The mystery of God and Jesus Christ — beyond agnosticism and foundationalism

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ABSTRACT

The historical Jesus confronts us with the basic issue of the reality of God. If the reality of God is compromised Jesus becomes a mere model to be followed. The latest search for the historical Jesus and the question of who God is, can lead to various extreme solutions to these basic questions. After a brief survey of the development and shortcomings of rationalism this article attempts to offer an answer which will not lead to some foundationalist escape into dogmatic security, but suggests an option which allows for the dimension of mystery and imagination in our understanding of Jesus and God.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Lately, I experience a growing concern about the distance between New Testament science and the ordinary Christian. How do we communicate the problems we as academics concern ourselves with to the man in the street, or to the ordinary believer? Non-academics, non-theologians are also battling with questions like: Who is God? Who was the historical Jesus? If Jesus was just a pious Jew, what does that imply for my personal faith?

Can we as New Testament scholars really speak our minds on our deepest theological thoughts when we are among believers who are not theologians? Can we reach the ordinary man in the street with our theological views, with the results of our academic research? Perhaps these issues throng most uncomfortably into our consciousness when our own children confront us with questions which touch them existentially? The embarrassment is unbearable when someone who puts his/her trust in one expects a clear-cut answer which cannot be avoided without a total loss of integrity in the eyes of the questioner. How do we answer children’s questions about Jesus and
God? What effect will our ideas have on their religious beliefs, those they
learn in school or from their daily experience?

In this article I want to share some of my own thinking about the relation
between theological research and personal faith. My urge to do this gains im-
petus from the fact that modern man has shown a new desire for a personal
religion (cf Maree & Strauss 1994:368). Secularisation, entailing the dis-
appearance of a sensitivity to religious matters, has come up against strong
opposition. It is therefore not strange that Van Peursen (1989:38) recently
remarked: ‘Signs of a “post-secular” era are becoming visible. Rather than
ultimate relativism and scepticism, there is a growing effort to discover the
horizons beyond human manipulation, technological power and the natu-
ralistic and supernaturalistic fallacies.’ I therefore deem it imperative to find
ways and guidelines that I can apply towards preserving my mental sanity
and spiritual equilibrium when faced with issues relating to God.

2 THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF RATIONALISM

Perhaps we could start by agreeing that any knowledge we can have of God is
limited by definition to the scope and means of knowing. Any statements
we humans make about God are anthropomorphic. We describe God in ways
determined by the limits of our cognitive ability. Questions regarding the
relation between reality and God as creator of this reality are basic questions
each thinking human being would ask.

The average person’s conception of ‘reality’ has been influenced by René
Descartes from the early seventeenth century up to the present time. Des-
cartes concludes that there is a new, homogeneous, universal science that
could expound clearly and unequivocally the laws of both nature and the
mind, of physics as well as metaphysics. The second rule of his theory of
knowledge states: We must occupy ourselves only with those objects that our
intellectual powers appear competent to know certainly and indubitably (cf
Anscombe & Geach 1954:153). He finds the key to his new philosophy in the
method applied in mathematics and geometry. He works with the idea of a
knowledge based not on uncertain sense data, distorted images or recognised
authorities, but on understanding, which alone produces certainty. For Des-

1 The rise of mysticism in recent times is explained as due to the ‘spirituelle
Vakuum’ which our modern world is experiencing (cf Haas 1994:30).
2 This is the kind of discussion which was evident on some of the internet discus-
sion lists when I wrote this article (cf Herb Stahlke on ‘God-talk’, BIBLE-
L@GITVM1.GATECH.EDU, on Tuesday, 30 August 1994).
3 For a selection of his most important writings see Anscombe & Geach (eds) 1954.
cartes, faith is an exception to the general rules of evidence. Faith exhibits the greatest certainty of all, although—unlike philosophy or natural science—it relates not to an evident but to an obscure content, which surpasses reason. This is possible because faith is an act not of the perceiving mind or of the intellect, but of the will, which, in the context of God's revelation, can accept something even without evidence. Descartes does require, however, that the foundations of this faith should be established rationally by intuition or deduction. He also states that it is God's grace which inclines man to assent, not, however, by diminishing his freedom, but by increasing and strengthening it.

