THE IGNORANCE OF CHRIST:
A PROBLEM FOR THE ANCIENT THEOLOGY

LIONEL WICKHAM

I

Well, shall I be permitted to speak of ‘the ancient theology’ in an essay for a friend and mentor who notes carefully one’s more pretentious utterances? Did it ever exist? After all, we meet in the written memorials of the patristic period (and let us say that the period runs from the Apostolic Fathers to John of Damascus) not so much a ‘one’ as a ‘many’. The voices we hear, speak of God, Christ and the human condition (and that makes their utterances ‘theology’), in many different ways: through varying media which determine what is to be said (for no one will say in a sermon precisely what he would say in a combative treatise against a heretic); in different circumstances (for a letter of consolation to the bereaved, say, will attempt an encounter with the grieving heart and leave behind those considerations of evil’s nullity which may suit less anguished moments). The writers we call ‘patristic’ and recognize as classic, do not speak with one harmonious accord, however much grand talk there may be, amongst those who have little direct acquaintance with it, of ‘the mind of the fathers’.

Yes, that, and much else along the same lines is all true. And yet it remains the case that there is a unity in the patristic, the ancient, theology. Let us take a very large view from a dangerous (I grant you) height. Do you not see common themes and presuppositions, a shared approach, which you would have to be an incorrigible nominalist to discredit and locate only in the viewer’s eye? For one thing, the public declarations of the Church in conciliar decisions and creeds mark them out. We perceive a common ‘world’ of ideas, out of which, and to which, these decisions are uttered. The ancient theology is not simply these decisions and creeds, not simply the ‘doctrines’ alluded to or taught there in the catchwords and formulae (‘consubstantial’, ‘three persons in one substance’, ‘hypostatic union’ and the like) to which the
historian of doctrine is apt to reduce it all, imposing certainly thereby more uniformity than is natural. Yet they do convey the distinctive approach and tone. The formulae are the product of long debates which occupied the anguished consciences and fertile brains of ministers of religion and servants of the state who might (to the philistine mind) have been engaged in occupations more productive of human happiness. Yes, and I will not pretend that the very religiousness of the milieu which created the ancient theology is free from moral ambiguity: there can be a surfeit of debate and too much interest of a trivializing kind in religion, too much mere *phlyaria*, as more than one distinguished theologian pointed out at the time. The construction of theology was irresistibly entertaining to those who engaged in it and served many other purposes (some of these to do with politics and power) besides the advancement of the knowledge of God. But entertainment is not so opposed to seriousness of intention that it nullifies the enterprise, and games are only worth playing if there is something at stake. The ancient theologian who lost the argument might lose much else besides; and that sharpened his wits and put a brake, too, upon the merely teasing. ‘Radical’ theology has always been something of a commercial venture, but in ancient times its practice did not encourage insouciance. Marcellus of Ancyra, Eunomius and Nestorius did not make the ancient equivalent of the walk from the television studio to the bank.

Formulae, then, of a ‘technical’ character; their roots in a proneness to debate and in the asking of questions (characteristically about the being and nature of alleged agencies and things) to which it is presumed that there are correct answers: this we recognize (I suggest) in the ancient theology as typical of its style. It is the style, as it is also an echoing of the vocabulary, of philosophers, who ask questions, argue and ‘dogmatize’. We perceive the ancient theology as the peculiar construction it is, because in it a narrative of faith was linked to philosophy: not so much to a defined school as to the philosophical enterprise itself. The ancient Church came to present a religion about which questions could be asked. From the Apologists onwards, it made what was to be believed open and vulnerable to public discussion of a kind we recognize as rational. It could, one might imagine, all have evolved differently. You can think into possible existence a succession of figures like St. Paul or St. John, intuitive, inspired minds which do not descend so far from the mountain of vision as to explain how all that they have to tell us could be true at once or relate to what the crowd sees on level ground. Yes, and we might admit that the Christian Gnos-