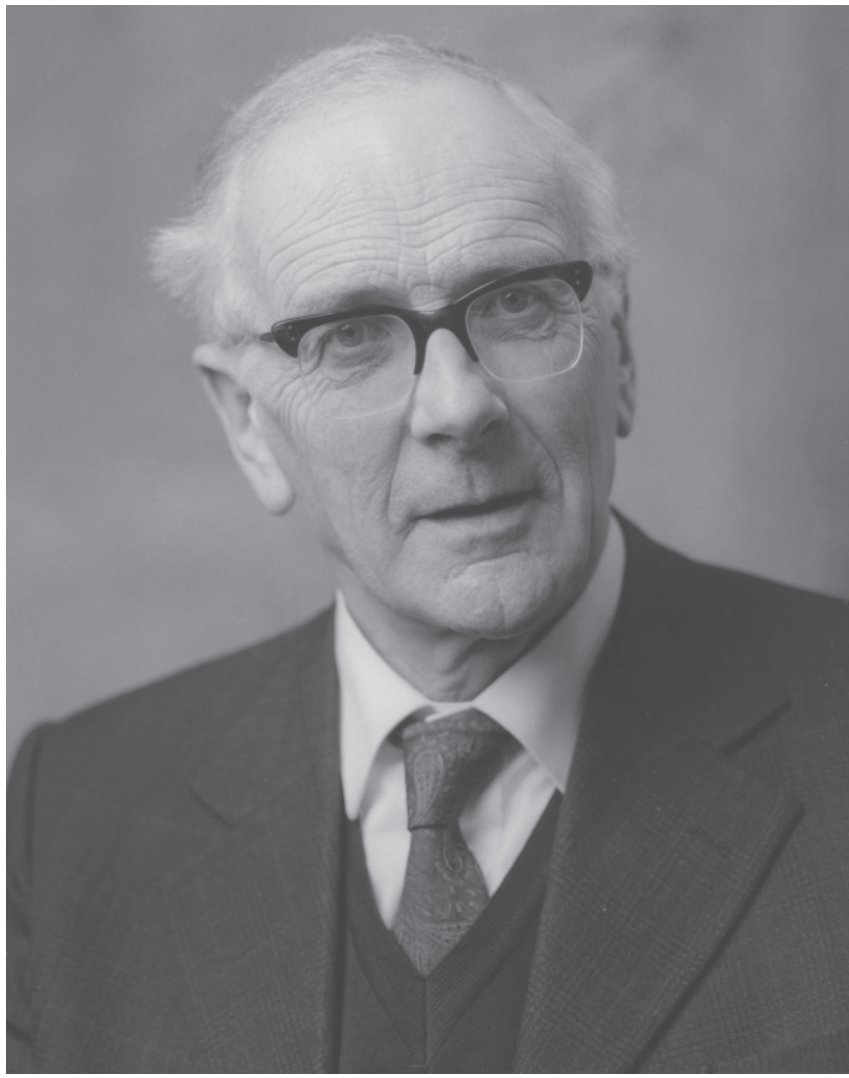

CHRISTOPHER STEAD

George Christopher Stead
1913–2008

George Christopher Stead ('it rhymes with "Creed"') died in Ely on 28 May 2008. He left with the archivist of the Academy a long and informative memoir on which I largely draw and from which I quote liberally in what follows.

Life

Christopher was born on 9 April 1913 in Wimbledon, 'the first, as it turned out, of four children'. His father had read Natural Sciences at King's College Cambridge and been a schoolmaster before joining the Board of Education as an Inspector of Schools shortly before his marriage in 1912; his mother, daughter of a Headmaster of Marlborough, had read Greats at Oxford. The profession of education was, as it were, in the genes. Of his childhood he writes 'I was a conformist, anxious to please, and once my poor eyesight' (never a problem in the later years when I knew him) 'had been detected I began to do rather well at school [King's College Wimbledon] from which I was removed at the age of ten and sent to the Dragon School at Oxford where the competition was keener. This set me apart from my brother and sisters; but in any case we were not a closely united quartet.'

Christopher's account suggests a degree of isolation but no lack of affection when he briefly notes the careers of his brother (who became a consultant physician) and his two sisters. The fact, again, that he mentions nothing about his parents beyond the bare record of their *curricula vitarum*

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is, I think, without significance. Certainly, though, he remembered isolation and initial unhappiness at the Dragon School as a 'diffident, clumsy and short-sighted' prep-school boy, 'a sad handicap in a punch-up' (that sounds ominous!) but 'the teaching was good' and he could rid himself of the place on a bicycle or by canoe. He did not get the scholarship to Winchester he had tried for, was too late to attempt one at Marlborough and went there as a commoner:

> At my Father's urgent insistence [a phrase which *is* significant—his father was evidently, in Jane Austen's words, an 'anxious parent'] I was put a year ahead of the scholars in my age-group [which] later gave me the great advantage of two years in the Classical Upper Sixth under that fine scholar George Sergeaunt, whose teaching made a permanent impression on me. Marlborough was a place of contrasts. The fees were low, the teaching excellent, the living conditions crude; the sanitation unmentionable.

This is the only remark he makes in his memoir about his teaching at any stage of his life. Neither the health of the boys nor their happiness were evidently thought of as of overriding importance at the school; skill at the compulsory games was generally reckoned proportional to worth of character 'and competence at one's lessons brought no recognition'. The level of religious and moral instruction was low, conventional and aridly prescriptive: 'On the credit side the teaching, especially in Classics, Mathematics, Geography and Biology, was outstandingly good.' Natural Science was not in the curriculum and he was sorry to drop Mathematics but his bent was towards Classics and after five years he was top of the Classical Sixth.

