There is little or no trace in the first Christian decades of a Christianity unmarked by devotion to Jesus as a living agent. Even allowing for the most sceptical reading of the Gospels and Acts, we can say that within about twenty-five years from the likeliest date of Jesus’ crucifixion, he was being invoked by Christians as a source of divine favour and almost certainly addressed in public prayer at Christian assemblies. The concluding verses of Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth (16.22–23) illustrate both things, with the ambiguous Aramaic formula, maranatha, strongly suggesting a direct address to the glorified Jesus as Lord, and the reference to ‘grace’ stemming from Jesus identifying him as a bestower of the kind of favour that is normally to be looked for from God. Without entering into the very involved question of how far Jewish piety at the time accepted a cult of angelic powers, we can at least say with certainty that Jesus was, within a generation of his death, regarded as present to and in the believing community, the object of personal devotion, the recipient of personal address. He is coming again to act as judge; but in the meantime, he is not absent, and his future judgement can in some ways be anticipated or affected by the present decisions of the church and especially of its charismatic leaders, acting ‘in’ the Spirit of Jesus (e.g. 1 Cor 5.4–5). By the end of the first Christian century, this presence of Jesus and anticipation of his return and judgement have become both pervasive and pictorially vivid in Christian literature. Luke depicts the first martyr Stephen commending his spirit to Jesus (Acts 7.59) as Jesus had commended his to the Father (Luke 23.46); the writer of the Revelation depicts Jesus as bearing the title and the attributes of the God of Israel (Rev 1.11, cf. Isa 44.6; and compare the pictorial details with the divine manifestations e.g. in Dan 7 and Ezek 1), and issuing sentences upon the Christian communities of western Asia Minor.

If we are to speak of ‘devotion’ to Jesus in the first days of the Christian church, this is where we must start. It is not helpful to speculate about some supposed primitive phase in which a dead leader was remembered with...
warmth, ‘devotion’ in the loosest sense; our primary literary sources show something more robust, a conviction that human destinies are decided by a heavenly Lord who may be spoken to, prayed to, even adored as God is adored (Rev 1.17). Those who receive his Spirit are able to understand something of the judgements that he will pronounce when he comes in glory, and to transmit these judgements to the church (the seer of Revelation, like Paul, is ‘in the Spirit’ when he sees the glorified Jesus, and hears his messages to the churches; Rev 1.10). It may seem a sombre picture in some respects; but it is softened by the pervasive association of ‘grace’ with the figure of Jesus, primarily but not at all exclusively in Paul. Jesus’ appearing in judgement is longed for rather than feared (cf. 2 Tim 4.8); the favour, light and love now experienced by the believer are themselves the anticipation of an encounter that will not end in condemnation (Rom 8.1; cf. 1 John 3–4, passim). In this sense, devotion to Jesus is an eager looking towards him in the expectation of seeing in him not simply the decisive judgement of God but the beauty or splendour of God (2 Cor 4.6).

We know from Pliny’s celebrated letter to the emperor Trajan in AD 112 that Christians at their meetings addressed hymns to Christ ‘as to a god’ (Letters, 10.96). Not many early exemplars of such hymnody survive, though those that do are of great interest. The Odes of Solomon, which emanate from a Syriac milieu in the second century, build up a sophisticated and rich repertoire of metaphors for Jesus and his work: he is the ‘crown’ that saved humanity is to wear, the ‘mind’ or ‘thought’ of God, the ‘name’ given to Christians to put on or receive (a common theme in early Christian writing, echoing the very ancient prayers of the Didache). Around the end of the second century, we have a hymn by Clement of Alexandria, attached to the end of his treatise on the Christian teacher (Paidagogos), addressing Christ as a horse-tamer, bridling the wild passions of the human soul. One of the most ancient and durable hymns, the φῶς ἱλαρόν, which may go back to the second century, addresses Jesus in terms strikingly close to the language of 2 Cor: he is ‘the joyful radiance of the immortal Father’s glory’.

Some of the language of early Alexandrian theology in particular similarly emphasises the role of Jesus as the visible manifestation of the invisible God, the mediator, not so much of salvation or forgiveness as of true perception of the divine nature. The earliest theologian to stress this theme, however, is not an Alexandrian, but an émigré from Asia Minor, Irenaeus, who became bishop of Lyons in France; and for him Jesus’ role as revealer immediately connects with a further and more profound set of considerations. Jesus reveals because of his own relation to the Father; because his face is wholly turned to the Father, it reflects his glory. For us to know and
recognise that glory, we must be brought into that relation – a fundamental theme of Paul and John in the New Testament (Rom 8, John 17, among much else), which Irenaeus develops extensively. Jesus is an example, not only in the sense of being a model of behaviour we ought to imitate (again a New Testament theme, as in Matt 11.29; 1 Cor 11.1), but as a paradigm of relation to God as Father. Our attention or devotion to him is a kind of tracing the contour of his life so as to see its conformity to the Father’s character and purpose; we are to pick up the essential clues as to how to recognise what it is to be a child of the heavenly Father by looking single-mindedly at him (cf. Heb 12.2). Being in the Spirit is not only or even primarily a gift of prophetic alignment with the ultimate judgement of Jesus, but entails the gift of sharing Jesus’ relation with the Father, beginning to love God as parent with the same confidence as Jesus shows.

