

JOHN BEHR, *The Formation of Christian Theology, The Way to Nicaea*. Vol. 1., foreword by Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), xii+261pp (ISBN 0-88141-224-4).

John Behr is known, especially among the American and British academic theologians, as the author of a translation of Irenaeus of Lyons' book *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary, 1997) and of one major contribution to the study of Late Antiquity, namely his study of *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). He is Associate Professor of Patristics at St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, holding the chair formerly occupied by the great Russian-American scholar, John Meyendorff. As the reader finds out in the stimulating Foreword of Andrew Louth (Professor of Patristics and Byzantine Studies at Durham University, UK), Rev. John Behr is 'the most striking and hopeful example' among the young theologians who prove being able 'to transcend the uneasy relationship between Orthodoxy and critical theology' (x-xi).

This volume is first in a series called 'Formation of Christian Theology', which aims to provide a comparatively short but dense outlook on the theology of the seven ecumenical councils of the Christian Church. Obviously, such a project requires a careful selection of the work of those authors who influenced directly the constitution of a set of practices and beliefs that even nowadays define orthodox (or normative) Christianity. Behr embarked on a very ambitious and difficult project, one indeed without precedent that should therefore be welcomed *ab initio*. If the sympathetic hermeneutics is always necessary to provide valid interpretation, in any field of humanities, with theology is even more so the case. With a clear philosophical background to his methodology (based on H.-G. Gadamer's hermeneutics), John Behr handles a lot of historical and philological material, and yet he naturally provides a distinctive theological interpretation of the beginnings of Christian theology.

The book is divided into three main parts ('The Gospel of Jesus Christ', 9-70; 'The Word of God', 71-134; 'The Son of the Father', 135-236) each chapter being introduced by a preamble. The volume naturally ends up with an epilogue and a bibliography. In the first part, the author sets out the premises of his research and provides an outstanding account of the relationship between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the old Scriptures. He insists on the importance of the Pauline proclamation of Christ 'according to the Scriptures', meaning by 'the Scriptures' the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets. Consequently, Dr Behr addresses the very complex issue of 'canon' and 'tradition', delineating the differences between the Gnostic and the heretical understanding of Christ (*eg*: Valentinus or Marcion) and the Church's proclamation of the 'scriptural Christ' (pp. 49-70). Here, John Behr builds in almost a homiletic fashion the portrait of the 'scriptural Christ', who, through the prism of the Cross and the Resurrection, gathered (or, in Irenaeus' words, 'recapitulated') all the divine attributes of God, as revealed in the Old Testament. Consequently, Dr Behr also focuses upon the significance and the context of emergence of the four main names attributed by the Gospel and the Pauline writings to Christ, namely 'man' (*anthropos*), 'God' (*ho theos* – in the articulated form), 'Lord' (*kyrios*), 'Word' (*logos*).

The second part begins with a review of the three Christological options assumed by the heretics in the second and the third century (namely, the low-profiled adoptianism, docetism and Gnosticism), which 'all attempt to circumvent the involvement of God with the Cross' (77). Contrarily, the Church understood and confessed Christ in the light of his Passion and Resurrection, which transfigured all the divine attributes of the Old Testament. This particular understanding of Christ's Passion is eloquent in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, himself a martyr. Ignatius is different from the approach undertaken by Justin 'the Philosopher', who appears to be the defender of a lower divinity in Christ, which is not fully shared by God the Father. For Irenaeus of Lyons (in discussing whom Dr Behr is at his best), the becoming of Word of God flesh, does not represent 'an eschatological event in "the last

times”’, or ‘a new episode in a biography of the Word, but a recapitulation, providing a résumé, of the continual presence and identity of the same Word’ (128).