From these brief introductory remarks we can conclude that Descartes's reasoning brought a new way of looking at reality. The main question asked in his time was expressed in terms of finality: Why does a thing exist? In modern times it is expressed causally: How does a thing come to be, of what does it consist, what laws does it obey?4

The Enlightenment and secularism, with their faith in human reason and progress, have undoubtably thrown theology into a crisis (Küng 1987). Added to this the discoveries of people like Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo have caused the firm and well-ordered world structures to fall to pieces. Descartes's vision of a universal science, covering all the problems of human life, however, has proved increasingly unrealisable, so that his followers, initially enthusiastic, have finally been driven to scepticism. Certainty of knowledge is a long way from security of life. Through reason one can gain conceptual certainty, but never existential security. This is why the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal rejects Descartes's idea that salvation can be found in a universal rational method, and seeks it rather in an open-mindedness of the whole person to reality as a whole (cf Guardini 1956:185-196).

It is essentially true to say that Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) takes Descartes's rationalism—with the help of Hegel's philosophy—to its logical consequences. He comes to the conclusion that the idea of God is nothing but human fantasy. He states that what man wishes to be, he makes his God. He wants to dissolve theology in anthropology. Feuerbach can rightly be confronted with the question whether the possibility can a priori be excluded that there is actually something real that corresponds to all these needs, wishes and instincts? Might not some sort of reality correspond to all our wishes and thinking? If I speak in a human way about God, does that mean that the God of whom I speak is merely something human? Feuerbach's

4 See the discussion on Descartes in Küng (1980:26).
critique rests on this single argument which contains a clear logical fallacy. Perhaps Feuerbach’s folly can be seen as mitigated by the fact that the church and theology have too often defended God at the expense of man and nature.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) also pursues a strictly rationalistic line of thought when he emphasises that reason cannot reach beyond the world of experiences to the ‘things in themselves’ (which are conceptually necessary but not perceptible), nor can it bring one any closer to the real God. He therefore claims that God cannot be understood through reason alone. He bases his position on the argument that the theoretical assumption that there is a real God leads in rational theology to invalid proofs. How, he asks, can an objective reality ever legitimately correspond to the purely regulative idea of God? His answer is that this is possible not through theoretical, but only through practical reason; not in science but in morality. Moral principles make it possible for man to believe that God exists. Man’s morality is therefore an indication that there must be a Being which makes it possible. Thus, according to Kant, man acts as if God exists (cf Palmquist 1992:85–108). This idea leads him to state that one can know through theoretical reason what is there (the objects of knowledge), and through practical reason, what ought to be there (the motives of the will). Thus Kant proceeds, not from natural things, but from the premise of man as a moral being.

It is clear that Kant is no atheist, but his insistence that the existence of an absolute moral commitment within us implacably dictates the existence of a supreme good that reconciles morality with happiness and thus confirms the existence of God, is open to criticism. Can we start out from a categorical imperative which is supposed to be not an object of knowledge or proof, but simply a primordial reality of the voluntary aspect of man’s mental life? In this regard Küng (1980:545) rightly queries Kant’s standpoint when he poses the question whether such an assumption is not merely a relic of the old belief in God. Kant’s critique of pure reason as cognitive means of knowing God and his postulation in its stead of practical reason as an absolute condition for human freedom, is still only a principle of explanation which is no longer acceptable (cf Malan & Jonker 1992:523). To draw conclusions in theory about God without any preliminary assumptions is just not possible.

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5 See Kant in Abbott (1954:226): ‘It is morally necessary to assume the existence of God.’
3 DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

3.1 A post-metaphysical way of thinking

The twentieth century has been characterised by the appearance of a post-metaphysical way of thinking: a skepticism about claims to knowledge which is not based on human sensory experience. One of the offshoots of this mindset has come in the form of the theology-without-God movement of the 1960s which is the result of a philosophy of language which recognises cognitive meaning only in propositions that can be empirically verified. The relentless quest for objectivity has led to positivism's absolute exclusion of subjectivity and its attempted creation of a neutral observation language (cf Guarino 1993:312). This is the outcome of the Enlightenment which has removed God from the world.

The movement away from ideological rationalism towards critical rationality can also be found in the thinking of Wittgenstein who does not reject the metaphysical but rather the possibility of stating the metaphysical (cf Malcolm 1967:331). For Wittgenstein, therefore, the experience of the 'metaphysical' cannot be given expression. This confirms the notion that God cannot be empirically verified and analysed like other objects. The question is, however, whether the problem of ultimate reality can simply be dismissed? Küng (1980:123) phrases this problem as follows: 'A possible all-embracing, absolutely primal and ultimate reality, which we call God and which—because unascertainable and unanalyzable—cannot be manipulated, must be methodically eliminated from consideration in the natural sciences...but the question of...an ultimate and primal reality as such, cannot be a priori rejected.'