He was awarded a scholarship at King's College Cambridge when the competition in 1931 was unusually strong. At King's 'the atmosphere of intellectual excitement was intoxicating';

> The dominant fashion was a literary humanism fostered by close links with Bloomsbury, as represented by Maynard Keynes and George Rylands. For all its brilliance, King's was something of a lotus land; many of us had no ambitions to succeed in business or in public service; our main desire was to perpetuate the cultured intimacy we had just discovered. We were [unknowingly] Epicureans.

As for religion, 'the Chapel was, of course, an admitted marvel, viewed with patronising approval as offering an outstanding aesthetic experience. There was a sizeable, rather self-enclosed band of committed Christians, mostly of High Church sympathies, but in general deficient in influence and intellectual power. I did not feel myself at home either with the orthodox or the agnostics.' He 'read rapidly and widely' in the canon of Greek

and Latin authors: 'Plato struck me like a lightning flash; what I read, in the *Phaedrus* and S*ymposium* especially, was a vision of enlargement and delight but could it possibly be true?' He does not say what the 'it' was; dialogues about Beauty and Love had evidently awakened or echoed feelings he betrays here imprecisely. At any rate, he found Classics insufficient to meet his need to test out the truth of the Platonism which had so thrilled him. Moreover 'new currents were stirring in Cambridge with Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein which threatened to strike a fatal blow at Platonism, and indeed at any philosophy which countenanced an immaterial world, whether as an absolute Good or as a God in heaven. I felt uneasily that William Temple's *Nature, Man and God* was out of date before it was printed' in 1934.

Christopher changed tack to read the Moral Sciences Tripos where philosophy started without benefit of Antiquity or the Middle Ages from Descartes. Richard, later Professor, Braithwaite, whose lectures on the theory of probability and on ethics I myself attended as a student in the mid-1950s and who subsequently embraced a non-metaphysical, bespoke version of Anglicanism, was his tutor. He was encouraged to 'go to Wittgenstein's lectures, which I found bafflingly incomprehensible, but not without the promise of insight'. 'They were a heavy tax on time and energy' which needed to be devoted to the syllabus of the Tripos in the hope that success there might lead to a Fellowship: 'They were totally unstructured, and emotionally charged; a comment from the "floor" might be welcomed with delight or savagely put down. And they could last for three hours at stretch. After a year I gave them up, [and] was rewarded with an original typescript copy of the "Blue Book".' Though he never became a committed disciple of the Master, on one occasion when he had

> . . . screwed up my courage and invited him to tea I felt that I had gained a crumb of approval when I recognised the opening *Kyrie* of Bach's Mass in B minor which he was abstractedly whistling on entry. Could it be that I counted as 'serious'? He gave me some advice on how I might make progress as a philosopher. 'You must never read any philosophical books. Never, ever! They will only muddle you'. He soon relented enough to add that if I read some 17th century medical textbooks, they might prove enlightening.

The advice was prudently disregarded, of course. When I asked Christopher once about Moore's lectures which he had attended, he spoke of them disparagingly. He records here, damning with praise, that he was 'much impressed by the patience and acuity' (scarcely distinctive virtues in a philosopher, for they are necessary requirements equally of plumbers, ticket collectors, traffic wardens, atomic scientists and brain surgeons!)

'displayed in his lectures', but later came to see 'what Wittgenstein should have shown me, that they presupposed a faulty conception of language, as an exact instrument patient of exact analysis': a judgement here on method and his own practice that requires, I think, some nuancing since he frequently appeals to common usage and practice in his work. He had scored the highest marks in Part I of the Classical Tripos in 1933, was placed third in the University Scholarship and awarded the Pitt Scholarship the following year.

A simple First in the Tripos won him a College Studentship and encouragement to 'turn my hand to research'. 'Though' at this time 'harassed by doubts about Christian belief, I still attended chapel, read my New Testament and made some show of saying my prayers. Anglican apologetics I felt were inadequate, though there were some lucid and perceptive writers, such as Oliver Quick.' Vigorous defence of Christian faith he found left to Roman Catholics which suited the King's agnostics: allegedly the only defence and intrinsically absurd it amounted, they said, to adequate self-refutation. The appeal of Roman Catholic apologists to reasoned proof of the existence of God he favoured 'but the proof seemed to depend on a definition of reason that bore no relationship to the commonly accepted understanding of it'; neither Thomas nor the neo-Thomists offered, as it seemed then to him, any help. But friendship with the ever-kindly Dean of King's, Eric Milner-White, and with churchmen of high calibre and comparably high-Anglican religious persuasion did; even if Milner-White's attention to ceremonial worship he thought 'something of an indulgence, distracting attention from the pressing concerns of the time': the current slump, the wars and threats of more war 'to say nothing of the erosion of confidence in the Church's teaching'. He names, with affection, fellow Kingsmen to whom he could speak freely on matters of religion and especially one, Michael Peck, in whose company along with a group of undergraduates he first went sailing on the Norfolk Broads and was thus initiated into a sport which he was to enjoy for the rest of his life. Both 'were on friendly terms with some of the younger Anglo-Catholic clergy in Cambridge who took their lead from a group styled the Oratory of the Good Shepherd, whose senior members included Milner, Wilfred Knox, Charles Smythe and Alec Vidler, the last three being theologians of some note in their various fields'. He prayed more and 'with lingering unease and natural reluctance made private confessions'. He remembers his experience of religion amongst his friends at this time as cheerful: 'in their company laughter was never far away'.

