

# The Christ Epic as a Vision of Human Quality

This is part 1 of a talk Dinah Livingstone gave to the Barcelona-based Centre for the Study of Wisdom Traditions (CETR) at their October conference on the theme of *Human Quality*.

The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius ... As all men are alike (though infinitely various), so all Religions ... have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

In his *All Religions are One* the poet William Blake says all religions are created by the human imagination or poetic genius and in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he adds:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive...

These are 'poetic tales', he says, because when people tried to 'realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects' they 'forgot that all deities reside in the human breast'. So according to Blake, the gods or God are *personifications* of things in the cosmos or, we could add, attributes, actual or potential, of ourselves, such as motherhood, love – or military might. Personification, like metaphor, is a poetic trope. These poetic tales or myths of supernatural beings are an immensely rich cultural treasury, still deep in us and active in our culture, so that we can use them for better, for worse. I'll just give a couple of examples. The myth of the 'promised land' was powerful in the black American slave struggle, for example in their song:

One more river and that's the river of Jordan.  
One more river, there's one more river to cross.

The myth of the promised land is also powerful in the recent atrocities in Gaza with the government of Israel legitimising its actions from the Old Testament book of Joshua.

Or to take another example from my own adolescent experience. When I left school and before I went to university, I stayed for a time with a family in Guernica to accompany and teach English to the daughter of the house. I was a naive, ignorant girl from an English rural home and school. I knew very little about the Spanish Civil War. In England at that time I had never seen a policeman with a gun. On the feast of Our Lady of el Pilar, we went to Mass and the church was full. A priest had been sent in from outside the town (perhaps from Madrid). Armed civil guards were

standing round the altar. The priest preached a sermon saying: Just as Our Lady had appeared to Santiago when Spain was in trouble and saved Spain, so had Franco saved Spain. This was Guernica. Nobody moved. There was complete silence and I felt a sense of something terrible in the church, which I have never forgotten. At the consecration the civil guards – with their rifles – stood to attention.

Certainly religious myths – poetic tales – can be used, have been used for oppression. But they can also be used, have been used, for liberation and for a vision of human potential. In his book *A New Great Story* Don Cupitt suggests that God is 'a leading idea: guiding us through life towards an ideal order that always remains somewhat ahead of us... God leads the way showing us what to become and how to live'. Other philosophers of religion have suggested that just as consciousness is 'an emergent property' in the brain, so God is an emergent property in human development. Incidentally, the biblical God's ancient name for himself, Yahweh, is a form of the Hebrew verb 'to be', which could mean 'I AM'; or causative: 'I cause to be'; or a *future* 'I WILL BE'. As Ernesto Cardenal puts it in his *Oracle upon Managua*:

And Yahweh said: I am not. I will be.  
I am the one who will be, he said.  
I am Yahweh a god who waits in the future  
(who cannot be unless the conditions are right  
God who is not but who WILL BE  
for he is love-among-humans and he is not,  
he WILL BE).

But how can this be done? In the Christian story, God comes *down to Earth*. God becomes human in Jesus Christ. In this talk I will look at four accounts of this descent, this *katabasis*, which together form the Christ Epic. First, I will look at the account in the synoptic gospels of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God; second, Paul's view of a restored humanity as the body of Christ; third, the image of Christ the bridegroom and his bride, Jerusalem, the beautiful city; and fourth, the later full-blown development of the theology of the Incarnation. After briefly considering each of these four accounts, I will go on to mention some historical examples, what I call 'christological moments', when that vision has inspired people to struggle for a better world.

## The Kingdom of God

In Luke's gospel Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue and quoting the prophet Isaiah: He has come 'to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim relief to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free' (Lk 4:18). In his Sermon on the Mount he says: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God, blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled' (Lk 6:20). He preaches the imminent coming on Earth of the kingdom of God, or we could call it the reign of kindness (*agape*), which is good news for the poor and hungry, a fair and kind society in which everyone can thrive. The gospels go on to tell of the religious and imperial opposition forces that killed Jesus and the story of his resurrection, inspiring the enduring hope – belief – that the kingdom will prevail.

And what we note about this reign or kingdom of God is that it is not just an inner quality or mental state, it is not just some form of 'higher wisdom'. It is first and foremost good news for the poor – supplying their human needs – bread, real bread for the hungry. The reign of God is *both* mental – an attitude – and physical. The reign of God is not just about personal holiness; it is also about *other people* – kindness, justice and peace. A kingdom is a *polis*, a political entity. The reign of God is both personal and political. Furthermore, there is something scandalous about it. It turns the world upside down, because it belongs first and foremost to the poor and dispossessed.