3.2 Rejection of the objectifying of God

At the end of the twentieth century many still object to the presupposition of an 'objective' existence of God. They resist any notions of the supernatural and the transcendental in the sense of that which cannot be controlled. For example, Kaufman (1981), whose thinking is rooted in Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach, strongly argues his conviction of the futility of objectifying God. He argues that God cannot be said to represent 'a free-standing, separate, or distinct object', but God is 'an important constituent of and simultaneously a function of an overarching world-view' (1981:120), or else He is 'the personifying symbol of the cosmic activity which has created our humanity and which continues to press for its full realization' (1981:133). To Kaufman the concept of God functions as 'the ultimate focus of life and of human devotion' (1981:118). For him the task of theology can 'no longer be properly understood as contemporary re-translation and re-presentation of traditional
themes (supposedly authorized by ‘divine revelation’) but must be viewed as imaginative construction through and through’ (McCormack 1984:433). Kaufman thus denies any special status to Scripture and tradition. This leads McCormack (1984:455) to argue that the different approaches of Karl Barth and Kaufman are not really in conflict because divine revelation and human imagination are not essentially irreconcilable.

A similar opposition to objectifying God is reflected in the viewpoint of Krondorfer (1992:2) that as we become more self-reflexive, ‘knowing that we create what we believe in’, our anxiety at becoming lost in a meaningless world leads to a more frantic search for securities (cf Vorster 1994:127). The claim is made that uncertainty is necessary for the creation of religious discourse. This reasoning seems to agree with the Wittgenstein axiom that theology is grammar (cf Kaufman 1975:9). The outcome of this way of thinking is that it was not the gods who created people, but people who created the gods, which is in line with the philosophical conclusion of Ludwig Feuerbach that it is not God who created man in His own image, but man who created God in his own image.

3.3 The return of the metaphysical

By the middle of the twentieth century a reaction against a positivist approach had set in in the form of postmodernism, which was more receptive to the metaphysical. Pannenberg tried to overcome the duality between the reality of God and the reality of this world by rejecting the supranaturalistic notion of revelation and focusing on the reality of history (Van Huyssteen 1973:146). He tried to prove that man could believe in God on reasonable grounds. He found ‘God’ as a concept to be integral to the freedom of man, and was convinced that faith was not at variance with reason (cf König 1974:110). The idea of God was no illusion. He did add, however, that all biblical speech about God ‘is rooted in adoration.... In the act of adoration, our words are transferred to the sublime infinity of God. They are thereby set in contrast to their ordinary meaning’ (Pannenberg 1970:215, 216, 217). He claimed that talking about God in this adorational way is always evoked by the experience of a divine act.

In a recent article Van Niekerk (1994:290) agrees with Pannenberg on this point by stating that we become aware of God when we become aware of the totality of the reality in which we live. He states that this happens when and in so far as we think about the unity between reality and our own existence on the basis of the presupposition that there is something which transcends everything, and something which we call ‘God’. This means that we can only speak about God to the extent that language and our metaphoric and symbolic system make communication and sharing of this system possible.
This God-talk is applied to religion (more specifically the Christian religion) by Maguire (1993:1229) when he says that ‘religion is a response to the sacred... [T]here is no one who finds nothing sacred.’ And he adds: ‘Religion is born when human consciousness sees the wonder of our being, the smiles of infants...the gentle budding of roses...’ (1993:1229). This reasoning supports the notion that reality includes a dimension which cannot be perceived or explained by pure reason or objective means.

On the matter of God-talk Jüngel adopts the position that any verification of God outside faith is impossible (cf König 1974:118). God does not wish to be ‘God’ but rather to be ‘our God’. He can therefore only be known by those who surrender themselves to God. No real dialogue about God can happen if both partners are free to come to any conclusion about this relation. This presupposes a commitment to, and an awareness of, something outside objective reasoning.

4 THE NEW QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

From the discussion above it has already become clear that there is some discord between the attempts to follow a consistently rational approach and those which would include other aspects of reality which make a purely rational approach incomplete.

The consistently rational approach is evident in the results of historical criticism, especially the strongly positivist strain of historical critics. Usually the results of historical criticism would make a person realise that a viewpoint based on a ‘first naiveté’ or a ‘pre-critical naiveté’ is no longer viable. Anyone involved in this approach would realise that whatever the significant authority figures in a person’s life might have taught him/her and which he/she formerly took for granted, is not necessarily true.

