



The Divinity of Christ

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Modernism has laid down two fundamental challenges to the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, especially as it is expressed in the doctrine of the incarnation. First, it is *wrong*. Our growing understanding of the background to the New Testament, the way in which Christian doctrine has developed, the rise of the scientific world-view, and so on, force us to abandon the idea that Jesus was God in any meaningful sense of the word. Second, it is *unnecessary*. Christianity can exist without the need for such obsolete and cumbersome ideas as God becoming man, traditionally grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and expressed in the doctrine of the incarnation. In a world come of age, Christianity must learn to abandon these ideas as archaic and irrelevant if it is to survive.

It is significant that most recent criticisms of the incarnation, such as those expressed in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), demonstrate a tendency to concentrate upon objections to the *idea* of incarnation, rather than the *basis* of the idea itself. After all, the idea of God incarnate in a specific historical human being was quite startling within its first-century Jewish context, whatever may have been made of it in the later patristic period, and the question of what caused this belief to arise requires careful examination. Of central importance to this question is the resurrection itself, a subject studiously ignored (along with the major contributions to the incarnational discussion by Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Walter Kasper and others) by most of the contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

The idea of incarnation is easy to criticize: it is

paradoxical, enigmatic, and so on. But everyone already knows this, including the most fervent advocates of the idea. And it is absurd, even offensive, to suggest that those who regard a belief in the incarnation as legitimate are intellectually hidebound or trapped in their traditions, unable to think for themselves. The question remains, as it always has been: is the incarnation a proper and legitimate interpretation of the history of Jesus of Nazareth?

The fact that something is paradoxical and even self-contradictory does not invalidate it. Those who have worked in the scientific field are only too aware of the sheer complexity and mysteriousness of reality. The events lying behind the rise of quantum theory, the difficulties of using models in scientific explanation - to name but two factors which I can remember particularly clearly from my own period as a natural scientist - point to the inevitability of paradox and contradiction in any except the most superficial engagement with reality.[42] Our apprehension of reality is partial and fragmentary, whether we are dealing with our knowledge of the natural world or of God. The Enlightenment world-view tended to suppose that reality could be totally apprehended in rational terms, an assumption which still persists in some theological circles, even where it has been abandoned as unrealistic elsewhere. All too many modern theologians cry 'Contradiction!', and expect us all to abandon there and then whatever it is that is supposed to be contradictory. But reality just isn't like that.

An example of this approach deployed against the principle of the incarnation is provided by John Hick who asserts ('argues' is not the *mot juste*) that the idea of Jesus being both God and man is logically contradictory.[43] Quoting Spinoza, Hick asserts that talk of one who is both God and man is like talking about a square circle. Hick's consistency at this point is difficult to trace, as he is already committed to the belief that all the concepts of God to be found in the world religions - personal and impersonal, immanent and transcendent - are compatible with each other. Indeed, such is the variety of the concepts of divinity currently in circulation in the world religions that Hick is obliged to turn a blind eye to the resulting logical inconsistency between them - only to seize upon and censure this alleged 'inconsistency' in the case of the incarnation. But

Hick cannot be allowed to make this robust assertion concerning the logical incompatibility of God and man unchallenged, and his less than adequate knowledge of the development of Christology in the mediaeval period is clearly demonstrated in this matter. The fact that there is no *logical* incompatibility between God and man in the incarnation is demonstrated, and then theologically exploited, by that most brilliant of all English theologians, William of Ockham.[44] Ockham's discussion of this point is exhaustive and highly influential, and has yet to be discredited. Indeed, it is confirmed by the superb recent study of Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate*,[45] which has received considerable critical acclaim within philosophical circles.

Let us look briefly at some of the points that might be raised here. Under what circumstances might the idea of Jesus Christ being both God and man, divine and human, be considered a logical absurdity? We can bring out the point at issue by considering Spinoza's example of the square circle, made to bear such theological weight by Hick. Why is the idea of a square circle an absurdity? Because 'square' and 'circle' both occupy the same space on a logical map. They are both examples of shapes. A single shape cannot conform to two irreconcilable forms. It is one (a square), the other (a circle), or neither (perhaps a triangle, or some ill-defined shape). 'Circle' and 'square' thus define mutually exclusive categories of shape: a shape cannot be both of them at one and the same time.