In the last part of his book, Dr Behr deals with the less-known controversies of the late decades of the second century (and the beginning of the third), which took place in the Rome, linked with the name of Hippolytus (whose position is closer to Irenaeus than to Justin Martyr). This episode perfectly exemplifies Dr Behr’s overall argument, that the Trinitarian debates of the third and especially of the fourth century were organically connected to the more urgent issue about the attributes of the person of Jesus Christ, which is already addressed in the New Testament. At stake was the need to proclaim Christ’s divinity and lordship as the very ‘hypothesis’ of the Scripture. This task required a specific terminology, which had to prevent theology lapsing into mythology. It is very telling that even a great philosophical mind like Origen hesitated to use the substantialist predicates (e.g., *ousia*, *hypostasis*) which were consecrated later on by Christian theology, with the authority, in particular, of the Council of Nicaea. Dr Behr suggests that there was a certain risk, neglected by the participants of the council of Antioch (268/9), in representing the ‘pre-existing Logos’ as a metaphysical entity, which at a certain time takes on a passive flesh; this understanding nourished the later Arian understanding of the incarnation as a form of ‘ensouling’ (behind this model stands a crude Platonic anthropology, which separates ‘body’ and ‘soul’ into two distinct realities). The alternative model was found not in the Aristotelian anthropology (which considers body and soul to be inseparable), but in a different approach to Jesus Christ as the Word of God, whose existence is not temporalised ‘in terms of a continuity of a personal subject who is identified by other characteristics prior to the Passion’. Rather, says John Behr, in the light of Ignatius, Irenaeus, Origen and, quite surprisingly, Paul of Samosata, Christ’s ‘pre-existence and eternity is scriptural: Christ, and the Gospel proclaiming him, is the subject of Scripture from the beginning’ (239). This is a very strong statement, which can puzzle the modern reader used to understand Scripture as a corpus of sacred texts having a precise history and being surpassed in time by countless of other religious testimonies. How the ‘eternity’ of Christ is ‘scriptural’ will need, certainly, more explanations, especially in the wake of the Christological dogma formulated at the Council of Chalcedon (where the substantialist language is kept intact: two natures, one person).

Yet, I would like to emphasise here one of the strongest points made by John Behr’s book, which lies in his description of the early Church tradition of apostolic origin as the community of the believers who confessed the crucified and the resurrected Christ as Son of God.¹ He makes the point with conspicuous clarity that the only Christ known by the infant Church was, from the very beginning, ‘the scriptural Christ’. From the early fathers of the post-apostolic era, such as Ignatius of Antioch, or Justin the Martyr, to the most impressive apologists of the second and the third centuries, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement and Origen of Alexandria – ‘the formation of Christian theology’ was shaped by one supreme goal. Namely, to give the answer to the question addressed by Jesus to his disciples at Cæsarea Philippi: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Matthew 16: 15). This interrogation immediately raised a consequent problem, that of formulating a doctrine of the unity of God in the light of Christ’s proclamation. Since they transmitted the supremely divine revelation, which itself was a part of the ongoing pneumatic tradition, the Scriptures were justly regarded

¹ One should be aware that, ‘in search for the real Jesus’, other accounts have been given, but though they were guided by presuppositions that neither the authors of the canonic Gospels, nor the author of this review would share. It is the case of K. HOPKINS, *A World full of Gods. Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 138-178; 290-335. Like Hopkins, those in the search for ‘the real Jesus’ have a mind shaped by strong convictions about the empirical impossibility of events such as prophecies or miracles, in general. To this, they add the epistemological claim that historical mediation and distance provide the perfect medium for a better knowledge of the past. For all the inverted prophets of modernity (who prefer the exercise of reading *à rebours*), the ultimate claim is that we can know who really Jesus was, better than himself. For a devastating critique of the modern hermeneutics of suspicion, see TIMOTHY L. JOHNSON, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

as ‘the pillar and the foundation’ of the Church. Scripture and tradition intermingled because faith in Jesus Christ could *not* be separated from faith in those who recorded and perpetuated his sayings: the prophets, the apostles and their disciples (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3. 1.1).

To put it more dramatically, belief in God implied also trust in the elected and charismatic persons who, like Thomas the Twin, confessed Christ as the ‘Lord and God’ (John 20: 24). It was the axial confession for which Jesus himself had to pay by shameful death on the cross. It became the crucial testimony for which Christ’s disciples had to shed blood, becoming thus the martyrs of truth in the Church. For the first generations of Christians, making the confession of Christ’ lordship implied sometimes the ruthless task of martyrdom, and not the serene practice of theological hermeneutics or, even worse, of dialectics (inaugurated by the second generation of the Arian theologians). Only through martyrdom the apostolic tradition could gain its immense, unshakeable prestige. In simple words, this is how tradition became a ‘cloud of witnesses’ and the vital organ of testimony within the Church (John Behr seems to follow here the argument of J.-Y. Congar²). Those ‘saints’ to whom St Paul very often refers did not belong to, they ultimately *were* the Church. The Gospel and the written and oral tradition (Tertullian, *The Crown* 1-4) emerged from the same matrix and only attempted to contemplate and to perpetuate its inexhaustible content. Thus, tradition became the living memory of the Church, the heart of which stored ‘the archives of Christ’ (Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Philadelphians* 8. 2).

