by definition foreign, even when the past speaks in English. A sensitivity to that frustration is the necessary prerequisite, but it may also become the occupational disease, of the historian, who can end up despairing of the effort and becoming a victim of what has been called "the paralysis of analysis."

One element of any method for coping with such frustration must be to inquire after instances of continuity within the change and variety, and if possible to find issues or themes that document both the change and the continuity at the same time. The point can be illustrated by reference to a field of historical research far removed from the concerns of this book. Without interruption since the days of the Hebrew Bible and of Homer, olive oil has been a major constituent of the diet, the pharmacopoeia, and the trade of the peoples surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, so that one of the most distinguished of contemporary social and economic historians, Fernand Braudel, is able to define the Mediterranean geographically as the "region [that] stretches from the northern limit of the olive tree to the northern limit of the palm tree. The first olive tree on the way south marks the beginning of the Mediterranean region and the first compact palm grove the end."[4] But even a comparison of Homer and the Hebrew Bible will show some of the variety in both the literal and the metaphorical use of olive oil. If, therefore, one were to study its history as condiment and cosmetic, culture and commodity, one would probably be able to discover many of the continuities—and many of

the discontinuities—in the past three millennia of the Mediterranean world.

Similarly, the history of the images of Jesus illustrates the continuities and the discontinuities of the past two millennia simultaneously. Arthur O. Lovejoy, founder of the history of ideas as a distinct discipline in modern American scholarship, used it to illustrate only the discontinuities. "The term 'Christianity,' " he wrote in *The Great Chain of Being*, "is not the name for any single unit of the type for which the historian of specific ideas looks." For Lovejoy saw the history of Christianity as not such a single unit at all, but rather as "a series of facts which, taken as a whole, have almost nothing in common except the name." Although he was willing to acknowledge, as that series of facts obliged him to acknowledge, that the one thing they did hold in common was "the reverence for a certain person," the person of Jesus Christ, he went on to add that his "nature and teaching . . . have been most variously conceived, so that the unity here too is largely a unity of name."[5] Yet Lovejoy would also have been obliged to acknowledge that each of the almost infinite—and infinitely different—ways of construing that name has been able to claim some warrant or other somewhere within the original portrait (or portraits) of Jesus in the Gospels. And so there is continuity in this history, yes; but no less prominent a characteristic of the ways of describing the meaning of Jesus Christ has been their discontinuity.

One consequence of the discontinuity is the great variety and unevenness in the concepts and terms that have been used to describe this meaning, from the most naive and unsophisticated to the most profound and complex. According to the Gospels, Jesus prayed, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (Luke 10:21). These words have served to remind theologians and philosophers that "man's discernment is so overwhelmed that it is hindered from attaining the mysteries of God, which have been 'revealed to babes alone.' "[6] But the words of Jesus in the very next verse make the declaration "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Luke 10:22). It took centuries of speculation and controversy by some of the most "wise and understanding" minds in the history of thought to probe the implications of that declaration.[7]

The outcome was a metaphysical tradition that, from Augustine to Hegel, interpreted the Trinity as the most profound of all the mysteries of being. Some of the images to be described here, therefore, will be quite clear and simple, others rather subtle and difficult to grasp; but chapters about both must be part of the history. In a favorite metaphor of the church fathers, the Gospels are a river in which an elephant can drown and a gnat can swim. For some of the same reasons, moreover, the images in later chapters of the book will often be considerably more diffuse than earlier ones; for the second millennium of this history is the period during which the prestige of institutional Christianity gradually declined in Western society. But it was, paradoxically, a period in which, far beyond the borders of the organized church, the stature of Jesus as an individual increased and his reputation spread.

Whatever blurring of his image the welter of portraits of Jesus may create for the eyes of a faith that wants to affirm him as "the same yesterday and today and for ever," that very variety is a treasure trove for the history of culture, because of the way it combines continuity and discontinuity. Nor is the portrait of Jesus in any epoch confined to the history of faith, central though it is for that history. It is, of course, appropriate (or, in the familiar terminology of the *Book of Common Prayer*, "meet, right, and salutary") that the history of faith, and specifically the history of the faith in Jesus Christ, should form the subject matter for scholarly research and exposition in its own right. The rise of the history of Christian doctrine at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a historical discipline in its own right—distinct from the history of philosophy, from the history of the Christian church, and from doctrinal theology, though continually related to all three of these fields—forms an important chapter in the history of modern scholarship.[8] But a narrative of the complex evolution of the doctrine of Christ, defined as "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God,"[9] does not even begin to exhaust the history of the meaning that Jesus has had for the development of human culture. For, in the words of the Gospel of John, "from his fulness [*plērōma*] have we all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16)—a fulness that has proved to be inexhaustible as well as irreducible to formulas, whether dogmatic or antidogmatic. To borrow the distinction of Werner Elert, alongside the "dogma of Christ" there has always been the "image of Christ."[10]

Jesus through the Centuries is a history of the "image [or images] of Christ."