But now consider Jesus Christ as God and man. What common logical area is occupied by 'God' and 'man'? Of what species are they both examples? In fact, they occupy no common ground; God is creator, man is a creature. As Thomas Aquinas stressed, divinity and humanity occupy no common logical - or even, as his famous distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* makes clear, *ontological* - territory. They are totally distinct. The parallel between the square circle and the incarnation is thus devoid of any serious logical basis.

Again, at the purely logical level, it is interesting to challenge Hick concerning why 'divinity' and 'humanity' should be treated as irreconcilable.[46] They are different - but why should they not co-

exist? Square circles do not exist, for the simple reason that they are mutually exclusive categories of shape. But why should not divinity and humanity be complementary? On the basis of what logical rule can such a possibility be excluded? A trivial example is suggested by a colleague of mine, who has both British and Swiss citizenship. Dual nationality is a common enough occurrence to make its theological potential worth exploring. Hick's crude analysis of the logic of the incarnation suggests that the following are logically incompatible:

a. Jesus is divine.

b. Jesus is human.

But consider my friend Francis, who is fortunate enough to have dual nationality. We could summarize his situation like this.

a. Francis is British.

b. Francis is Swiss.

A logical contradiction exists if, *and only if*, being British excludes being Swiss. But it does not. And why, at the logical level, should being human exclude Jesus from being divine? Might he not be a citizen of heaven, as well as of earth?

The charge of logical incoherence thus remains unpersuasive, except to those precommitted, for whatever reason, to anti-incarnational viewpoints. At points, Hick seems to reject incarnationalism on account of the difficulties that it raises for his theory of religions, which is more than a little disrupted by the traditional doctrine of the incarnation. Hick's interest in challenging the doctrine seems to be motivated by a quite different agenda, concerned with the homogenization of religions - a process to which the doctrine of the divinity of Christ is a serious stumbling block.

More seriously, Hick seems to work on the basis of the assumption that he already knows *exactly* what God is like, and on the basis of this knowledge is in a position to pass judgment on the logical niceties of the incarnation. But this is obviously not the case. (None of us has privileged access to God in this way; we are all limited in our

knowledge of God, which is why the news that God has revealed himself is such good news. We need to be *told* what God is like; left to our own devices, we would wallow about in confusion and chaos.) Hick may be saying that there is a logical problem involved with classical theism (a *philosophical* system) in relation to the incarnation - but this is merely to suggest that classical theism is not necessarily compatible with Christianity, a point which has been made with increasing force by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel in recent years. It is not to discredit the incarnation. Hick may be in a position to say that God is totally unable to come amongst us as a human being, and that the incarnation is impossible on account of who and what God is - but if he can do so, he would seem to have access to a private and infallible knowledge of God denied to the rest of us. And do we really fully understand what is meant by that deceptively familiar word 'human'? Do we really have a total and exhaustive grasp of what it is to be human? Many of us would prefer to say that the incarnation discloses the true nature of divinity and humanity, rather than approaching the incarnation on the basis of preconceived ideas of divinity and humanity.

Critics of the incarnation appear to envisage their criticisms as establishing a new, more relevant and universal version of Christianity. But what might this new version of Christianity be like? The inclusion of the word 'new' is deliberate: historically, Christianity has regarded both the resurrection and the incarnation as essential to its historical self-understanding, and any attempt to eliminate or radically modify them would seem to lead to a version of Christianity which is not continuous with the historical forms it has taken in the course of its development. In the following section, we shall look at the consequence of the elimination or radical modification of these two traditional ideas.

Let us suppose that Jesus was not God in any meaningful sense of the term. Let us suppose that he was a man, like the present writer in every way (although hopefully a nicer person), but far superior religiously and morally, and that everything which Christianity has wanted to say about the significance of Jesus can be said, and said well, without the belief that he was God as well as man. Let us see if this can actually be

done.

First, let me explore a comment made by Paul Elmer Moore, the noted American Platonist who became a Christian late in life. He wrote powerfully of the 'loneliness of an Ideal world without a Lord'. He longed for Platonic forms to turn into a face - into something personal. Without the incarnation, we are left in the realm of ideas. We are left unable to put a human face to God. We are left in a world of ideas and ideals - a chilly world, in which no words are spoken, and the tenderness of love is unknown. The incarnation allows us to speak with authority of God being personal. It speaks of God entering into our history, and allows us to abandon the cold and unfeeling world of ideals in favour of a world charged with the thrilling personal presence of God. That difference matters profoundly.