In 1935 he 'arranged for a year at Oxford', where traces of the idealist tradition in philosophy abandoned at Cambridge lingered on, and where he could undertake on his own the sort of research which, forty years on and supervised for a Ph.D., would furnish the normal preparation for aspiring university teachers. He chose to study Kant's *Critique of Judgement.* Closer acquaintance revealed (as it has to most other students of the piece) a work 'in the main pretentious, tedious and ill-constructed, though with occasional flashes of insight. Worse, any useful study of it demanded an acquaintance' with the first two very difficult Critiques: 'I was quite unequal to the task', and the resulting dissertation on Kant's teleology 'made little impression on the Fellowship Electors at King's, who in any case had some brilliant candidates before them, including the mathematician Alan Turing.' Nonetheless, encouraged by the Provost of King's, Jack Sheppard, in December 1937 'I submitted my dissertation again much improved. I had at least partially disentangled the literary history of the *Critique of Judgement*; but my interests were diverted into other channels and I never published my findings. Meanwhile I had come to feel that the right course was to take a stand' (he does not say why or for what or whom) 'and offer myself for Ordination'. His words here scarcely suggest a warmly positive answer to the Bishop's question at the Ordering of Deacons: 'Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you this office and ministration?' And indeed the issue of vocation was to arise later. The Dean on being told of his decision willingly and swiftly procured his entry to Cuddesdon Theological College for the following term. The absence from Christopher's account of any interview with a diocesan Bishop on deciding to offer himself for the Ministry need not surprise: he would, I take it, have been eligible for admission to Holy Orders on the basis of a Fellowship so that a necessary but not sufficient condition was soon to be, though it had not yet been, satisfied. It *is* perhaps surprising that he sought entry to a seminary at all or would commit himself to serve in a parish. At any rate, after a brief Italian holiday he entered Cuddesdon and six weeks into term learned by telegram that he had been offered a Fellowship (worth £300 p.a.) and a college Lectureship in Divinity (worth £115); 'More to the point, it made me a teaching officer of the College, so that I could expect my Fellowship to be renewed more or less indefinitely.'

His career was now assured but its plan changed: he would stay at Cuddesdon for a year only 'and then spend a year in a town parish to gain some experience of normal clerical life before taking up my post at King's'.

The adjective 'clerical' might profitably be suppressed: he had moved so far (though that was not, and is not still, unusual) from one corner of the grove of Academia to another surrounded by men from King's, without experience of any other pattern of existence. He would be made deacon by the Bishop of Lincoln, the Visitor of King's, with, apparently, no examination requirements or dealings with a Bishop's Examining Chaplain whether of Lincoln or of the diocese of Newcastle in which he was to serve. He did not find Cuddesdon congenial. His immediate contemporaries were Anglicans of a distinctly ultramontane persuasion: 'my new associates were expecting [after ordination] to gabble through the Communion Service at top speed, making time thereby to interpret large sections of the Latin Missal which was their real authority'. They tolerated him as an eccentric. Made deacon in Lincoln Cathedral in December 1938, 'I was to be acting curate at St John's Newcastle, whose Vicar, Bill Baker, had been Chaplain at King's when I first went up. Though no scholar, he was a kind and understanding master.' Mornings were to be spent at the Literary Institute with his books; visits to parishioners to occupy him from 2 p.m. till Evensong at 6. The Parish was lively 'and the atmosphere of charity and devotion impressive, sustained by a discipline of frequent and fasting communion and regular confession, at least before major festivals'; the scarcely legal ceremonial made him uneasy. 'I had absorbed some Franciscan ideals, and thought that priests should be poor and dress plainly; and certainly our life at the Vicarage was fairly austere': baths infrequent and only hot water in a thermos to shave in:

> I was, of course, mildly teased by my fellow curates, and quite fairly so, as I had prospects of a much more comfortable existence than they had. One thing they found comic and incomprehensible was that for private devotion I used a chapel where the blessed Sacrament was not reserved. My friends clearly held that consecration effected a miraculous change in the elements, so that God was uniquely present in a little box on the altar.

The war broke out and he found himself in charge of children, ill-clad and worse shod, 'evacuated [from the Parish] to Seascale a small waterplace on the Cumberland coast'. His first task was bicycling round to find them clogs. The expected blitz did not come and after a few weeks the children went home. His year as it seems of slumming, rather than anything you could call training, at St John's was up and he was due to be priested in December. He found to the dismay of his friends that he could not in conscience do so: 'The conceptions of the Eucharist that I had absorbed required me, as it seemed, to regard the act of consecration as a kind of miraculous pseudo-chemistry; the Roman Catholic theory of

transubstantiation was philosophically untenable, and I had found no coherent explanation to replace it.' He does not say where he had looked. The language is disconcertingly crude and naïve: 'miraculous change in the elements', 'little box on the altar', 'pseudo-chemistry'. Clearly, if he is offering a veridical account of his feelings at the time (and conversions, reversions and revelations are subject to later reconstruction in memory) he suffered from a serious deficiency in theological education. He had, after all, never, so far as one can see, been taught the subject systematically. He was an autodidact, and the disadvantage which self-teaching carries with it even to a self so naturally talented now, I would think, showed. Cheerful conversations with friends and indeed deep discussions with his seniors on religious matters, useful though they might have been, were no substitute for a theological education and he had not yet, so far as I can see, encountered the patristic authors on whose works he was to become an outstanding authority.