It is important when looking at the earliest days of Christianity to remember that Jesus is seldom if ever presented primarily as any kind of moral exemplar, someone whose values and priorities (in contemporary terms) we are encouraged to share or reproduce. Certainly there is a pattern of behaviour that grows out of the contemplation of the narrative of Jesus (e.g. John 13.14–15; Rom 15.7; Phil 2.5–11, etc.), but it is not quite a simple matter of choosing to follow an example. The central theme is the notion of a gift bestowed which equips us to speak to God in the voice of Jesus, as it were; Jesus is indeed a spiritual paradigm for us, but we cannot of ourselves reproduce the quality of his life or prayer; we must receive a particular sort of inner freedom first, concentrating not on our will and effort but on his grace, the clear experience of divine favour and welcome made possible by his death and resurrection. When we do ‘imitate’ Jesus in our choices and actions, this is more an outflowing from the inner gift than the result of a systematic effort to conform our behaviour to his.

There is, however, a sort of exception to this. The Christian has to cultivate the freedom to die for the sake of Jesus and in imitation of Jesus. From Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) onwards, the martyr’s death was seen as a sharing in the cross of Christ: ‘Let me become an imitator of the passion of my God’ is Ignatius’ prayer (Rom. 6.3). The earliest accounts of Christian martyrdom stress repeatedly the parallels between these deaths and Christ’s. The story of Polycarp’s execution in Smyrna in about 156, with its themes of betrayal and mob denunciation, its depiction of Bishop Polycarp offering a sort of eucharistic prayer over his own condemned body, and its echo of the anxieties of the Jews in Matt 28 about the disposal of a particularly sacred corpse, illustrates the point amply. More tersely, the record of the death of the slave-girl Blandina, crucified at Lyons in 177, speaks of the believing spectators
seeing Christ in her body on the cross (Eusebius Hist. eccl. 5.1.41, 55–56). As martyrdom becomes less common, the theme develops of an interiorising of the martyr’s death through detachment from the present world, or, in a way that has still deeper theological resonance, through a participation in the kenosis, the self-emptying of the divine Son, building upon the famous hymn of Phil 2.3 The conviction that monastic life is fundamentally an imitation of Christ rests on this theological base (cf. Williams 1990: 49–70, 92–117). Jesus is here above all the model of dying to the self, abandoning security and self-concern for the sake of God and neighbour. Even here, though, the emphasis is regularly on such behaviour as the making visible of a gift already given – the life of the eternal Son lived out in the believer’s life, so that the process of incarnational involvement enacted by the eternal Son is also realised in us. The disciplining of the passions and the emptying-out of self-regard may properly be thought of as matters in which we can dispose ourselves by asceticism and effort to become better aligned with Christ’s action; but once again the focus is not finally on effort but on the revealing of the life that has been given.

Martyrdom became less common, of course, as the church became a legitimate body in Roman society; and this process had its own effects on how Jesus was imagined. The fourth century, during which Christianity won widespread social and cultural acceptance, witnessed far-reaching developments in art and worship, reflecting the new situation. For the first time, it was possible to display in public unmistakeable images of Jesus as the visual focus of corporate devotion (in contrast to the anonymous images of the teacher or the good shepherd found in the pre-Constantinian period); Christian churches were purpose-built, normally on the pattern of the Roman imperial basilica, the great public hall for audiences and trials, and the image of Jesus occupied the dominant position as once the imperial portrait or statue would have done. But this has led to some confusion in the textbook accounts of the period. It is not true that these early artistic depictions simply borrow the conventions of imperial portraiture: Christ’s dress is sometimes purple in colour, but he never wears a recognisable imperial costume. With the possible exception of the rather unusual sixth-century mosaic in the archiepiscopal chapel at Ravenna, in which he wears military uniform, he is always robed as a philosopher, in tunic and shawl. Recent research has shown that these pictures probably depend on two classical types: some, intriguingly, seem to be based on Late Antique pictures of Homer, some on depictions of the gods Zeus or Serapis – sombre figures with untrimmed hair, heavy brows and full beards, quite unlike the conventional images of secular authority.4 In other words, Jesus is being ‘seen’ as a sage or poet
(and there are instances where scholars have suggested that we should interpret pictures of Orpheus as intended to represent Christ as well), or as a ruler among the gods; but never simply as an inflated version of the earthly monarch. And the crucifixion is already being depicted on fourth-century sarcophagi; a further counter-instance to the assertion that early Christian art simply takes over the imagery of a cultus of imperial power.