Let us develop this point in a slightly different direction. On the basis of a number of important works reflecting the spirit of Enlightenment modernism, it is clear that a central idea congenial to the modern spirit is that Jesus reveals to us the love of God. It is frequently pointed out that the modern age is able to dispense with superstitious ideas about the death of Jesus (for example, that it represented a victory over Satan or the payment of a legal penalty of some sort), and instead get to the real meat of both the New Testament, so movingly expressed in the parable of the prodigal son, and modern Christianity - the love of God for humanity. In what follows, I propose to suggest that abandoning the ideas of resurrection and the incarnation means abandoning even this tender insight.

This may seem an outrageous suggestion to make, but I cannot see how this conclusion can be avoided. How may the death of Jesus Christ upon a cross at Calvary be interpreted as a demonstration of the love of God for humanity? Once modernism dispenses with the idea of incarnation - that Jesus is God - a number of possible alternative explanations of the cross remain open.

a. It represents the devastating and unexpected end to the career of Jesus, forcing his disciples to invent the idea of the resurrection to cover up the totality of this catastrophe.

b. It represents God's judgement upon the career of Jesus, demonstrating that he was cursed by the law of Moses, and thus disqualified from any would-be messianic status.

c. It represents the inevitable fate of anyone who attempts to lead a life of obedience to God.

d. It represents the greatest love which one human being can show for another (cf. John 15:13) inspiring Jesus' followers to demonstrate an equal love for others.

e. The cross demonstrates that God is a sadistic tyrant.

f. The cross is meaningless.

All of these are plausible, within the framework of modernism. The idea that the cross demonstrates the love of God for man cannot, however, be included among this list. It is not *God* who is dying upon the cross, who gives himself for his people. It is a man - an especially splendid man, who may be ranked with others in history who have made equally great sacrifices for those they loved. The death of an innocent person at the hands of corrupt judges is all too common, even today, and Jesus cannot be singled out for special discussion unless he is something or someone qualitatively different from us.

Someone might, of course, immediately reply that Jesus is a higher example of the kind of inspiration or illumination to be found in all human beings, so he must be regarded as the outstanding human being - and for that reason, his death assumes special significance. But this is a remarkably dogmatic assumption - that Jesus is unique among human beings in this respect. One of the puzzles about *The Myth of God Incarnate* is that its contributors seem content to dismantle what they term the 'myth' that God became incarnate in a human being - only to make extravagant claims about the religious superiority of Jesus, which cannot be justified by their basic assumptions. Commenting on these trends, a perceptive American theologian notes:

Extravagant claims are ... made about the supreme religious worth, the sublime teaching, the transforming power, the overwhelming and vibrant God-consciousness, the tremendous ability to

challenge and change people, and the contagious spirituality of Jesus ... After reading such romantic pap, one wonders why anyone would have bothered to crucify Jesus. Such Christologies try to explain the existence of Christianity apart from the discontinuity and shock of cross and resurrection, and so end by making highly inflated claims about the 'human' Jesus.[47]

The notion of the uniqueness of Jesus was established by the New Testament writers through the resurrection, and the subsequent recognition that Jesus was none other than the living God dwelling among us. But this insight is given and guaranteed by two doctrines which modernism cannot allow. It would seem that modernists are prepared to retain insights gained through the traditional framework of resurrection and incarnation - and then declare that this framework may be dispensed with.

But this is clearly questionable, to say the least. If the traditional framework is declared to be wrong, the consequences of this declaration for each and every aspect of Christian theology must be ascertained. Discard or radically modify the doctrines of resurrection and incarnation, and the idea of the 'uniqueness' or the 'superiority' of Jesus becomes a dogmatic assertion without foundation, an assertion which many of more humanist inclinations would find offensive. We would be equally justified in appealing to other historical figures - such as Socrates or Gandhi - as embodying the best of Christian moral behaviour.

This point becomes more important when we return to the question of how the death of Jesus can be interpreted as a self-giving divine act, demonstrating the love of God for humanity. It is not God who is upon the cross: it is a human being. That point must be conceded by those who reject the incarnation. It may then be the case that God makes his love known indirectly (and, it must be said, in a remarkably ambiguous manner) through the death of Jesus Christ, but we have lost for ever the insight that it is God himself who shows his love for us on the cross.