He returned to King's in the New Year in a frame of uncertainty about his future but clear that he wanted to continue in Church ministry at some level and in some fashion; he was appointed to a post at Eton where he could exercise his diaconate and would teach classics. The friendship and good sense of his colleagues was a support and solace: 'It was a year or two, however, before I tumbled to the obvious fact that numbers of my fellow-Anglicans could happily serve as priests without binding themselves to regard the Eucharist as more than a symbolic action to commemorate Christ's sacrifice and associate ourselves in fellowship with him.' I think this minimalist if not begrudging interpretation of the Eucharist may be understood as his own. Baptism, which might be thought to present parallel and equal problems for him, he does not mention. He left no discussion about, and I never heard him touch on, the subject of the Sacraments; I guess it was a sore point. In 1943 he was priested. He does not say by whom or where; the experience, it may be supposed, was not the important occasion it is to many or most others. He writes of enjoying his time as a schoolmaster for which he had received no training even of the apprenticeship kind: 'I made some initial mistakes; but I tried hard to make my teaching interesting and where possible amusing, and I think I had some success.'

The war ended and it was time to return to King's 'and try to prepare myself for university work. This was a bad miscalculation. I had been sustained by the excitement and enjoyment of my teaching and quite failed to realise how exhausted I had become.' The first term at King's was 'miserable and unproductive'; he suffered a mild nervous collapse which

responded to 'heavy sedation; but recovery was rather slow': 'Returning to King's I gradually found my feet; but my post there proved undemanding.' King's admitted few theologians so he had few pupils and 'it was obvious that I needed a good deal more reading to qualify as a competent teacher of theology. But my classical training gave me easy access to the New Testament, and I regularly attended the seminars of that enthralling teacher C. H. Dodd.' He thought of research in Philosophy of Religion but was not invited to lecture in the Faculty of Divinity. These years were 'unproductive' and, I guess, frustrating. They were 'relieved by some delightful open-air diversions'; 'I had kept in touch with the Eton Scout Troops and was invited to join the Senior Scouts for their summer camps.' He writes of this experience, as he does elsewhere extensively of his sailing, with evident pleasure and satisfaction. His time, empty of academic or pastoral duties, he will have occupied in the theological reading he knew he needed.

At the encouraging suggestion of R. H. Lightfoot, 'a fine New Testament scholar who had been my Moral Tutor during the year I spent at New College in 1935–36', he applied for a vacant post at Keble as Chaplain and Tutor in Theology. The Warden, Harry Carpenter, subsequently Bishop of Oxford, interviewed him:

> I liked what I saw apart from the architecture, a sad let-down after King's. The post would give me pastoral responsibility as Chaplain, and a full teaching programme in theology, though without much chance of using my philosophical training. The duties in the Chapel itself were not too demanding, as the Warden was in charge and made all the arrangements.

When Christopher agreed unenthusiastically to wear vestments and to celebrate the Eucharist two or three times during the week as well as on Sundays 'perhaps he realised that he had appointed the most nearly Protestant Chaplain in the history of the College'. By 'most nearly Protestant', of course, he does not mean 'crypto-Calvinist' or the like, but 'most unanglocatholic' in terms of the Church politics of the day: in liturgical ceremonial, Eucharistic practice and personal religious discipline. 'Protestant' in any dogmatic sense I think he never was:

> Rather to my surprise, for I was then 35, he said that it was fortunate that I was unmarried, and that it would be a benefit to my work if I remained so for a time. Unlike my old Cambridge friends I had never thought of myself as celibate. I made a private bargain [evidently not a vow] to wait seven years before thinking seriously of matrimony.

Keble was in process of changing its status so as to be recognised as a full and self-governing college in the full sense, its Warden being a Clerk

in Holy Orders: 'There were not many clever men at Keble, but the atmosphere in the college was excellent, and the dons without exception were on cordial terms with their pupils.' Undergraduates at the time, to whom I have spoken, found him aloof at first but kind and warm on further acquaintance. The Fellowship was small (the Warden plus eleven) but quite high-powered academically; not so the undergraduates: too many uneducable ordinands were, Christopher complains, admitted. He had visited Germany in 1948 and had heard 'the veteran Karl Barth, who never flagged in an address lasting three hours'. The visits were renewed in his Keble years, enabling him to speak good German and to make important friendships with leading German scholars. Teaching and Chaplaincy duties proved a heavy charge on his time and energy: 'I lost confidence in my abilities as philosopher; I was finding it difficult to follow the professionals in discussion, and seldom joined in.' In a group 'The Metaphysicals' (to which belonged Austin Farrer, Eric Mascall and Richard Hare) he found stimulation:

> On investigation I discovered that there was practically no literature which attempted to relate theistic belief to the more sophisticated linguistic empiricism which was then emerging. After some discussion we agreed to produce a volume of essays, for which indeed I suggested the title; *Faith and Logic*, 1957, was edited by Basil Mitchell; and the essay I wrote was my first substantial published work.

Dissatisfied with the philosophical calibre of the standard histories of early Christian doctrine which it had fallen to him to teach, he 'began to work on the concept of substance about 1958, and the first result was an essay "The significance of the *Homoousios*", which I read at the Oxford Patristic Conference of 1959; but many years of further work were needed before I was able to publish *Divine Substance* in November 1977' (I discuss it below).

Engagement to Elizabeth Odom, an executant musician and pianoforte teacher of distinction, that same year was followed by marriage in April 1958. The 'private bargain' or vow had been redeemed at the age of 45. From the time that he moved out of College to live in Oxford itself, 'though I think my teaching and research were both improving, I became far less useful to the College as Chaplain'. There were strains: the Chaplain had an inferior role to the Warden's though he might be senior in years; he had got on tolerably if imperfectly with Austin Farrer, Harry Carpenter's successor; but relations with Dennis Nineham who followed were impaired by 'a divergence in ideas [which] became noticeable to the undergraduates'. The relevant 'ideas' he does not specify.