More than a pedagogical tool fulfilling moral purposes, Scripture enjoyed a sacramental veneration, almost similar to the veneration due to the Eucharistic body of Christ (Acts 2: 42). To contemplate Christ was possible only through the Scriptures, which presented him not only as the resurrected and the exalted Jesus, but also as the coming Lord. (Here, Behr could profitably have allowed an analysis of the relationship between the exegesis of the Scriptures among the early Christian communities and the spiritual preparation for the eschatological events promised by Christ.) During the second and the early third centuries, all those who claimed to have an apostolic succession, hoped to win the right to proclaim the true canon of the Scriptures.³ Probably only some, among legions, were right in claiming to have been given the tradition of the apostles. Irenaeus is obviously the most important author who proved the need for consistency in holding true the ‘hypothesis of the Scriptures’⁴. The Scriptures had to confess Christ’s divinity and lordship, since Christ reveals himself as ‘the Word of God’ (John 1: 1), the ‘exegete’ (John 1: 18), and the ‘interpreter’ (Luke 24) of the Scriptures⁵. Church tradition had to sanctify, as it were, the logic of this hermeneutical circle.

John Behr’s book helps us understand better how, without being in competition or even in complementary relationship (as the Council of Trent, 1545-1563), Scripture and tradition are not two distinct sources of authority, but they mirror the life of the mystical (because not always visible) ‘body of Christ’, in which the Word took flesh⁶. For Irenaeus, especially, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was only the dazzling résumé or recapitulation (*anakephalaiosis*) of what ‘the Law and the Prophets’ had told obscurely and at length (*Against Heresies* 3. 18. 1). As Origen very early understood it, the Scriptures are one aspect of Christ’s incarnation, preparing in speech what the sacrament of the Eucharist gives in full silence. Writing ‘the New Testament’ was made possible, both theologically and historically, through Christ’s incarnation and by the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1) promised before

² M.-J. YVES CONGAR, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

³ R. WILLIAMS, ‘Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?’, in R. WILLIAMS (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 16: ‘It may be that the very nature of the basic Christian narrative carries the notions of canon and orthodoxy within it’.

⁴ More on this, see J. BEHR, ‘The Word of God in the Second Century’, *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000) 1, 85-107.

⁵ J.-L. MARION, ‘Le Verbe et le texte’, *Résurrection* 46 (Paris: 1975), 63-79.

⁶ An excellent survey of this topic was given by L. BOUYER, *Gnosis. La connaissance de Dieu dans l’Ecriture* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1988).

his Passion (John 14: 26). The Church ‘happening’ could only be the actual site of emergence for Scripture and tradition, heart of which, again, is the proclamation of Christ’s divinity and lordship. The resurrected Christ is recognised by the most doubting apostle as his ‘Lord and God’ (John 20: 24), and this will remain the pattern of Christian confession over the centuries.

Let us ponder, now, an important point, which remained untouched (and understandably so) by John Behr’s concise book. One needs to understand not only that the success of the Gospel was achieved through the radical claim of be-holding the truth. It is equally important to grasp the subtle epistemology of the apostolic proclamation. In short, what kind of truth is implied in the confession ‘Christ is risen’ or in the acknowledgement, made by every Christian at the hour of his or her baptism, that Christ is ‘my Lord and my God’? Certainly, this confession is not comparable to the mere recognition of empirical evidences (like ‘Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew’). Confessing Christ as ‘Lord and God’ was not a matter of intellectual probity. It required something else, namely faith, which is the ‘substance (*hypostasis*) of things hoped for’ (Hebrew 11: 1). If faith is articulated by hope, then hope is generated by love, as St Paul put it in the celebrated hymn to the Corinthians (13: 7, 13). The truth of the central confession of early Christian theology is not static. It is not a truth objectively grasped by the discursive intellect, which debates the properties of a sentence. It is that truth, which burns the hearts (Luke 24: 32) without being consumed (Exodus 3: 2). Giving testimony about Christ’s lordship simultaneously required an experience similar to those found on the way to Emaus. It is that truth, which addresses a call, though it can be denied, that, unlike any other historical truth, is not subject to falsification. It is not the vulgar evidence, disposable, at hand, fulfilling the condition of all imaginable objects, since the resurrected Christ tells Mary: ‘Do not hold me’ (John 20: 17). It is that truth that one can only recognise as life and way (John 14: 6): one has to grow into this life, and not just to make statements about it. One is not simply told *about* the truth of Christ’s lordship: one has to be initiated *into* it. ‘He took the bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them; and their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight’ (Luke 24: 30-31).