These early images of Christ (mostly from about AD 400 onwards) do, however, emphasise what we might call the element of holy dread in the approach of believers to their Lord. As the art of the Byzantine Empire develops in the next few centuries, the depictions of Christ in the dome of the church building are often clearly meant to be overwhelming rather than just comforting. The very well-known instance at Daphni in Greece (from about 1100) is the culmination of a long and vigorous artistic tradition; such images also reflect the effects of liturgical language during these centuries in the Christian East. Scholars of Christian worship have often noted how, from the fourth century onwards, the rhetoric of eucharistic worship in particular is characterised by expressions of awe and the building up of extravagant epithets, as if to induce a sense of ‘extremity’ in the experience of worship: in the Eucharist, Jesus is present in the fullness of his divine activity, taking up and transforming the bread and wine, and the only possible reaction is abasement, wonder and a visionary, incantatory recital of the mysteries of the divine life that is in Christ (‘wisdom, life, sanctification, power, true light’, in the words of the fourth-century liturgy of St Basil). Although the eucharistic prayer itself is almost always addressed to God the Father (the major exception is the very early Syrian liturgy of Addai and Mari), the actual practice of the Eucharist naturally encourages devotion to the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements as the concrete embodiment of the sacred in our midst. The great prayer of thanksgiving over the bread and wine is seen as a sharing in Christ’s prayer to the Father. But, from the fourth century onwards, there is a growing interest in the idea of a climactic point of transforming consecration in the Eucharist; and this naturally intensifies a sense of adoration directed to the present Christ – ‘the one who is to come’ already among us, in anticipation of the end of the world.

Thus, after the fourth century, two significant themes in Christian devotion begin to develop in full vigour: the adoration of Christ as cosmic Lord, depicted in the intense visual idiom of the Byzantine icon, and devotion to Christ sacramentally present in the Eucharist. In the Byzantine world, these two elements came into direct collision in the ‘iconoclast’ controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries. Faced with the competitive pressures of an Islam that rejected all visual representations of the divine, a school of thought in
Byzantium argued that the only defensible image of Christ was the sacrament itself, the image actually ordained by Jesus. The response to this drew on the doctrinal formulations of the fifth and sixth centuries: if Christ is genuinely and wholly both divine and human, and if the ‘energies’ of his divine nature permeate and transfigure his humanity without altering its nature, then a depiction of Christ’s humanity (which is obviously possible in principle, if he is a human individual in some sense like others) is a theologically intelligible and licensed depiction of his divinity, represented in its action and effect. By analogy, the icon of a saint shows the divine ‘energy’ by showing how a human person is transfigured by it. The sacrament is not in this sense an image: it is more than an image in that it actually conveys transfiguring grace, the seeds of immortal life. It is, you could say, part of the process whose endpoint is depicted in an icon. And the more this concrete conveying of grace is articulated in the liturgy and the theology of the liturgy, the more overt become the gestures of adoration directed towards the consecrated elements.

Western Christianity shared both these themes up to the beginning of the Middle Ages; subsequently, though, both art and liturgy began to move in somewhat different directions. Before about 1100, most (though not all) of the public and canonical images of Christ in the west are broadly comparable with the Byzantine conventions. After this date, there is an increasing interest in the human vulnerability of Jesus, shown in increasingly realistic depictions of the crucifixion. The physical and mental anguish of Christ on the cross is more and more invoked and explored both visually and verbally, in a process that reaches a climax in the immediate pre-reformation period. Behind this development lies, on the one hand, a general ‘humanistic’ interest in the specific psychology of Jesus, at a time when fascination was growing with the nuances of diverse human experience, and, on the other, a pious concern to foster in the believer a proper sense of indebtedness and gratitude towards Jesus for ‘all the pains and insults you have borne for us’ (in the well-known prayer of St Richard of Chichester, 1197–1253). The intensifying of a sort of grotesque hyper-realism in the artistic portrayal of the effects of scourging, beating, crowning with thorns and crucifixion, the appearance by the fifteenth century of a specific ‘Man of Sorrows’ image in art, the production of meditative texts designed to stir the imagination to the point of some sort of empathetic identification with these extreme physical tortures and the proliferation of lyrics of lament or complaint – all this serves to intensify the believer’s grief and shame for sin. From being simultaneously the terrifying judge and the bountiful, life-giving patron, Christ has become the petitioner at our gates, appealing for our sympathy.
And in a curious parallel movement, the eucharistic presence comes to be seen in new ways. Rather than being the fire from heaven celebrated in Byzantine and Syrian hymnody, it is seen as a concretising of the suffering and crucified humanity in an object that is here and now presented for our adoration. The process was aided by the definition of the Lateran Council of 1215 which declared that the substance of the bread and wine was replaced by the substance of Christ’s body and blood at the Eucharist – not a doctrine in itself wholly alien to earlier formulations, but undoubtedly encouraging a greater focus on the tangible ‘thereness’ of Christ’s human identity. Legends of the later Middle Ages often distorted this into a crudely local and physical presence: hosts bleed, visionaries see the bread as a lump of dripping flesh, and, worst of all, stolen hosts are ‘tortured’ by Jews (the supposed enemies of the ‘social’ Body of Christ, who are also accused of the literal torture and murder of Christian children).