It was, at any rate, time to leave Keble and to occupy a professorial Chair. He did so not at Christ Church where he might have been expected to succeed F. L. Cross, but at Cambridge, the Ely Chair, which carried with it a residentiary canonry at the Cathedral. This was peculiarly satisfying to him. He does not complain about the dreary drive on foggy evenings between Ely and Cambridge and he derived much pleasure from the house, the 'Black Hostelry', and the companionship with his wife Elizabeth and their family of two sons and a daughter, not to mention the space for his model railway it afforded. In 1978 he was made a Litt.D., I assume on the basis of the book and published essays. He retired from the joint Chair and Canonry in 1980 at the age of 67. He was its last occupant. In the same year he was elected Fellow of the Academy: 'I was already too old to play much part in routine business, but my advice was sometimes accepted and I much enjoyed the dinners and the other opportunities of meeting with the Great and the Good.' Lectures to undergraduates (they were, I understand, clear and well-delivered if a trifle old-fashioned in scope) and teaching of research students (where, not himself having been taught to research, he was not perhaps at his best) ceased on retirement, of course; but he presided at conferences, chaired the Senior Patristic Seminar of the Divinity Faculty excellently with characteristic good sense and energy, and I saw him at work regularly in the University Library at a time in life when most have ceased from labour. The Festschrift we presented to him on his eightieth birthday pleased him.[1] He saw through the Cambridge University Press in 1994 his *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*. A cardiac arrest during the Oxford Patristic Conference of August 1995 when he was due to deliver a paper on Arius (I refer to it below) set him back temporarily. Otherwise, he remained remarkably vigorous right up to his final decade. He had been a late-developer: it took many years for him to find his role and subject and to become the expert and internationally recognised scholar he eventually was. Long life and perseverance enabled him to continue in the one and work at the other for a time correspondingly long. I miss him. I picture him softly, politely and with the manner of a don and a 'typical English Christian gentleman' (as a Dutch friend said to me) advising tourists in Cambridge who were sitting on the low wall round King's in Trumpington Street to refrain from this infringement of the universalisability of a moral imperative: 'Think what would happen if *everybody* were to do that!' Such a very nice and good man!

[1] L. R. Wickham and C. P. Bammel (eds.), *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Prof. Stead's 80th Birthday* (Leiden, 1993).

Writings

I pass to description and comment on a selection of the published work which, beginning at Keble, filled his years at Ely and Cambridge from the middle 1970s, starting with his first published piece at the age of 44: the essay, 'How theologians reason'.[2] It cannot be accounted one of his successes but everyone has to start somewhere (as Debussy is supposed to have said to Stravinsky after the first performance of *Firebird*). The essay is insipid in style and with that vacuity of content which arises from allusion to ideas and discussions beyond the scope of the piece. The reader learns, scarcely with surprise, that theology comes in various forms and that theologians argue in various ways and think that they are saying various true things. The essay is written, as Christopher himself says in his memoir, against the background of the style and method of a decreasingly rigid Anglophone philosophy of logical empiricism. R. B. Braithwaite's *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge, 1955) and the essay by John Wisdom, also of Cambridge, 'Gods',[3] are named in the essay and were certainly at the time thought important as in opposite ways undermining theology. The book as a whole was an attempt to renovate the building or at least shore up the collapsing fabric. Opinions on both the book and Christopher's essay may differ but all can agree that if Christopher had died at the age of 45 he would have been justly forgotten as a scholar.

As he says himself, and I have recorded above, his interest in contemporary philosophy had waned and his thoughts were taking a different turn by directing his attention to the philosophical theology of Christian writers of the first four centuries. The next publication marks the change. In 1961 he published the essay 'The significance of the *Homoousios*'. It stands first in the collection of his papers reprinted in 1985 under the title *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* (London, 1985). He writes in its Preface:

> As long ago as 1960 I had begun to think that much of the energy devoted to the study of early Christian thought was misapplied … Theologians conversant with the primary crystallization of Christian doctrine, and well instructed in its technical details, appeared ill-qualified and uncertain in their approach to the central issues of the existence and nature of God; and those philosophers who,

[2] In B. Mitchell (ed.), *Faith and Logic: Oxford Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, 1957), pp. 108–31.
[3] *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 45 (1944), 185–200.

> to their credit, engaged those issues with full seriousness tended to confine themselves to well-known points of difficulty, such as the existence of evil in a world supposedly governed by a loving Father; fuller information lay ready to hand in histories of doctrine, but was presented to them in a form which no doubt struck them as uncritical, confusing trivialities with questions of real moment.

He could find words to praise J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1959, and subsequently revised and reprinted several times) but that book despite being 'well instructed in its technical details' does present many difficulties to the student of the subject, particularly the beginning student (I speak from experience), by introducing a multiplicity of ideas and arguments whose rational basis is left obscure.

Christopher's aim, throughout his scholarly work, was to lay bare and *explain.* He was very good at it, as this first piece in 1961 shows. It is a fine example of his mature thinking. All the features that distinguish his work and made it fresh at the time are apparent here: clarity and directness, thoroughness of research, a gift for illustration of a technical point of logic from plain examples; and the, perhaps most noticeable, sign of an essay on some patristic theme's being his very own—the presence in it of critical appraisal. Though he was, sometimes and in other contexts, to voice sharply destructive criticism, his appraisals are usually conducted, as in this first essay, so that sympathy with the ancient writer is preserved. But there is, I think, never an author whom Christopher discusses at any length who escapes demonstration of the unreliability of some feature in his argument. Here in this essay he is very mild; even those who treated, and indeed still treat, the fathers as little less august than the Bible (and there were certainly such at the Patristic Conference in 1959 where the piece was delivered) could not feel threatened:

> In developing his metaphors, Athanasius writes *currente calamo* without subjecting every phrase to a rigorous logical scrutiny. If we insist that every phrase shall pass such a test—if we try to interpret Athanasius in the same spirit as he interpreted the Bible!—we shall encounter loosely-constructed arguments and what look like logical blunders. It is a mistake to exploit these in a rationalising spirit.