Although historical Jesus study is a very important intellectual activity today, Crossan has stated that the basis of all religion and all human life is mythological, based on acts of fundamental faith incapable of proof or disproof... (Crossan 1993:7). In this he is in agreement with the argument we have proposed so far, namely that it is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God—one can only speak of God in terms of faith categories. This means that arguments about one’s religious convictions cannot really be based on empirical means to prove or disprove anything. At the heart of any

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6 The scope of this article is meant as a critique on the shortcomings of the so-called third quest for the historical Jesus, especially as it affects the issues I want to raise here. Because of this focus I will not deal with the very elaborate discussion going on with regard to the search for the historical Jesus as such.
Christianity there is always, covertly or overtly, a dialectic between a historically read Jesus and a theologically read Christ (cf Crossan 1991:423). A certain complementarity (cf Kasper 1976:19,35) is inevitable, a correlation between the historical Jesus and the proclaimed Christ. When referring to ‘Jesus Christ’ we are in fact dealing with the combination of a fact (Jesus) and an interpretation (Christ).

The historical Jesus can never be the entire and only valid content of faith. A truncation of the eschatological person of Christ to the private person of Jesus will end up making christology irrelevant (cf Moltmann 1990:41), thus making Christianity a movement that tries to stand on one leg instead of two. A Jesus construed from the very limited information which can be verified historically runs the risk of becoming a mere hybrid (cf Venter 1995:371), a character who will be at the mercy of the ideology of the theologians of the day.

The historical paradigm in itself cannot be questioned, but we should remember that the historical Jesus is a modern abstraction and construct. The so-called ‘third quest’ for the historical Jesus can construct only a fragment of a mosaic (cf Meier 1990:18–19). However, when it assumes the status of a controlling view on reality that eclipses not only any other view concerning Jesus, but our relationship with God and the concept of salvation, then it erects a barrier to meaningful interaction with those who do not wish to let purely rational/rationalistic categories solely determine what they consider important existentially as well as epistemologically. In this regard we should take heed of what Peacocke (1984:54–55) says about the relation between theology and the natural sciences, which is also applicable to such human sciences as sociology and cultural anthropology: ‘Theology, I said, will have to listen to and adapt to, but not be subservient to, new understandings of the natural world afforded by the sciences.’7

The danger of reductionism in the ‘third quest’ is only too obvious and too serious to ignore. Reductionism is a typical positivistic approach in the natural sciences, but even the physical sciences offer grounds for rejecting extreme reductionist theses (cf Fuller 1994:439). Natural scientists have found that there are certain aspects of reality in the physical world which are ‘upward’ rather than ‘downward’ emergent. In other words, there are some

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7 Peacocke (1984:54) explains this in more detail when he says that the religious affirmations of the Christian community, their way of depicting the world and their understanding of the world and of man in the world, should be set alongside the changing perspective of man in the world that the sciences engender. Theology should be neither immune from the changing outlook of the sciences of man and nature, nor should it be captive to them.
concepts which may only be understandable as a function of some whole entity, rather than in terms of the behaviour of that entity's constituent parts (cf Fuller 1994:433). Such an antireductionist viewpoint could be defined as 'holism' and is of tremendous theological significance for the matter under discussion. If nature itself is mysterious and fundamentally unpredictable, then mystery in the theological disciplines should be taken very seriously in determining the role of the key figures in this discipline.

From a historical point of view it is perhaps true to say that the polemic embedded in early Christian traditions is not revealed truth, but human attempts at self-definition (Botha 1994:201). One can no doubt prove that there are personal and rhetorical angles in the polemic of early traditions, and that the debates are too often filled with shortcomings, one-sided reasoning and so forth. But can one thus categorically state that it is nothing more than 'human attempts at self-definition'? From a purely historical angle one can agree with Botha (1994:201) that 'before we talk about the poor Jesus, or about Jesus the liberator or Jesus the whatever, we must first talk about Jesus the Jew.' An historical approach is of course totally valid, but is it really the only approach with which one could start? It is true that any religious phenomenon always implies historical, literary, psychological, sociological and cultural aspects, but it should not be reduced to these features (cf Van der Ven 1994:252). One could for instance start with the available text, or from a specific religious viewpoint and only then look for the historical or any other perspective. In my opinion this option is in line with the postmodern mind which prefers to have an open mind to a diversity of approaches. The viewpoint of Ahmed (1992:10) that the postmodern mind 'must look for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning' is therefore not as farfetched as it may appear at first sight to the western, analytic mind. This, however, does not mean that we would want to propagate postmodernism's tendency to avoid choices. Any person who has made a choice for Jesus as the Christ will be affected in how he/she thinks about the historical Jesus. Acceptance of Jesus as Mediator and Agent of God will affect one's outlook upon the historical Jesus, upon Jesus the Jew. If one works only with the insights and information which can be gathered from historical research, one will most probably end up with a different and rather reduced picture of Jesus. This is in my opinion the shortcoming of the 'Jesus Seminar' group who base many of their decisions with regard to the historical Jesus on the aphorisms of Jesus