The general effect is to give to western medieval devotion to Christ a more blatant pathos than is found in eastern literature, and to enshrine images of dramatic suffering as the focal visual expressions of Christian faith (in a way that contrasts sharply with the classical iconographic tradition). The Revelations of divine love recorded in the early fourteenth century by Julian of Norwich begin with some alarmingly intense visualising of the suffering of the crucified, but modulate into an extraordinary colloquy between the visionary and a Jesus giving rich assurances of faithfulness and ultimate healing, with an unexpected use of maternal imagery not only for God in general but for Jesus in particular. A text like this shows how the passion-oriented spirituality of the medieval west had its positive side. It can be seen, first, in a refusal to absorb the cross into the resurrection, and an insistence upon the utter ‘ordinariness’ of the flesh of Jesus by (paradoxically) stressing the extraordinary intensity of his suffering; and, second, by means of this to leave a door open for the idea that the death of Jesus might suggest a critique of human conceptions of power and security, making compassion the basic element in Jesus’ transfiguration of the human world – a crucial theme in Julian. If we turn to the perennially popular Imitation of Christ ascribed to Thomas à Kempis, we find a slightly more ‘moralised’ and individualised rendering of the theme that imitation of Christ is imitation of his passion by means of our own inner detachment and mortification. There is not so much as in Julian a sense of surprise at the methods of God’s workings, so at odds with human assumptions.

There is a problematic side to this devotion to Jesus, faintly discernible in Thomas a Kempis, more obviously visible in the words and pictures of more popular devotion. It shows itself in a tendency to sentimentalise the
death of Jesus and to make paradigmatic for Christian devotion a sense of individual reproach, the covertly resentful guilt provoked by accusations of ingratitude and unresponsiveness. It is perhaps not too much to say that this tradition profoundly eroticises devotion to Jesus; our relation to him is the kind of thing found in a stormy love affair, or even in the dangerous territory where pain is close to orgiastic delight.

But of course, it will be said, erotic metaphors for the believer’s relation to Christ are not a peculiarity of the late medieval West. Their foundation charter is in New Testament texts like 2 Cor 11.2, Eph 5.23–32 or Rev 21.2 and 22.17, where the whole community is seen as Jesus’ bride (just as the relation between ancient Israel and its God was repeatedly cast into the language of marital fidelity and infidelity). The earliest application of this imagery to the relation between Christ and the individual soul seems to be Origen’s Commentary on the Song of Songs, in the early third century, where the great Alexandrian commentator writes of how we are ‘wounded’ by the touch of divine love so that we long to experience the embrace of ‘our bridegroom, the Word of God’ without the mediation of any other human agency. Here as in the comparable commentary of Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century, the reference shifts between the particular soul and the corporate experience of the church; but it is clear that direct erotic yearning for union with Christ is understood as something that a mature Christian should grow into. In the early Middle Ages, the genre of commentaries and homilies on the Song of Songs became one of the richest in monastic literature, and the sense of Christ as erotic partner finds powerful and uninhibited expression particularly in the great cycle of sermons on the text written by Bernard of Clairvaux for his monks mostly in the 1130s and 1140s (ET Bernard of Clairvaux 1976). The last great flowering of this style of meditation is to be seen in the poetry of St John of the Cross in sixteenth-century Spain, and his prose reflections on the poems; here it is no longer precisely a matter of commentary on the Song, but of poetic paraphrase, deploying the imagery and the emotional tonality of the biblical text to produce a strikingly new composition. For John, the most important aspect of the Song’s imagery is clearly that which deals with agonising loss, the search for the renewal of an encounter that has ‘injured’ or interrupted the soul’s life. Both John and his contemporary and friend Teresa of Avila will also use the conventions of popular vernacular love lyrics – the forlorn shepherd despairing of a response from the beloved and so on. There are close parallels with the themes of English devotional lyrics of the Middle Ages, the songs of complaint or desolation already mentioned.

However, John’s poetry is more complex in its implications. ‘Erotic’ union with Christ, the union in difference of the soul with its beloved, is only an
element in the soul’s assimilation to the deeper union in difference, which is the eternal Son’s oneness with the Father. Creation exists in its entirety to be a ‘bride’ for the Son, to share and reflect his joy; but that joy is fundamentally and inescapably the joy of his relation to the Father, so that creation, in sharing the joy, shares the relation. The twofold dynamism here takes us a step beyond the straightforward erotic passion of the soul for Jesus and points back to older and more basic themes of the believer’s assimilation to Christ as beloved and intimate child of God. Later and more ‘routinised’ forms of the spousal imagery of contemplative writers, particularly in the marital ceremonies surrounding monastic profession for women, seldom make the connection with growth into the full measure of adoptive intimacy with the Father. And outside monastic circles and the writings of a few visionaries, the post-Reformation era saw little development of the image of Jesus as erotic partner; a more fragmented Christian world had become more nervous of this language, with its risky intensities.