Neither are we, I paraphrase, to suppose Athanasius did not mean *au plein sérieux* exactly what he wrote, and I should add 'sc. and was entirely wrong!'

I will take a brief look later at his essays on Athanasius and Arius where Christopher bruises the reputation of the one and pours balm upon that of the other. It is enough to emphasise here that he is usually fair:

even Plato, his inspiration at the beginning of his intellectual awakening and 'probably the greatest of the Greek philosophers', is held to make mistakes as when 'in spite of the admitted difficulties he clung to the [false] belief that there was an Idea corresponding to every common name': 'Aristotle's treatment of being and substance is affected by some very persistent confusions.' If Plato and Aristotle can be found committing obvious errors there is no chance that others lower down, as it were, in the list of successful candidates in the great Ultimate Tripos of Intellectual Achievement which Christopher was wont mentally to draw up, will escape much stronger criticism. Augustine is rebuked on a number of counts, Gregory of Nyssa chided for confidence trickery, and similarly the rest are weighed in the balance: kindly, gently but confidently. It is, you might say, 'very Cambridge'. It is the style and voice of Moore writing (in *Principia Ethica*: Cambridge, 1903) 'though the state of the man who is angry may be really as bad in itself as that of the murderer, and so far Christ may be right, His language would lead us to suppose … that it *also causes* as much evil and this is utterly false'; and of Russell coolly dismantling the metaphysics of Leibniz in the both wonderful and ghastly monograph he devoted to him (*A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*: London, 1951); not to mention Wittgenstein and his advice to Christopher. Nobody is immune to error or shall be above criticism; the most admired intellects often voice absurd thoughts; and it is a duty to point out the absurdity: something like that is the unexpressed deontic enthymeme Christopher accepted and lived by. It suggests a beautiful and rather touching attitude to the philosophical enterprise: so pure, so dreadfully naïve. The novelties in this 1961 essay, aside from its candid approach to the subject and to ancient and respected authors, are, first, an important step he takes in the clarification of the term *homoousios*: the attempt to explain the term by reference to Aristotle's distinction between first and second substance is mistaken. Though he allows for the indirect influence of Aristotle in the distinction between substance and accidents, *ousia* ('substance') and the related concepts of identity, similarity and dissimilarity take on a different scope and raised (and this is the second novelty) special and explicable logical problems when used to construct and expound the Christian doctrine of God, Father and Son. That he thought the logical problems *explicable* is a basic ingredient of his thinking: the Christian religion deals with unutterable mysteries but appealing to alleged paradoxes without attempt to resolve them is useless. Since the question at issue for this essay is the logical basis for the terminology at the time of its adoption, it is Athanasius' usage which is chosen for exemplification and

discussion; to Athanasius he was later to devote much time and energy. Athanasius' usage is here shown conclusively to give the lie to G. L. Prestige's oversimplified, indeed false, presentation of the patristic doctrine of God which serves Christopher as a *cantus firmus* or perhaps, more exactly, *corpus vile* for the essay as a whole.

Ideas appearing in this essay were to be repeated and expanded in the book *Divine Substance* which was published in 1977 (Oxford). It had been preceded by several essays of importance to which I will briefly revert later. The first printing sold 1,500 copies and a second, in the year 2000, out of 200 copies sold 193. Christopher was, I guess, more disappointed than he allows to show.

> It was well reviewed, but did not achieve the circulation we [i.e. editorial 'we'] had hoped for. Owing to illness at the University Press, all the hard work which John Cordy and I had put in to commend it to the attention of philosophers was wasted, and it appeared in their [i.e. OUP] catalogue among the theology books without even a cross-reference to the philosophy section.

The 1978 review by Richard Hanson in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* articulates the difficulty for Church historians and theologians presented by the book:[4] for the non-philosophically adept it oscillates disconcertingly between logical problems and their resolution in ancient and modern thought, and Christian doctrine. Christopher explains the scope of the book when he writes in the Preface:

> This study belongs partly to logic, partly to the history of ancient philosophy, and partly to theology. I intend to review the concept of substance as developed by the ancient Greek philosophers, and especially by Aristotle; and then to consider how, when, and in what degree this concept affected the doctrine of God developed by Christian writers of the first four centuries A.D., and especially the Trinitarian concept of one God in three persons … I have not conceived this as a purely historical study; on the contrary I have tried to give serious attention to the logical problems presented by terms like 'being', 'identity' and 'unity'… [and] to examine the works of some philosophers, and of some Christian thinkers who used their ideas, with the object of reaching a precise understanding of the conceptual and logical apparatus with which they conducted their thoughts about God. For my part I believe that the problems with which they were concerned were real problems and that their attempted solutions have a permanent value for Christian thought. But I hope that I shall have something to say to historians and philosophers who do not share this belief; and I shall try to base my discussion in the neutral territories of philology and the history of ideas.

[4] *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 29 (1978), 93–4.