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8 An example to illustrate this point is given by Fuller (1994:434), namely that a simple combination of proteins, nucleic acids, lipids, and a few other chemicals is not alive; but a living cell is.
without properly taking the context of these aphorisms or the role of Jesus into consideration.

It is really a matter of where we start. Do we start with the Jesus who is the icon of God, the one who makes God maximally visible on earth according to the Scriptures? Or with Jesus the Jew, the historical person? What do we do when we come across contradictions between our historical research and the content of the New Testament? We might find ourselves in a dilemma when our scientific endeavour seems to clash with our deepest convictions. We might try to look at it from both sides at the same time and thus judge historical facts in a historical way, and the kerygmatic contents through the eyes of faith. But what happens if there is a clash of interest between these two approaches? If we follow a strictly historical, sociological or anthropological course we can only work with the facts available, even though they are limited and somewhat speculative. If we adhere to a strictly rationalistic approach we may have to be satisfied with a reduced Jesus—in other words with only a section of the multicoloured mosaic. To me this seems to be the situation of the Jesus Seminar. The historical method represents an entire world-view which might obscure what was really new and unique about the event that took place in Jesus of Nazareth (cf Kasper 1976:34). A proper dialogue becomes impossible if scholars insist on focusing on Jesus within the general correlation of all events without due attention to the real novum which took place in Jesus Christ (Kasper 1976:34). Here we like to agree with Moltmann (1990:70) who claims that the Jesus in whom people believed, and whom they followed and worshipped, has always been conceived of as transcending the boundaries of His earthly life. His continued influence has always been interpreted as the result of His personal presence and not only as the continuing influence of his personality (cf Venter 1995:388). If the reality of God and of salvation is compromised, then Jesus becomes a mere model to be followed and the role which he has played in Christianity through the centuries is discounted. The historical Jesus confronts us with the basic issue of the reality of God.

Those who regard Jesus as divine are the people that see in the historical Jesus the manifestation of God—which presupposes a faith standpoint. Such an approach to the historical Jesus is different from the angle of approach adopted by those who are only interested in the sociological and anthropological framework of the historical Jesus. Information about the historical Jesus can undoubtedly be found, but it is doubtful whether this information can really decide the debate as to the significance, identity, and meaning of Jesus. It is open to question whether the historical Jesus can ever be tracked down. We should rather be prepared to always speak of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith at the same time.
Although we have to agree that the Jesus of history is not the Jesus (Christ?) of the Christian faith, the question is: can we keep them apart? Can we have a fruitful debate between the two approaches? If we come up with certain results on our study of the historical Jesus which totally contradict statements about him as represented in the traditions of the Christian churches, where do we end up? With total agnosticism and unbelief, a parting of the ways, or is there another way?

The complexity of the problem is aptly emphasised by Ogden from a different angle when he differentiates between faith and unbelief as two totally (essentially) different levels of human life—a reflective level and an existential level. On the reflective level faith refers to our living according to an explicit conviction of which we are very well aware. On the existential level faith refers to implicit convictions of which we may not even be aware, but which are of the utmost importance for our daily activities. There may be no real correlation between the reflective denial of God and the existential confirmation of it in a person's life (cf Kün 1980). The question could be raised, however: Is it really possible that this existential confirmation would not affect a person's reflective life? We humans are complex beings whose cognitive, emotional, creative, imaginative and conative or volitional qualities cannot really be isolated from one another. We may deny or suppress our deepest thoughts, but at some time or another they are bound to surface and drive us into some kind of decision in which the different dimensions of our make-up cannot be separated. We are both thinkers, believers and doers, all at the same time!