But, as Michel de Certeau pointed out in his groundbreaking research on early modern spirituality, the erotic pathos of medieval and Counter-Reformation mysticism left a significant trace on the whole history of later western culture. It defined the soul as ‘homeless’, always in search, always on the move; when God has retreated over the cultural horizon, what remains is simply the drama of restlessness (Certeau 1992:197–200, 292–93, 298–99). In late medieval or sixteenth-century Spanish spirituality, the sense of loss and excruciating pain in the soul’s journey could be christologically grounded: along with the yearning for fulfilment in the embrace of Christ went the conviction that this entailed sharing in the dereliction of Christ. The darkness and sense of absence classically treated by John of the Cross can be seen both as the abandoned lover’s pangs and as a sharing in the crucified Christ’s sense of abandonment by the Father. Faith means to walk Christ’s way, expecting no easier path. This looks back to the whole theme already noted in relation to patristic spirituality of the imitation of Christ’s self-emptying; monastic literature had often related this to the monk’s call to follow Christ’s nakedness and poverty, and the Franciscan movement had placed this decisively at the centre of its vision. St Francis’s receiving in his body of the wounds of the crucified is a particularly strong externalising of the theme of imitating the crucified (it is referred to by John of the Cross as reinforcing his model of advance in spiritual maturity). Without the element of relation to Christ in all this, we are left with the characteristic drama of the ‘modern’ self, searching for its own truth, self-martyred.

Perhaps the most recurrent problem in the history of devotion to Jesus is the sense in which he, as a specific individual, is or remains the terminus.
of prayer and meditation. Several very diverse responses can be traced in the tradition. Origen, in the commentary already referred to, speaks of the human identity of Christ as a protective shadow to shield our eyes from the full glare of the divine life; as we grow spiritually, we move away from the contemplation of the humanity until in heaven (whence, in Origen’s system, we fell before the world’s creation) we return to the vision of the divine Logos and, in the Logos, of the Father. It is thus important not to become attached to the humanity of Jesus as an object of love or adoration.20 This attitude is shared widely in the patristic and medieval tradition, and it is found even in St Bernard of Clairvaux, whose warmth and enthusiasm in writing of the humanity of Jesus is so evident. Ultimately, the humanity of Jesus is the path to contemplation of his divinity, however intensely we are drawn by that humanity as we set out on the path. By the sixteenth century, the issue has become further complicated. The Franciscan writer Osuna takes the classical line that meditation on the specifics of Jesus’ human life has to be left behind as we mature (and John of the Cross largely echoes this). Teresa of Avila, for all her indebtedness to Osuna and her closeness to John, spiritedly repudiates the idea that Jesus ever becomes superfluous in our spiritual pilgrimage. Ignatius of Loyola builds on medieval precedent to provide an exceptionally full and rigorously structured scheme of meditation on Jesus’ life in his Spiritual exercises; and his Spiritual diary notes how in his personal prayer he was aware of some activity ‘terminating’ in Jesus, some in the Father or the Spirit, and some in the Trinity as a whole. His consciousness of this variety leads him, however, not to any attempt to ‘grade’ devotional activities but to a deepened sense of the oneness of the divine persons: when one is addressed or focused upon in prayer, the others are at once implicated, evoked alongside.21

Perhaps, like Teresa, he has shaken off the residual Platonism still found in Osuna and John which considers the humanity of Jesus a less worthy object of pious attention because it is, after all, a phenomenon of the material and historical world. But there can be some confusion in interpreting all this. As we have seen, John of the Cross gives central significance to the actualities of Jesus’ fleshly life and death as paradigms for our spiritual history; what he, like others, questions is whether sustained meditation on the narrative is desirable beyond a certain point. The problem is less the concentration on a material phenomenon than the characteristic issue in John of how we liberate ourselves from the trap of binding God to one set of images, whether material or otherwise. Purely theologically, there is less difference between Teresa, John and Ignatius than a first reading might suggest.

This issue is, of course, rather different from the related set of problems associated in the early church with the name of Origen and centring on
the appropriateness of addressing prayer to Jesus. It is difficult to untangle precisely what Origen did or did not commend on this matter, but it is fairly clear that he discouraged prayer not simply to Jesus, as the incarnate form of the Logos, but to the Logos as such, since our prayer is ultimately a sharing in the Logos’s prayer to the Father (On prayer 15.1–4; 16.1; ET Oulton and Chadwick 1954). This position has impeccable theological logic at one level, since this is exactly the dynamic of most of the New Testament; but it pulls against almost universal practice (we have noted how early on we find hymns addressed to the Son in Christian usage). It also gave hostages to fortune in the early church, since the refusal to pray to the Logos was interpreted as a refusal to recognise his full divinity. Paradoxically, in the fourth century, the critics of the creed of Nicaea, which affirmed the unequivocal divinity of the Logos, seem to have maintained the common liturgical practice of addressing hymns and prayers to him. Athanasius of Alexandria, writing against these dissidents, makes much of this contradiction and appeals to New Testament examples of worship being given to the glorified Christ (e.g. in Against the Arians; ET in NPNF vol. 4).