What the cross might conceivably demonstrate, among a number of other, more probable, possibilities, is the full extent of the love of one human being for others. And as the love of human

beings can be thought of as mirroring the love of God, it would therefore be taken as an indirect demonstration of what the love of God is like, in much the same way that countless other individuals have given up their lives to save their friends or families throughout history. But whom did Jesus die to save? None, save possibly Barabbas, can be said to have benefited directly from his death, yet it would seem that modernism would like us to understand Jesus' death as making some sort of religious point which will enrich our spiritual lives. But this is not how the New Testament writers understood his death (not least because they insisted upon interpreting that death in the light of the resurrection, a procedure regarded as illegitimate by modernists), and it is certainly difficult to see how it would have cut much ice in the hostile environment in which Christianity had to survive and expand in the first period of its existence.

Had Jesus died in western Europe in the modern period, such an interpretation of his death might have had a certain degree of plausibility - but the historical significance of Jesus' death was determined by its historical context, and we are committing historical errors which parallel those of the ill-fated nineteenth-century 'quest of the historical Jesus' if we project modern cultural preoccupations onto the event of the death of Christ. The interpretation which modernism wishes to place upon the death of Christ is culturally conditioned by the social and personal values of western society, and is imposed upon (rather than discerned within) the history of Jesus.

The traditional framework for discussion of the manifestation of the love of God in the death of Christ is that of God humbling himself and coming among us as one of us, taking upon himself the frailty and mortality of our human nature in order to redeem it. To deny that the lonely dying figure upon the cross is God is to lose this point of contact, and to return to the view which Christianity overturned in its own day and age - that 'God is with us only in his transcendence' (Don Cupitt). A divine representative - not God himself - engages with the pain and suffering of this world. It is his love, not God's, which is shown. And to those who might think that this difficulty may be eliminated by developing the idea of God allowing himself to be identified with the dying Christ, it may be pointed out that the exploration of

this idea by Moltmann and Jüngel leads not merely to an incarnational, but to a *Trinitarian*, theology. In order to do justice to the Christian experience of God through Jesus Christ, we cannot view Jesus Christ merely in terms of his function - we are dealing with an identity of being, rather than just an identification of function. Jesus acts as and for God precisely because he *is* God.

A similar point may be made in relation to suffering. As we noticed earlier, twentieth-century apologetics has recognized that any theology which is unable to implicate God in some manner in the sufferings and pain of the world condemns itself as inadequate and deficient. The twentieth century has witnessed previously unimagined horrors of human suffering in the trenches of the First World War, in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany, and the programmes of genocide established by Nazi Germany and Marxist Cambodia. The rise of 'protest atheism' - perhaps one of the most powerful sentiments to which modern theology must address itself - reflects human moral revulsion at these acts. Protest atheism has a tendency to select soft targets, and there are few targets softer in this respect than a non-incarnational theology.

An incarnational theology speaks of God subjecting himself to the evil and pain of the world at its worst, in the grim scene at Calvary. God suffered in Christ, taking upon himself the agony of the world which he created. A non-incarnational theology is forced, perhaps against its intuition, to speak of a God who may send his condolences through a representative, but who does not (or cannot, for fear of being accused of logical contradiction?) enter into and share his people's suffering at first hand. And for a modernist who rejects substitutionary theories of the atonement, God can hardly be allowed to take on himself his own punishment for the sins of humanity through a human representative, who suffers instead of and on behalf of man.

In 1963, the English Sunday newspaper, *The Observer* publicized John Robinson's book *Honest to God* with the headline 'our image of God must go'. The image that Robinson had in mind was that of an old man in the sky. But the 'image of God that must go' in the face of the intense and deadly serious moral criticisms of protest atheism is that of a God who does not experience

human suffering and pain at first hand - in short, a non-incarnational image of God. Many of those who criticize the incarnation seem to realize the force of this point, and attempt to retain it, despite their intellectual misgivings. A non-incarnational theology is fatally flawed. Perhaps in the end, it will not be the protests of orthodoxy which destroy non-incarnational theologies, but protest atheism, which wisely and rightly detects the fundamental weakness of such a theology in precisely this respect.