Jesus almost certainly thought that this kingdom or reign of kindness was coming soon on Earth. God had inaugurated it in Jesus himself and would shortly establish it in power. But the kingdom still has not come. Jesus was wrong. He was wrong that the kingdom was coming soon on Earth and I think he was also wrong that there is a supernatural being who will bring it about. We have to do it ourselves. But even so this reign of kindness is still an inspiring vision of a fair society where human quality can thrive. It is a humanist vision, the grandest of all Grand Narratives.

## The Body of Christ

Jesus gives a version of the whole of humanity as himself in his story in Matthew's gospel of the judgment of the nations. He says to those on his right hand:

I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink... Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me (Mt 25:34).

In his first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 11:23) Paul recalls that 'the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread... broke it and said: "This is my

body..."' That leads Paul to reflect on humanity as one body: 'We who are many are one body, because we all share the same bread' (1 Cor 10:17). 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (1 Cor 12:12). Christ is the name for the new liberated humanity. Of course, at the moment humanity as a whole does not 'all share the same bread'. Some of us starve and some of us have too much. The Eucharist is a sign that the 'new humanity' has been inaugurated as a project *now* but it has *not yet* fully come about.

Paul's letters are the earliest New Testament writings we have. In them and in the letters traditionally ascribed to him, such as Colossians and Ephesians, we find the Christ Epic, which became attached to Jesus. Christ is both Jesus and the figurehead, the namesake hero of his people, representative of humanity in all its potential. Christ's incarnation, death, descent to the lowest depths and resurrection becomes an epic story, poem or drama of humanity's struggle for liberation. In his letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:6-11) Paul writes or quotes a poem, which may have been an early Christian hymn, focusing on the *shape* of the drama – Christ Jesus:

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death –  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend  
in heaven and on Earth and under the Earth  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The movement is *down* and then *up* of Christ. As Ephesians puts it: 'When it says he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lowest parts of the earth?' (Eph 4:9). The project is to 'gather up all things in Christ' (Eph 1:10). Christ is the head of the church, 'which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all... so that he might create in himself one new humanity' (Eph 1:22; 2:15). The project is 'the building up of the body of Christ, until ... all of us come to maturity, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:12-13). For, it says in Colossians, 'In him all things hold together' (Col 1:17). 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have come to fullness in him' (Col 2:9).

The task is not yet complete. Paul can say: 'I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of his body, the church' (Col 1:24). Here too we have the tension between *now* and *not yet*. The Epic is the myth of a people – in this case humanity – as the body of Christ coming to *embody* the divine wisdom, 'the whole fullness of God'. This idea of humanity as one *social* body reaching 'maturity', its full potential, is another take on the Grand Narrative of kingdom come. And once again there is something scandalous about it. Just as in the story of the reign of God the scandal is that it belongs first and foremost to the dispossessed, in this story of the body of Christ, he is *crucified*. As Paul put it: 'We preach Christ *crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (1 Cor 1:23).

This has been developed in one of the two most important christologies of our own time. For Latin American liberation theology Christ is to be found today in 'the crucified people'. As Jon Sobrino says in his *Jesus the Liberator*: 'Christ has a body that makes him present in history, so we need to ask whether this body is crucified.' He calls the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the excluded 'the actual presence of the crucified Christ in history'. In their hopes and in their struggles for a better life these crucified people are rising again. The story of Christ's resurrection embodies the hope that humanity may one day overcome unjust suffering and exploitation and become 'a glorious body'. And this hope retains its power without any need to believe that Jesus' corpse was literally resuscitated.

The other development of the Christ Epic is the evolutionary 'cosmic Christ'. Decades after the 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (and with his work banned from publication by the Vatican for still further decades), the first great theologian of evolution, palaeontologist Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin saw evolution as a cosmic process with humanity continuing to evolve – emerge – towards a 'point omega', a 'divine milieu', the 'cosmic Christ': 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ', in whom 'all things hold together'. This evolutionary theology (and subsequent eco-theology) have promoted ecological awareness, helping us to realise that all life on our planet is connected in one process, one life, and needs looking after.

## Bridegroom and Bride

In mystical poetry the union of the divine and the human is often seen as a marriage. What is remarkable in the poems of St John of the Cross is the bridegroom and bride's *reciprocity*. Both are called 'beloved': He is *el amado*, she is *la amada* (not 'lover' and 'mistress' as in one rather ghastly translation). Secondly, in both his *Dark Night* and his *Canticle* she

is the protagonist. She speaks, she seeks him, she finds him. She praises the night that brought them together and describes their union terms of a feminine orgasm:

Oh night that guided!  
Oh night more delightful than the dawn!  
Oh night that united  
beloved with beloved,  
she who was his love changed into her love, him...

I stayed there and forgot myself,  
I leant my face upon my beloved,  
everything stopped, I left myself,  
leaving all my care,  
that faded away among the lilies forgotten.

That blissful mystical union is the story of an individual spiritual journey. We saw both with the Grand Narrative of the kingdom of God and of the body of Christ that the message was both personal and political. We find the same is true here with this story of the divine marriage. For where have we heard those exclamations in praise of the night before? Where had the poet heard them before?