5 ANOTHER OPTION

5.1 Openness towards the mystery of God and Jesus Christ

I believe that neither agnosticism nor foundationalism offers a solution to the problem of the identity of God and Jesus and would therefore suggest a third option. This is where I would like to link up with the quotation from Heidegger's 'Gelassenheit' quoted at the beginning of this essay. He considers it necessary that we remain open to mystery ('Geheimnis'). Heidegger was arguing and warning against the danger of human beings becoming totally mesmerised by the wonders of the technological world, to the extent that we humans stop thinking about matters. In other words he warns us not to neglect our basic humanity which requires that we think about ('nachdenken') life and what happens every day. I do not consider Heidegger's warning against the dangers of the technological world a call to turn our back on the excellent means of managing our environment provided by modern technology. What I would like, however, is to compare and apply his
warning against becoming slaves of technology to the risk we run of working and living as if we were only cognitive beings, satisfied to use only the left hemisphere of our brains. There is an element in our make-up as human beings which cannot be described or fathomed by our intellect and our scientific research, but which I would call a sensitivity or openness towards the unfathomable. I would like to use the term ‘mystery’ with regard to this dimension of our existence; an indication of an openness towards a dimension of our daily existence and experience which cannot be explained in terms of the ordinary rational and logical arguments we are used to. When I use the word ‘mystery’ I do not think of it in terms of mysticism in the sense of the relation between human experience and the interpretation of it, or as the transcendental possibility of an experience of the Absolute within the framework of human contingency (cf Haas 1994:31). I could agree with Haas (1994:35) that theology is God’s speaking with mankind and of man speaking about and with God, and that this can perhaps only be called a mystery, but not that it should be equated with mysticism. 9 This openness towards mystery could be associated with Heidegger’s notion (quoted at the beginning of this article) when he says: ‘Sie gewähren uns die Möglichkeit, uns auf eine ganz andere Weise in der Welt aufzuhalten.’

Van Peursen (1989:39) makes a plea for moving away from a separation between the natural and supernatural, and prefers the notion of an interpenetration. He illustrates this with the example of the meaning of letters and words emerging only when the far-reaching reference beyond their written form is decoded. He speaks of a ‘third dimension’ which makes the real meaning of daily life and work visible (1989:39). There is at present an intensified urge for a more holistic approach to reality and a search for meaning which goes beyond the horizons of the natural, integrating the ‘supernatural’ into the ‘natural’. In his penetrating article Van Peursen concludes: ‘Biblical realism—that events are intrinsically linked with their narration, that meaning is the disclosure of real history—overcomes both fundamentalism (pure events) and psychologism (only the stories).’

Linked to the foregoing reasoning is the question as to the truth claims present in Jesus’ preaching. For example, in Luke 11:20 Jesus’ emphasis on the anticipatory presence of God’s kingdom in his own activity involves his person in a way that essentially implies what later on was explicated by incarnational language and by titles like Son of God (cf Pannenberg 1990:100). And, to quote just one more example: in Luke 12:8 it is clear that Jesus identifies himself and his conduct with the coming Son of man. His

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9 I do not agree with the modern notion of spirituality as mysticism (against Haas 1994:36).
conduct implies that he considers himself to be God's representative on earth and that whoever confesses faith in Jesus confesses faith in God. It seems as if the uniqueness attributed to Jesus by the later incarnational theology of the church was already characteristic of his own eschatological message and activity. That raises the question as to how we are to reconcile the claims regarding Jesus in the Gospels with the results of the quest for the historical Jesus?

I deem it imperative that we think and look beyond the direct outcome of our historical research and be prepared to ask what the consequences of our rational debate are. This is what I find lacking in much of the present research into the historical Jesus. If our research into the historical conditions of the Jesus movement does not account for its ideology, its motivation, its religious aims, it will alienate the Christian churches and many serious theologians. It should also not ignore its task of seriously reflecting the ethical and social effect it has on present social structures, or it might end up in an ivory tower of self-indulgence, giving the impression of being so busy with the social world of then that it loses sight of the social world of now.