The problems here are inevitable. Jesus is manifestly the focus of the renewed sense of God that constitutes the distinctive news Christianity brings; it is through his life and death and resurrection as an historical individual that change occurs in our standing in relation to God. But that change is precisely a movement into the relation Jesus always and already has to God: he is and is not the ‘terminus’ of devotion, and there is (as Christian writers from Gregory of Nyssa to John of the Cross to Michel de Certeau have recognised) an absence at the centre of the Christian imagination, a space opening up to the final otherness and final intimacy of encounter with the Father. To move into this space, in prayer and imagination, is to move into the new identity Christ makes possible – to become, as the eastern Christian tradition has always put it, ‘deified’ by coming to ‘embody’ Jesus’ own prayer. The history of modern understandings of devotion to Jesus shows the difficulties that arise when the person of Jesus is separated from this further space of encounter, from the gift of adoption and participation in divine life and relation that is central in the New Testament and the patristic tradition. What develops is a bifurcation of the older styles into a cult of Jesus as individual on the one hand and a series of attempts to domesticate Jesus as teacher and exemplar on the other. One remarkable survival or revival of a more classical balance between intense personal love towards Jesus and a robust theology of deification can be found in the best of classical Protestant hymnody in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. You have only to listen to the greatest hymns of a Paul Gerhard (especially in their sublime use in the Passions
and Cantatas of J. S. Bach) or a Charles Wesley to see how the governing themes of patristic and medieval theology can be made vivid and accessible to the body of worshippers (see e.g. Kimbrough 1992). But by the end of the eighteenth century, much of this ‘classical’ energy is giving way to a more individualised feeling, in Catholic and Protestant devotion alike.

These developments must be held partly responsible for some of the bewilderment and agnosticism about the figure of Jesus that characterises a good deal of twentieth-century theology, sitting uncomfortably alongside a hugely popular devotional idiom that focuses uncomplicatedly on the worship of Jesus. The late twentieth century has witnessed an extraordinary explosion of devotional song, whose popularity seems to cross an unprecedented range of cultural and linguistic boundaries; in a way curiously reminiscent of the Middle Ages, there is now an international language for worship – not literally a single tongue, but a strongly unified style. Its roots are evangelical and charismatic, but it has conquered great tracts of the Roman Catholic world as well. Some of it, perhaps much of it, has a solid theological basis, and can be strongly evocative of the paradoxes of ‘meekness and majesty’ (to allude to the refrain of a well-known example); much of it is utterly unadorned and often deeply moving adoration of Jesus. But there is a disquieting element in a good deal of this literature; it is not just that devotion to Jesus can often be expressed in a way that detaches it from the Trinitarian dynamic of the New Testament, it is also that the erotic idiom of medieval and Counter-Reformation spirituality can reappear with fewer checks and nuances than in earlier centuries. Jesus as object of loving devotion can slip into Jesus as fantasy partner in a dream of emotional fulfilment. To avoid sentimental solipsism, there needs to be either a strong and self-critical theological environment or (which is often the same thing in other guises) a clear orientation to the world’s needs and the action of Christ in the whole social and material environment. Some songs will sound very different depending on whether they are sung in an atmosphere of social comfort or in a favela in the Two-Thirds World.

The role of actual ‘lives of Jesus’ in devotion is a many-sided story. Reflective summaries of the life of Jesus were fairly common in the Middle Ages, and the Reformation continued the tradition. Jeremy Taylor’s The great exemplar of 1649 is a late flowering, marked, as we might expect, by a less ‘mystical’ and more ‘moral’ emphasis than some medieval works, yet aiming at the same goal of narrating the earthly life of Jesus so as to lead the reader to contemplation of the eternal truths of divine and human nature. But the new historical methods of reading Scripture had a powerful impact from the mid-eighteenth century onwards: the story could no longer be told
with the same ‘innocence’. When David Friedrich Strauss published a ‘life’ of Jesus in 1835, it was a composition of a wholly different kind from anything earlier, an attempt to reconstruct a neutral record by reading the gospel texts with an eye to their likely distortion by confessional interest (by devotion, indeed). Later in the century, Ernest Renan’s essay in the genre helped to create what was almost a new devotional language, but one of an entirely humanistic character: Jesus becomes a ‘beautiful soul’, a poetic genius who can be appreciated (and best appreciated) by the aesthetic response. The gospel record is a pastoral fantasia, moving us to higher sensibility – neither strictly an ethic, nor a dogmatic. Jesus becomes a culture hero for the educated and enlightened.23