Surely in the *Exultet*, the great praise poem for the paschal candle, symbol of the risen Christ, sung at the Easter Vigil with its repeated: '*Haec nox est*: This is the night, when you led our forebears, the children of Israel, out of slavery in Egypt.' '*Haec nox est*: This the night when Christ broke the chains of death and ascended conqueror from Hell ...' And: '*O vere beata nox*: O truly happy night... when heaven is married to Earth and God to humanity.' Later in the Easter Vigil the water is blessed in the font, and in what is surely a fertility ritual for a marriage night, the paschal candle is repeatedly plunged into it, with a prayer that the water may 'become fruitful'. Here all four elements come together: Heaven (Air) and Earth, Fire and Water. The cosmic Christ.

We are back with the Christ Epic, but this time instead of the image of the whole Christ as a single body, we have the image of Christ the bridegroom with his bride, the united male and female human form divine. Jesus sometimes referred to himself as 'the bridegroom' and we find this image developed in the book of Revelation in the wedding of Christ the Lamb to his bride, who has now become Jerusalem, the *beautiful city*:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, as a bride dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: 'See the dwelling of God is among humans. He will dwell with them.' (Rev 21:2-3).

God comes down to Earth. He comes down into human society – the city, the *polis* – which finally comes to embody the qualities of kindness we set as ideals in God. As Ernesto Cardenal puts it in his



Oracle upon Managua ‘God is also city’:

The free city  
where God is everybody  
He, God-with-everybody (Emmanuel)  
the universal City  
the City where God’s humanity is revealed to us.

## Incarnate Word

After the New Testament, the theology of the Incarnation was developed in the succeeding centuries at the great ecumenical councils. The Council of Nicea, summoned by the Emperor Constantine in 325, declares Christ to be *katelthonta, sarkothenta, enanthropesanta*: come down, become flesh, become human. At the Council of Ephesus (431) – the city with the temple of the great goddess Diana and also the city where by tradition Mary herself lived in her later years – Mary is defined as *theotokos*, mother of God, because Christ the Incarnate Word is one person with two natures and you can’t be the mother of a nature; you are the mother of a *person*. Then the Council of Chalcedon in (451) with its thunderous repetition of ‘the same, the same, the same’:

we should confess our Lord Jesus Christ  
to be one and **the same** Son,  
**the same** perfect in deity,  
and **the same** perfect in humanity,  
true God and true man,  
**the same** of a rational soul and body,  
one in being with the Father in deity  
**the same** one in being with us in humanity,

If we listen to the Chalcedon statement as a kind of poem, we hear how it stresses again and again that Christ, despite having both a human and a divine ‘nature’, is *the same person*. Listening to it aloud, you can’t fail to hear the thunderous repetition of ‘the same’, ‘the same’, ‘the same’. (The repeated *τον αυτον* – *ton auton* – in the Greek and *eundem* in the Latin sound even more thunderous.) Not **either-or** but **both-and**. I suggest that these statements of the early councils, particularly the tremendous prose poem produced by the Council of Chalcedon, are one of the greatest expressions of the insight of **both-and** that our culture has produced.

Another thing ‘the thunder said’ to me was this. Although the old church fathers who wrote the Chalcedon statement believed that God, including God the Son, existed ‘before the ages’ – eternally and independently of us – nevertheless that thunderous repetition conveys very powerfully that God and human are *the same, the same, the same*. Christ, who is both God and human, is *the same person*. Not only can a poem tell us things we didn’t know we knew, but a whole poem can say more than its component parts.



Council of Chalcedon 451. Picture: Nuremburg Chronicle

It is a poem of *humanity*. The whole creation by the human poetic genius of the supernatural and divine is brought within the *scope* of humanity, brought *down to Earth*. It has ‘come down, become flesh, become human’. And we notice that Chalcedon’s strongest possible assertion of Christ as *both* human *and* divine produces the most humanist outcome. The *whole fullness of God* is ‘recapitulated’ in a human being, who represents the whole human race. Christ ‘the Lord, the Universal Humanity’, the ‘whole Christ’, Incarnate Word is an epic poem, the *poiesis* (making) of humanity. It has to happen on Earth in human history. The Word is embodied, the truth is not abstract but ‘concrete’ (as they say on the Continent – it doesn’t mean cement!): it is what actually happens.

Incidentally, like Christ, poetry itself is incarnate word. The particular, actual words with their rhythm and sound are very important. And the poet Federico García Lorca says that the *duende*, that mysterious power that everyone feels but that no philosopher has explained’, appears more often in the arts which – like spoken poetry – are expressed through a living body.

Pursuing the theme of ‘embodiment’, part 2 of this talk (to be published in the next *Sofia*) will look at some ‘christological moments’ in history when the Christ Epic helped inspire people to struggle for a better life.

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