This is mystagogical, and not propositional truth had to be conveyed by the early Church tradition.⁷ Being taught Christ’s truth, the Christian catechumen let himself initiated in what St Paul calls the ‘secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification’ (I Corinthians 2: 7). Even a fourth-century author as Gregory of Nyssa retained exceptionally well this mystagogic (but not secret) dimension the Christian truth, nowadays almost forgotten, or sadly perverted. Gregory chose Moses as the prototype of the interpreter of the divine mysteries, who called his followers to the knowledge of God in wonder, with awe, through ignorance. Yet, as M. Eliade pointed out⁸, the Christian initiation rejected the sectarian character of the Greek mystery cults and of the Gnostics, proclaiming the catholicity of the salvation.

Confronted with insecure and very hard times, the early Church had little time to develop the doctrinal implications of the confessional theology established by the apostolic fathers during the first three centuries⁹. By that time, theological debates revolved around the problem of scriptural canonicity and of the apostolicity of the tradition. Heresy was mainly

⁷ The initiation character of the early Christianity played an important role in the transformation of the pagan heritage of the Hellenistic culture. Cf O. CASEL, *Das christliche Kult-Mysterium* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1935); H. RAHNER, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* ET by B. Battershaw (London: Burns & Oats, 1963); L. BOUYER, *Mysterion. Du mystère à la mystique* (Paris: 1988); G. STROUMSA, *The Hidden Wisdom* (New York: Brill, 1996); H. I. MARROU, *Histoire de l’Education dans l’Antiquité* (Paris: 1948), 417: ‘morphologiquement, le christianisme est une religion-à-mystères’.

⁸ M. ELIADE, *Naissances mystiques* (Paris, 1957), 7 *et passim*.

⁹ J. BEHR quotes W. BAUR, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964²) ET *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1972); another important contribution is that of A. M. RITTER, ‘“Orthodoxy” and “Heresy” and the Unity of the Church in pre-Constantinian Times’, *SP* 24 (1993), 316-330.

the denial of Christ's lordship and divinity by an attempt to create another hypothesis for the Scriptures. Another aspect of heresy was revealed by moral deviancies, as one can easily see in St Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Very much like in the early rabbinical tradition of Judaism, within the infant Church the most important quarrels retained the very practical aspect of what the religious belief can mean for ordinary people in their daily life. The orthodox Christianity had very high standards, saying that deification (pursued not only by monks but also the married laymen) is the ultimate goal for any baptised Christian.

In short, the criteria of unity and orthodoxy within the early Church were both of scriptural, ethical and liturgical kind, having already given the confession of Christ's lordship and divinity. Christian liturgy had to avoid any elements of practice that could recall pagan forms of worship, while the Scriptures had to be regarded as *one*, despite their unfolding in two different testaments. The latter point became a corner stone of the dogmatic disputations during the fourth century. At stake was the understanding of the unity of God in the light of the recognition of the Scriptures as being one. After Marcion was defeated, the early Christian Church was ready to see in the old-testamentary theophanies the veiled presence of Christ, made manifest as the Word of God only in the New Testament. Yet, how was the 'pre-existence' of Logos to be understood? What kind of sonship did Christ's prayer to his Father underlie? These are all issues, which were exploded by controversies which preceded and followed the inauguration of the Christian Byzantium.

Dr John Behr's second volume in this series will tackle many of the above-mentioned questions, as they were articulated during the fourth century. At least other two more volumes are in preparation for the coming years, dealing with the rest of the ecumenical councils, from Constantinople I (381) to Nicaea II (787). The *The Way to Nicaea* is certainly successful in providing the necessary cues for all students of early Christianity, who need to understand how the history of religious ideas in the first three centuries had a theological autonomy in relationship with the secular factors (sociological, political, economical), too easily and to quick invoked in most of the handbook-presentation of this period. The clarity of style, the novelty of its methodology and the comprehensive knowledge of the material under research make Dr Behr's book an indispensable introduction to the complex web of theological ideas which stamped the mark of orthodoxy on what we call nowadays the Patristic era.

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Note: The electronic copy of this book review has been subjected to some minor changes. The pagination also differs from the printed version. © RAHR, 2005.