He goes on to suggest how the book is to be read: 'the first few chapters' would not overtax readers with an elementary knowledge of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics; chapters 8 and 9, though, entitled *Homoousios* and *Nicaea,* deal with matters of Christian teaching and controversy which might be skipped. The suggestion and its uptake proved mutually at odds. The first few chapters were unread by the philosophers either entirely or at least in part for the reason he himself gave: that it was not brought to their attention; and they confused the theologians. Chapters 8 and 9 and the Conclusion will have interested and greatly profited the theologians who read them; as some, but not many, did. Those chapters, and in particular the Conclusion, are indeed the best things in the book. There in the Conclusion he explains that though he can sympathise with objections to talk of 'substance', he finds it inadequate to say with John Robinson (a bishop, New Testament theologian and temporarily a figure of popular notoriety): 'We must naturally locate reality, not in another realm, but as the profoundest truth of this one.' No, 'to characterise God as a substance is to stake a claim against reductionist theories which in effect represent God as dependent on the human experience he is invoked to explain'; and that is sufficient justification for the enterprise on which he has been engaged in the book.

However, it is not only the failure to find his readership and fulfil their different expectations in a single scheme, which was perhaps an impossible task in any case, that make the book (I write with the candour he would not have disallowed) an incomplete success. It is the fact that though there are good observations in the exposition of Aristotle and some witty illustrations, the attempt to wed him to contemporary logical theory comes to grief in a number of predictable ways but in particular with 'existence'/'exist' and synonymous concepts, notions, words or whatever aspect and title they are regarded under. It will not do for Christopher to accept that to exist is to be 'the referent of a bound variable' and in almost the same breath to speak of a category of 'being'. I suggest that if the book had been exposed to any detailed philosophical review this part of it would have incurred just censure and indeed ridicule. He believed, I think, in an odd sort of way, that all reasonable modern persons of good will and good sense could accept the epistemology and ontology of the standard patristic writers, founded securely as these were on the logic and metaphysics of Aristotle, granted their correction through the improvements of logic as initiated by Frege and others. I treat of his other book below where there is some nuancing of his views. But in voicing this criticism of, in effect, the first five chapters I do not wish to overlook the strength of

the later material from chapter 6 onward. Here he turns to issues of immediate concern to Christian theologians. I have mentioned above his discussion of *homoousios* in the essay of 1961. He deals with the same word in chapter 8, giving an exhaustive history of the term and cataloguing the recorded instances. Learned essays will continue to be written about the issues raised by the adoption of the term but its meaning and logical implications have been adequately explained here.

He deals in several essays with the interpretation of what is generally called the 'Arian' controversy, with the views of Arius, so far as they are known from the sparse remnants of their presentation, and the ample writings of Athanasius. To these I now turn and begin with an untypical essay, of which Christopher was evidently proud.[5] He writes:

> Among my shorter papers, was that on the *Thalia* of Arius. I succeeded in showing that the passages quoted by Athanasius could be understood as a coherent metrical text, or rather series of extracts and Arius' theology could be reconstructed from these fragments; the accounts given by Athanasius, which were commonly regarded as authoritative, merely reflected the fragments, showing clear traces of Athanasius' own polemical and dogmatic interests. Despite much hard work, I failed to identify the metre [that appears to have been done by M. L. West in a subsequent issue of the *Journal of Theological Studies*[6]] but overall, considering the importance of the Arian controversy in the formation of Christian doctrine, I think my clarification of Arius' position was a useful contribution to historical scholarship.

In that thought he was certainly correct. But I do not believe that it was either the most influential or the most far-reaching in its implications for learned investigation of the principles of the controversy. I think that was probably the first of his essays on Arius in 1964, 'The Platonism of Arius'.[7] The piece appeared at a time of interest in Arius revived in part by Maurice Wiles through an essay, 'In defence of Arius', which appeared in the same journal in 1962.[8] I remember being fascinated and slightly alarmed on reading it. Its main contention, that Arius proposed a doctrine of Christ which made of Arius an adopted son of God by grace, was certainly wrong and misleading: it was based upon a false interpretation of a half-line in the *Thalia* and Christopher rejected Maurice Wiles's view, though he makes no allusion to it in this essay. This interpretation misled a couple

[5] 'The *Thalia* of Arius and the testimony of Athanasius', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 29 (1978), 20–52.
[6] 'The metre of Arius' *Thalia*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33 (1982), 98–105.
[7] *Journal of Theological Studies*, 15 (1964), 16–31.
[8] *Journal of Theological Studies*, 13 (1962), 339–47.

of American scholars, Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh (who published a stimulating book in 1981, *Early Arianism: a View of Salvation*: London), but not Christopher. The theme of his essay is the influence of Plato on Arius. He proves with the due modesty of cautious scholarship, but I would judge conclusively, that what Platonism is to be detected in Arius comes filtered through a general Church tradition deriving from Origen. However, the essay had in it a discussion of contemporary Platonism sufficient to encourage and mislead Rowan Williams into exploring further the implications of possible neo-Platonic influence on Arius' arguments and to hypothesise in his monograph on Arius in 1987, dedicated to Christopher, whiffs and rather more than whiffs of Plotinus, Porphyry and others.[9]

Never one to permit corrigible error even at the risk of offence to his dearest and most respected friends and perhaps conscious that he had in this case been himself half the cause of the error, Christopher prepared a response and corrective for delivery at the Oxford Patristic Conference, 'Was Arius a Neoplatonist?' The question is, of course, rhetorical and the answer 'no'. He did not deliver the paper himself; Providence or fate intervened and the cardiac arrest I have mentioned earlier occurred. The published paper is characteristically exhaustive and the conclusion decisive:[10]

> Arius stands at the furthest remove … from Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus. I have tried to show that his supposed dependence on various points of their doctrine is illusory. But even if I am here mistaken, and there were some traces of dependence, nevertheless any sort of general agreement is out of the question. I have to conclude that Dr Williams has been advancing, with great ingenuity and learning, a theory which we must reject as unfounded.