This is, then, neither a life of Jesus nor a history of Christianity as a movement or an institution. The invention of a genre of biographical literature known as the *Life of Jesus* is, strictly speaking, a phenomenon of the modern period, when scholars came to believe that by applying the methodology of a critical historiography to the source materials in the Gospels they would be able to reconstruct the story of his life; Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* remains the standard account of the growth of that literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Naturally, the reconstructions of the life of Jesus in any period, beginning with the reconstructions in the Gospels themselves, will serve as indispensable artifacts of this history of Jesus through the centuries. But we shall be concerned here with more than the history of ideas, whether theological ideas or nontheological ideas—or, for that matter, antitheological ideas. For example, the efforts to portray the person of Jesus in visual form are likewise "artifacts" for our story. They will perform that function not only when, as in the Byzantine empire of the eighth and ninth centuries and again in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the legitimacy of such efforts became a subject of intense discussion, with far-reaching implications for the history of art and aesthetics as well as for the history of European politics East and West. But in each chapter the portrayals of Christ in such works of art as roadside crosses in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria or Carolingian miniatures or Renaissance paintings will also provide us with the raw material for a cultural history of Jesus, and we shall usually concentrate on one example of such portrayals. Similarly, we shall throughout the book be drawing over and over upon works of literature, from the Old English *Dream of the Rood* through the *Divine Comedy* to Dostoevsky's tale of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in order to assess the impact of Jesus on culture.

Yet the term *culture* in the subtitle "His Place in the History of Culture" does not refer here exclusively to what has now come to be called "high culture," seen as what poets, philosophers, and artists create. Would it not be ironic if the one who was attacked by his contemporaries for associating with the outcasts of polite and respectable society were to be interpreted solely on the basis of his contribution to the enhancement and beautification of the life and

thought of the rich and educated classes? As *culture* is used here, however, it has almost the significance it has in anthropology, including as it does the life of society and of the state no less than literature, philosophy, and the fine arts. For we shall also be paying attention to the political, social, and economic history of the interpretation of Jesus, and we must incorporate into our recital instances of the ongoing practice of invoking the name of Jesus to legitimate political activity, as this practice becomes visible in the history of both radical and reactionary movements.

The most inclusive conceptual framework for this range of images is provided by the classical triad of the Beautiful, the True, and the Good, which has itself played a significant role in the history of Christian thought.[11] Corresponding to that classical triad, though by no means identical with it, is the biblical triad of Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as he is described as having identified himself in the Gospel of John (John 14:6). This formula from the Gospel of John became the motif for a striking image of Jesus in the Archiepiscopal Chapel at Ravenna: "EGO SUM VIA VERITAS ET VITA."[12] As one ancient Christian writer had put it in an earlier century, "He who said 'I am the Way' . . . shapes us anew to his own image," expressed, as another early author had said, in "the quality of beauty";[13] Christ as the Truth came to be regarded as the fulfillment and the embodiment of all the True, "the true light that enlightens every man" (John 1:9); and Christ as the Life was "the source" for all authentic goodness.[14] The Ravenna mosaic, therefore, summarized Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and at the same time it epitomized Christ as the Beautiful, the True, and the Good.

In a set of public lectures delivered at the University of Berlin in the academic year 1899–1900, that university's most renowned scholar, Adolf von Harnack, undertook to answer the question "What is Christianity?" The book that came out of his lectures has achieved a circulation of well over one hundred thousand copies in the original version, has been translated into more than a dozen languages, and is still in print both in German and in English.[15] Harnack's introduction opens with words that can well form the conclusion of this introduction:

> The great English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, once commented that "mankind can hardly be too often reminded that there was once a man

named Socrates." That is correct; but it is even more important to remind mankind that a man named Jesus Christ once stood in their midst.[16]

The images in this book represent a series of such reminders "through the centuries."

1
The Rabbi

A light for glory to
thy people Israel.

The study of the place of Jesus in the history of human culture must begin with the New Testament. This is not simply for the self-evident reason that all representations of him since the first century have been based—or, at any rate, have claimed to be based—on the New Testament, although of course they have. But we shall not understand the history of those subsequent representations unless we begin by considering the nature and literary form of the sources that have come down to us in the four Gospels. For the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament is in fact itself a representation: it resembles a set of paintings more closely than it does a photograph.

Even without settling all the thorny problems of authorship and of dating, we must recognize that in the several decades between the time of the ministry of Jesus and the composition of the various Gospels, the memory of what he had said and done was circulating among the various Christian congregations, and probably beyond them, in the form of an oral tradition. Thus the apostle Paul, writing to one such congregation at Corinth in about the year 55 C.E. (hence about twenty years or so after the life of Jesus), was able to remind them that during his visit to Corinth a few years before, probably in the early fifties, he had orally "delivered to you as of first importance what I also received" still earlier, thus perhaps in the forties, con-