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*Ordinary Christology. Who Do You Say I Am? Answers From The Pews* (Farnham, Ashgate 2012); 224 pp. ISBN: 9781409425359 / 9781409425366

Ordinary Christology is defined as the account given by ordinary believers of who Jesus was (or is) and what he did (or does). The author identifies and critiques the ordinary Christologies of a group of ordinary believers. Her study is based on in-depth interviews with 45 Anglican churchgoers in rural North Yorkshire. They have not studied Christology as an academic subject. This approach, based on fieldwork, is a contribution to ordinary theology, a recent branch within the subdiscipline of practical and empirical theology. The book, which is a reworked and updated version of the doctoral thesis by the author from 2005, clarifies the tension between the belief and experience of ordinary churchgoers and academic and doctrinal theology. The book maintains the distinction usually made between Christology (Ch. 3-5) and soteriology (Ch. 6-7). Before these Chapters, there is an introduction, and an outline of the doctrinal norms against which ordinary Christology must be tested (Ch. 1) and methodological issues are discussed (Ch. 2). The approach is a descriptive-exploratory one and the research is described as an empirically-orientated practical-theological study. The concluding and evaluative Chapters 8-9 address the characteristics of ordinary Christology and the ongoing hermeneutical process.

While theologians in their discourse are familiar with critical, theoretical, abstract and academic discussions and evaluations, a complication in this research was asking questions to interviewees who had had no theological training and who had not often spoken about or even thought about Christological questions before. In the interviews, people were forced to, for the first time, reflect on and speak about what it was that they actually believe. Based on the considerations and thoughts of the interviewees about the identity of Jesus, the author makes a distinction between functional Christology, ontological Christology and sceptical Christology. The majority of interviewees do not consider Jesus to be God, and do not appear to have learned doctrines of pre-existence or the immanent Trinity. They do not conceptualise Jesus’ identity. Their theology is pictorial rather than conceptual. They have a functional rather than an ontological Christology. Jesus is the Son of God, created by God; he is ‘of God’, significantly special, full of divine power and filled with supernatural qualities. This group talk about what Jesus does and what function he performs: he reveals God in the world; he is the personal representative of God. Representatives of this group are liberal in their Christology. They do not confess Christological orthodoxy in terms of a recognition that Jesus is...
the pre-existent Son of God incarnate, and as such ontologically equal to the Father, but rather in terms of functional ‘equivalents’. The orthodox doctrine that Jesus is God is held by the smaller part of the group (mainly evangelicals). They consider God to be triune in Godself, and Jesus is thought of as Son of God from eternity. A small part of the group has very serious doubts about or denies the divinity of Jesus. They consider scepticism and unbelief towards miracles to be causes for denying the divinity of Jesus. To make Christian faith credible, demythologisation and deliteralisation are required. It is Jesus the man, not Jesus the divine redeemer, who is at the centre of this type of Christology. Emphasis is on the continuity between Jesus and other human beings. There is no reason to dismiss this Christology as one which simply regards Jesus as ‘just a good man’ or ‘a mere man’.

The three soteriologies distinguished in Ch. 6 illustrate that Jesus has no lesser impact on an unorthodox as opposed to an orthodox believer. The meanings attached to the death of Jesus by the interviewees result in three main theologies of the cross: an exemplarist soteriology, with little room for concepts such as atonement; Jesus’ death is considered to be a martyr’s death. A traditionalist soteriology: representatives of this type are mainly women; they cannot articulate a theology of the cross at all and believe in everything conventionally included in Christian religion — they take it for granted. An evangelical soteriology: the substitutionary theory of atonement is the cornerstone of this theology; Jesus pays the price for sin in our place and there is no further theological reflection.

Key terms such as atonement, redemption and salvation are virtually meaningless in ordinary theology. Academic theology seeks to understand how the cross can be an answer to the problem of sin and suffering. For ordinary believers, the cross is a compelling narrative which evokes emotional rather than reasoned theological responses. The emphasis is on personal morality: being Christian is being good.

Analysing the interviews results in some characteristics of ordinary Christology. It is story-shaped, it is a type of narrative theology. Stories suffice and there is no need to abstract from them. It is more metaphorical and imaginistic than conceptual. Theology is considered to be an intellectual exercise for an elite minority, with little or no relevance to the faith and life of the ordinary believer. In academic Christology, a cognitive approach dominates; in ordinary Christology, the affective mode is of primary importance. Ordinary Christology reminds academic Christology that there is more to Christology than factual beliefs. Moreover, the research shows that the majority of the interviewees have a theocentric, not a Christocentric faith; salvation comes