Nobody could resent such a rebuttal cast in terms so gracious; indeed one might after a fashion welcome it.

The observations about Arius forward the discussion and increase understanding; an interesting and even fortunate mistake is corrected in a constructive way. I pass over other essays on Arius to mention two: 'The word from nothing' belonging to 1998; and 'The Arian controversy: a new perspective' to 1990. The 1998 essay presents his final interpretation of Arius.[11] Starting from this phrase of Arius he demonstrates that it was capable of interpretation in a number of ways. In Arius' hands (I paraphrase) it

[9] Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London, 1987).
[10] *Studia Patristica*, 31 (1997), 39–52.
[11] *Journal of Theological Studies*, 49 (1990), 671–84.

was a bad choice of weaponry and, coupled with emphasis on Proverbs 8:22 where Wisdom is described as 'created', made Arius vulnerable. But basically there was nothing so outrageous according to the standard of conventional theology of the time as to warrant the abuse to which Arius has been subjected: 'The Christian Church has much to deplore in its treatment of him. … Perhaps the most useful lesson we can draw is the unwisdom of befogging the minds of simple believers with expressions that are better suited to the lecture-room and the theological journal.' The other essay makes the same assessment but in a different way.[12] It is a humorous piece: the sort of answer Arius might have made to Athanasius cast in the form of an allegedly pseudepigraphical letter or apology. Christopher told me how amused he was to find that some po-faced reader of the German journal in which the piece originally appeared had missed the joke and taken the thing for real. But the joke conceals the serious point that Athanasius is shown often to have made use of arguments poor by the standards of the time and Arius to have had a good deal of right on his side. A 1976 essay, 'Rhetorical method in Athanasius',[13] makes the same point: Athanasius used the methods of persuasive oratory to present his case against 'Arianism' and some of these are certainly designed 'to make the worse appear the better cause'. All twenty-eight topics listed by Aristotle are shown to be present in Athanasius' rebutting of his opponents. Christopher provides the best possible defence of Arius and mounts the most damaging case against Athanasius by simply demonstrating the techniques involved.

I pass over the rest of Christopher's essays to note and comment briefly on his second book: *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1994). The work first appeared in German translation by Christian Wildberg and edited by A. M. Ritter in 1990. What I take to be the English original was published in 1994 by Cambridge University Press; 326 copies of the hardback and 4,462 of the paperback have so far been sold. Judging by these numbers, and including the stampings on the copy I borrowed from Cambridge University Library, I would think that the book in its English version (I do not know about the German) has found a need and fulfilled it. To appreciate the book it must be recognised that it is not written with the experts in mind. There is no Greek text and its chapters are concise. The book resembles in one respect a typical feature of a paper by its

[12] It appeared in H. Eisenberger (ed.), *Epmhneymata: Festschrift für Hadwig Hörner zum sechzigsten Geburtsag* (Heidelberg, 1990), pp. 51–9.
[13] *Vigiliae Christianae*, 30 (1976), 121–37.

author and perhaps of an undergraduate lecture of his too: it would have a dull start so that the listener might doubt whether it was worthwhile continuing and wonder if there was not something better to do with the time; by page one and a half it had become more interesting and by the conclusion very interesting indeed.

Part One, 'The philosophical background', plods its worthy way through the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle and starts to walk with more spring in the step when he gets to chapter 7 and late antiquity. Chapter 8 (headed 'The debate about Christian philosophy') begins Part Two, 'The use of philosophy in Christian Theology', and goes more briskly. There he writes that there is no such thing as a self-standing

> Christian philosophy: philosophy moulded Christian beliefs about God without itself being a philosophy; only a few of the early Christian Fathers can properly claim to rank as philosophers; for the majority, the commitment to philosophy is too uncertain and their achievement, as philosophers too slight.

Augustine, who is an exception because he did make an original contribution, is to be the subject of Part Three. Chapter 9, 'Greek and Hebrew conceptions of God', drags initially: Christopher knew no Hebrew, so far as I am aware, and relies on those who do to explain the Old Testament to him; it shows. The next chapters deal with the doctrine of God and its expression with the help of philosophy. There is much to value in the chapters: telling examples drawn from the sources, clear exposition of the logic behind the arguments. The final Part Three is on Augustine. Nobody who knows the works of Augustine can write badly on him but these two chapters seem to me very good. It is an advantage that he had read the sycophantic literature of the professional Augustine bores and expressly did not follow them. He writes objectively and coolly but with respect for the author. It is an admirable exercise in critical exegesis.

If I try to express the value I believe to be found in Christopher's work as a whole, I think I must say that it is not to be chiefly found in either of the books. *Divine Substance* seems to me flawed, though in the exposition of the philosophy inherent in the Christian tradition as it developed in the first four centuries superbly learned and clear. *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* embodies and transmits research but does not advance it and was not intended to do so. For that one must go to the essays. I believe that the careful study Christopher devoted there to problems of interpretation, particularly of Athanasius and Arius but of other writers too, and of semantic and epistemological issues in the construction of Trinitarian theology, has contributed to a better understanding of both the importance

of the one and the place of the other in the whole history of Christian thought. He wanted, I think, to do more: to persuade, indeed to demonstrate, that the Christian tradition, at least as developed in the Nicene and immediately post-Nicene period, was valid and its formulation viable. That he may not have done. But his work has explained how it is possible to find those adjectives appropriate.

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