More starkly ethical readings were also being proposed in the nineteenth century, building (with greater or lesser degrees of acknowledgement) upon Immanuel Kant’s seminal Religion within the limits of reason alone (ET Kant 1934, esp. 119–21, 145–51). Jesus is here transformed into the teacher of enlightened common sense, tolerant, generous, appealing to the highest in human nature, not to supernatural revealed authority. This became a popular trope in American writing, from Jefferson to Emerson and beyond (its distant echoes may be heard in the quirky and relaxed peasant guru favoured by many members of the ‘Jesus Seminar’ within the American Society of Biblical Literature); but its fiercest and most consistent exposition is in the late work of Leo Tolstoy (esp. Tolstoy 1961), for whom Jesus ‘teaches us not to commit stupidities’ and sets out to undermine the entire system of law-governed social authority in the name of radical trust and love between human beings.

In a justly famous essay, George Steiner (1959) argued that the two great Russian novelists, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, represented two basic and irreconcilable attitudes to faith in general and the figure of Jesus in particular. Tolstoy regards Jesus, ultimately, as a fellow-worker in the same cause of emancipation; Dostoevsky sees him as mercilessly other, mysterious, silent, practically powerless, as in his unforgettable fantasy of the ‘Grand Inquisitor’, which forms a decisive episode in The brothers Karamazov. Tolstoy was excommunicated by the Orthodox Church; Dostoevsky was regarded as a faithful apologist for it. The point as Steiner sees it is that Dostoevsky begins from the sense that the figure of Jesus disturbs the human agenda, social, political and religious, and is therefore appropriately the focus not of the faintly patronising commendations of Tolstoy but of both love and terror (he goes on to suggest, plausibly, that some of Dostoevsky’s Christ-images should have disturbed his ecclesiastical allies more than they did). It is possible to see Dostoevsky’s Jesus, especially in the Inquisitor, as a figure in visible continuity with both the language of the New Testament and the Byzantine
iconographic tradition, for all that he represents – in a very typically Russian idiom – a self-emptied and helpless deity (cf. Gorodetzky 1938). The salient thing is that he stands in judgement on the personalities and events of his environment, and also realises radically different possibilities for and in that environment. Twentieth-century Russian novels, especially Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* and Bulgakov’s *The master and Margarita*, work with some of these themes, in a continuing and lively dialectic with the Orthodox theological tradition.

It seems that there are two things that continue to connect the representations of Jesus, verbal and visual, in devotion with the theological enterprise. There is first the sense that encounter with the figure of Jesus can bring about radical questioning and change; and second the conviction that the outcome of such change is a relation with God as source and parent, fully realised in Jesus but in some degree shared with the believer. Divorced from this, the image of Jesus becomes somewhat problematic. The visual representations of Jesus canonised in the nineteenth century – from the German ‘Nazarene’ painters to the British pre-Raphaelites, along with the abundance of popular devotional art, including Roman Catholic icons of the Sacred Heart – show a figure of androgynous charm, characterised by a rather exhausted tenderness of aspect. They can be read as the long-term fruit of that late medieval tendency already described, to show Jesus as primarily requiring compassion, understanding and response from us (Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World* is a magnificent case in point); as such, while they are not without power, they risk leaving unanswered the question of why this figure should be seen as bringing about conversion or renewal. In a nutshell, these are images that leave Jesus as object for us and not subject beyond us. Most of the strategies designed to assist devotion to the ‘Sacred Humanity’ seem to have run this risk – the cultus of the Sacred Heart (whose origins lie in the seventeenth century), the concentration in Baroque and later eucharistic piety on the Host as the concrete presence of the crucified, the ‘prisoner of love’ in the tabernacle, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Protestant passion for historically and geographically ‘authentic’ illustration of the gospel text (William Hole’s watercolours shaped generations of young British Christian imaginations).

In such a light, the revolt against the focus on Jesus as an historical figure becomes intelligible – from Kierkegaard’s proclamation in the *Philosophical fragments* of the incarnation as the wreckage of a certain kind of historical inquiry (ET Kierkegaard 1987) to Rudolf Bultmann and beyond.24 The imbalances of this have been more than adequately discussed in the theology of the last quarter of the twentieth century. But the issue remains: Jesus cannot
but figure in Christian devotion, cannot but be the object of pious attention and imagination; yet Jesus is not the terminus of Christian experience and prayer, and when he becomes so, something is lost and confused in the Christian mind. Current controversies over the status of a male saviour for female selves raise many complex issues; but some of the literature suggests (on both conservative and radical sides) a muddle over the way in which Jesus should and should not be the focus of all spiritual attention and aspiration for the Christian. As more than one feminist has noted, the problem looks very different in the perspective of patristic christology (see e.g. Hampson 1990:53–58). Is it possible, chastened by the modern history of sentimental and emotionally oppressive representation of Jesus in art and worship, to find a contemporary idiom for expressing relation to Jesus that will revive the primitive Christian seriousness about judgement and change? The theologies and spiritualities of the developing world represent a significant challenge already to individualistic and historicist readings of the believer’s relation to Jesus (see especially Míguez Bonino 1984 and Schüssler Fiorenza 1995a). There are bridges to be built here with the substantial historical resources we have sketched – if we can overcome both western and modernist snobberies.