5.2 Marcus Borg: An illustration

An illustration of our viewpoint that a definite moving away from a first naivété is not necessarily the last word in this matter can be found in the experience of Borg. He gives a ‘confession’ of how his quest for the historical Jesus led him to agnosticism and even the danger of becoming a ‘closet atheist’ (1993:7), but he ended up in a rediscovery of the mystery of God, which he refers to as an ‘experience of holy mystery’ (1993:8). He no longer thinks of God as a supernatural being ‘out there’, but sees the word ‘God’ as referring to ‘the sacred’ which is at the center of existence, the holy mystery which is all around us and within us. He connects this with Paul’s remark in his speech to the Athenians, namely that God is the non-material ground and source and presence in which ‘we live and move and have our being...' (Acts 17:28). To him God is not a concept or a belief, but an experiential reality. Borg also finds this experience in the life of Jesus where God is central. He links this with Jesus as person in whose life the experiential awareness of ‘Spirit’ was foundational for his life. He sees Jesus as a teacher of subversive and alternative wisdom (like Socrates), who had an enlightenment experience (like Buddha), powers of healing (like a shaman), a social prophet (like Gandhi)... ‘a most remarkable man’ (Borg 1993:9). In spite of the fact that he

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10 In this way he seems to agree with Küng (1980) who states that God as the decisive reality will be verified by the experienced reality of man in the world.
does not believe that Christianity is the only way of salvation, or that the Bible is the revealed will of God, or that Jesus is the unique Son of God, he returned to the church because of his desire to be part of a tradition and community which celebrates and mediates the reality of the Spirit (Borg 1993:9). The Christian tradition is to him not something to believe, but something to be lived in. The Bible and Christian tradition are mediators of the sacred. He does not believe in them but wishes to be in relationship to what they mediate, namely God, the Spirit, the sacred.11

5.3 Ambiguity requires imagination

The whole debate about the identity of God and Jesus Christ mainly deals with the problem of the human notion about God and its consequences for our viewpoint about Jesus Christ. It brings us back to the age-old debate to which we referred at the beginning of this essay. This debate is also reflected in the discussion going on amongst systematic theologians. For example, the Dutch systematic theologian Kuitert (1992:21–25) agrees with those scholars who oppose any idea of objectifying God (see paragraph 3.2). In his theological reflection on God and Jesus Christ he also starts from below, from this world. He summarises this way of thinking about God with the remark that ‘alle spreken over boven komt van beneden’ (All speaking of above comes from below; cf Bakker 1992:14). Because humans are thoroughly religious beings they are always seeking to understand God better. Because our knowledge of God remains incomplete, faith and religion are models or patterns through which people seek to understand the primary experiences of their existence. Through this cumulative experience (cf De Kruiff 1992:5) people develop images and conceptions of God which are determined by their contemporary culture. This fact has recently been emphasised by cultural, anthropological and social scientists, as well as by biblical scholars linking up with this line of approach. When people’s conceptions about God no longer fit, they can be replaced by others. Thus religion can change from time to time.

Because of this continuing process of change, the search for God and religious relevance will continue. The Christian tradition, however, has never understood itself as a search on the way to eternity, but rather as the arrival of eternity here and now (cf Bakker 1992:17). The Christian faith hinges on the premise that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Although we are aware that when we are dealing with Scripture we are dealing with human

11 Unfortunately the distinction Borg makes between believing and having a relationship is not clearly explained.
language, human experiences, human metaphors, these are evoked and supported because people consider themselves called from above (cf Bakker 1992:17). According to Christian belief God identified himself with Jesus when He was raised from the dead—a deed from above. The same could be said of Jesus forgiving sins. Bakker (1992:19) poignantly spoke of God concealing himself in the course of history, but at the same time revealing himself in Jesus Christ. Kuitert (1992:23) says about the ambiguity and dilemma of the believer who also truly tries to understand: in one person there are two souls, one which believes completely and the other which knows that even in believing there is a threshold which we can never cross. He adds the following statement: Believing you never do on your own (individualism) but you do it personally (1992:25). This underlines the important fact that faith is based on trusted traditions (assumed to be authoritative), which presuppose a sharing in the history of a faith movement, but which always require a personal choice and commitment.

The fact that humans are both rational and religious beings does bring about the dilemma of deciding which will be dominant in each situation where we are confronted with the text of the Bible. Things like the virginal birth, the resurrection, the assumption, the miracles of Jesus can probably not be proved scientifically. Yet they are essential for the story of Jesus as the Agent of God among human beings. Jesus is presented in the story of the New Testament as the human with whom God identified Himself. At the same time Jesus is the human being who identified himself with God and God’s cause on earth. He thus became the highly personal representative of God as well as of mankind.