**Notes**

1. A very reliable guide to the discussion is Horbury 1998.
2. See especially his *Proof of the apostolic preaching* 6, 7, 31 (ET Irenaeus 1952) and *Haer.* 4, 7, 24, 28, 34.
3. The theme comes into some prominence in the fourth century in texts like Gregory of Nyssa’s commentary on the Lord’s Prayer (ET Gregory of Nyssa 1954), and is developed extensively in the later Greek tradition by the seventh-century Maximus the Confessor.
5. Mathews 1993:3–22 authoritatively dismantles the notion of a simple ‘imperial mystique’ in the art of the period. For a possible representation of Christ as Orpheus, see Murray 1977; the assimilation of Christ to Orpheus can already be found in Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century.
6. The celebrated essay of Dix 1945 was the first major work to point out the ‘slippage’ from the understanding of the Eucharist as anticipation of the end of the world towards a stress on the concrete presence of Christ here and now in a more static sense; but he tends to ignore the strong link in the Byzantine liturgical tradition between the presence and the anticipated judgement. Cf. Schmemann 1988 for an excellent modern statement of this.
7. On the controversy over images, see (amongst a great deal of scholarly literature) Herrin 1987:307–43; for a more overtly theological treatment, though in informal style, see Ugolnik 1989. A fuller technical study of the interrelation between
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Christology and the icon controversy is Schönborn 1994. Dix 1945:268–302 remains helpful for understanding the evolution of devotional practice.

8. See e.g. Davies 1963, Nos. 22, 24, 41, 46, 47, 62, 63, 106.

9. As e.g. in some of the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian; see Murray 1970.

10. See FitzPatrick 1993:221–25; and, for a wider social survey, Rubin 1991, a seminal text on the connections between eucharistic practice and social inclusion/exclusion.

11. The Revelations were translated into modern English by C. Wolters (Julian of Norwich 1966); the original text is edited by Glasscoe 1986. See chs. 4, 7–8, 10, 16–24 in particular for the evocation of the physical details of the passion of Christ; 51 for the ‘parable of the lord and the servant’, a sustained meditation on the whole story of fall and incarnation; 59–61 for Jesus as mother.

12. The Imitation is widely available in translation. See especially 2.12 on the following of the crucified; the fourth book is of great interest in showing how eucharistic devotion has become a vehicle for individual colloquy with Jesus.


15. See especially ‘Songs of the Soul in Rapture’ and the ‘Spiritual Canticle’ – more properly, ‘Songs between the Soul and the Bridegroom’ (many translations, including Campbell 1951:10–27 for the texts referred to here).

16. This is spelled out in the Romances, John’s sequence of ballad-like lyrics on creation and incarnation, see Campbell 1951:48–77.

17. St Thérèse of Lisieux provides a vivid commentary on this tradition in ch. 27 of her Histoire d’une ame (ET Thérèse of Lisieux 1958:164) by composing a ‘Letter of invitation to the wedding of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face’ written on behalf of God the Father and the Virgin Mary as parents of the bridegroom.

18. ‘Naked to follow the naked Christ’ (nudus sequere Christum nudum) is a typical early medieval formulation; the theme is prominent in several eleventh- and twelfth-century writers including Peter Damian and the obscure but very interesting Stephen of Muret, who claimed to have no monastic rule but the gospel itself. More radical groups like the Waldensians and the followers of Arnold of Brescia in the same period echo the same concern for Christlike poverty, and it becomes, of course, a matter of fierce controversy among the Franciscans in the early fourteenth century (the ‘Spiritual’ Franciscans were condemned by the pope in 1322–23 for teaching that Christ possessed no property, and thus that the perfect imitation of Christ was impossible for those who owned property).

19. On 14 September (Holy Cross Day) 1224, as recorded in the First life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano, ch. 94 (ET in Habig 1973).

20. See e.g. Origen’s Commentary on John 1.7–8, and the famous twenty-seventh Homily on Numbers; for a brief discussion, cf. also Williams 1990:40–43, with further references.

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touches on the question both in her early Life (ch. 22) and in the masterpiece of her maturity, The interior castle (vi.7–8); for ET see Avila 1976–80. Among many pertinent references in Ignatius, see particularly entries 63, 83–87, 129, 138, 140, 156 in the Spiritual diary (ET Ganss 1991).

22. Properly The history of the life and death of the holy Jesus (The great exemplar is the subtitle); reprinted in Taylor 1990.

23. Renan’s work appeared in 1863. There is much helpful discussion of these and other nineteenth-century approaches in Pelikan 1985. For a vigorous short overview of the whole period, see Wright 1996:16–21.