Scholars busying themselves with the social and cultural world of the New Testament have come up with very interesting scenarios and sociological models of the Mediterranean world which can give us a fairly good picture of and perspective on the factors affecting the story of Jesus and the development of the so-called Jesus movement and the early church. The question is of course: What do we do with this information? If it is seen as offering the definitive explanation of the behaviour of Jesus and of the early church we might end up in total agnosticism with regard to the Christian faith. If the sociological models and psychological explanation applied to Jesus’ behaviour become the only perspectives that are offered, the end result could either be that some people will reject even the new perspective on this new paradigm, or that others will accept it, but at the price of ultimately rejecting the Christian faith. Historians, sociologists and cultural anthropologists mostly admit that the fact that we are trying to explain a social world of 2000 years ago, and often do this with models based largely on modern social conditions and a western way of life, inhibits what we can
know about the world of the New Testament. If we are aware that the historical and social information are to a degree speculative, and that it can only form part of the process of knowledge and experience, we are on the right track towards realising that there is a third option between agnosticism and foundationalism.

People may conclude from their experience of reality that God is either absent or even non-existent or that he is secretly present. The believer who approaches the issue from a faith standpoint would choose the last-mentioned. Because God remains hidden and concealed to man's eyes, he cannot be experienced unless he is accepted as being present. Experience and acceptance cannot be separated (cf. Nicol 1994:540). The believer is required to accept without evidence, and this means that he/she has to move from their private circle of certainty. The choice to believe comprises a trust in the One who is concealed, a submission to Him and a relationship with Him. Believers and the church at large base their core experience on Jesus who acted as God's Agent to 'reveal' God's love and care. For the Christian believer, however, the uniqueness of Jesus should be confessed without discriminating against other religions or beliefs.

What we are pleading for is an awareness of the complexity of human understanding. Neither faith nor intellectual understanding should be sacrificed in an attempt to find the truth. What we are proposing could perhaps be described in terms of Marianne Moore's description of poetry as 'imaginary gardens with real toads' (quoted by McFague 1978:248). If I understand this metaphorical speech correctly and apply it to my own advocacy of a third option, I would suggest that historical research can indicate the toads but that we should still remember that they appear in an imaginary garden which is the product of the faith and imagination of the gospel writers as well as the readers. Imagination, not in the sense of a fictional made-up story with no root in reality, but as an expression of what is required to overcome the distance between, on the one hand, the real situation and its associated events, and the enscripturation of the situation and appurtenant events on the other. Toads and garden are not compatible to a viable extent. Neither the garden nor the toads should be ignored. To present and judge the earliest Christian community as imaginative creators and even distorers of the gospel story can only offer a one-dimensional picture of Jesus Christ. My suggestion is therefore that we allow for the dimension of mystery where we have to acknowledge that a study of the real, historical Jesus has its limitations. We have to keep our minds open for the dimension of Jesus, presented in the Scriptures as the one who represents God in this world. The distance between the historical Jesus and the present readers may not be ignored. We should allow for the mystery of both the person of Jesus
and the belief in Him if we wish to get the full picture. Even so the mystery of Jesus has to be interpreted for our own times, and therefore the information from the historical Jesus angle should be included in the equation.

My concern is that a socio-historical representation of the historical Jesus could easily end up like the films which have been made of Jesus of Nazareth, being a one-dimensional reproduction of Jesus, without taking into consideration the full context in which he acted. Because of the inherent limitations of the film only a single picture of Jesus can be produced. The attempt to present Jesus realistically is like the quest for the historical Jesus, namely a specific picture of Jesus, the Jesus of a specific person. The choice of material depends on the preferences or even prejudices of the author, with the result that the picture might reveal more about the author and his/her ideology than about the real Jesus. Any attempt to portray the historical Jesus realistically might end up in deflating the mystery of the gospel story by concentrating on the person and the social world of Jesus while neglecting Jesus' view of reality (cf McFague 1978:241). Important as the modern search for the historical Jesus and his world might be, we should not allow our desire for immediacy to obscure the fact of the mediacy of God's communication with mankind through the Scriptures. One does not say 'Jesus is Lord' except through an act of the imagination (cf McFague 1978:251). A study of the historical Jesus can become a very sterile game in which one may end up with a picture of a certain pious Jew based on sociological models scrounged from the material available. We may end with a picture of the social powers and structures which influenced and affected the religious movement Jesus started. But do we need Jesus for this experiment? What we need in my opinion is rather to overcome the distance between the Jesus who gave us a redescription of reality and the story which has been transmitted to us. In my opinion this can only be achieved by an imaginative approach in which we have to reckon with the alternative possibilities when we focus on imaginative redescriptions of reality.

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