A final point which may be made concerns the permanent significance of Jesus Christ. Why is he of such importance to the Christian faith here and now, some twenty centuries after his death? The traditional answer is that his significance lay in his being God incarnate; that in his specific historical existence, God assumed human nature. All else is secondary to this central insight, derived from reflection upon the significance of his resurrection. The fact that Jesus was male; the fact that he was a Jew; the precise nature of his teaching - all these are secondary to the fact that God took upon himself human nature, thereby lending it new dignity and meaning.

But if Jesus is not God incarnate, his significance must be evaluated in terms of those parameters which traditional Christianity has treated as secondary or accidental (in the Aristotelian sense of the term). Immediately, we are confronted with the problem of historical conditioning: what conceivable relevance may the teachings and lifestyle of a first-century male Jew have for us today, in a totally different cultural situation? The maleness of Christ has caused offence in radical feminist circles: why should women be forced to relate to a male religious teacher, whose teaching may be compromised by his very masculinity, as well as by the patriarchal values of his cultural situation? And why should modern western humanity pay any attention to the culturally-conditioned teaching of such an individual, given the seemingly insuperable cultural chasm dividing first-century Palestine and the twentieth-century west? And even the concept of the 'religious personality' of Jesus has been seriously eroded, as much by New Testament scholarship as by shifts in cultural perceptions. For reasons such as these, a non-incarnational Christianity is unable to convincingly anchor the person of Jesus Christ as the centre of the Christian faith. He may be the

historical point of departure for that faith, but its subsequent development involves the leaving behind of the historical particularity of his existence in order to confront the expectations of each social milieu in which Christianity may subsequently find itself. Jesus says *this* - but we say *that*. *This* may be acceptable in a first-century Palestinian context - but *that* is acceptable in a modern western culture, in which we live and move and have our being. Jesus is thus both relativized and marginalized. Many non-incarnational versions of Christianity accept and welcome such insights - but others find them disturbing, and perhaps unconsciously articulate an incarnational Christianity in order to preserve insights which they intuitively recognize as central.

Critics of doctrines such as the divinity of Christ tend to work on the basis of two presuppositions. First, that there exists a theological equivalent of precision surgery, which allows certain elements of the Christian faith to be excised without having any detrimental effect whatsoever upon what remains. Second, that by eliminating logical and metaphysical difficulties, a more plausible and hence more acceptable version of Christianity will result. Both these assumptions are clearly questionable, and must be challenged.

To return to our surgical analogy, we are not talking about removal of an appendix (a vestigial organ serving no useful purpose), but of the heart, the life-pump of the Christian faith. As C. S. Lewis so perceptively noted: 'The doctrine of Christ's divinity seems to me not something stuck on which you can unstuck but something that peeps out at every point so that you'd have to unravel the whole web to get rid of it'.^[48] Far from being an optional extra, the divinity of Christ, given expression in the doctrine of the incarnation, is an essential and integral part of the authentically Christian understanding of reality.

Faith in the resurrection and incarnation is what kept and keeps Christianity growing and spreading. The sheer vitality, profundity and excitement of the Christian faith ultimately depends upon these. In a day and age when Christianity has to fight for its existence, winning converts rather than relying upon a favourable cultural milieu, a non-incarnational theology despoiled of the resurrection has little to

commend it. It is perhaps significant that many critics of the resurrection and incarnation were themselves originally attracted to Christianity through precisely the theology they are now criticizing. What, it must be asked in all seriousness, is the *converting power* of an incarnationless Christianity?

The history of the church suggests that such a version of Christianity is a spiritual dead end. To recall the words of Thomas Carlyle: 'If Arianism had won, Christianity would have dwindled to a legend.' To its critics, incarnationless Christianity, seems to be scholarly, bookish and devoid of passion, without the inner dynamism to challenge and conquer unbelief in a world in which this is essential for its survival. But this is where history will pass its own judgment. Only a form of Christianity which is convinced that it has something distinctive, true, exciting and relevant to communicate to the world in order to transform it will survive.

Notes

42. For demonstration that paradox does not require a break with classical logic, see D. Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 25-26.

43. John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 167-185.

44. See Alister E. McGrath, 'Homo assumptus? A Study in the Christology of the *Via Moderna*, with Particular Reference to William of Ockham', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 60 (1984), pp. 283-297. See further Alfred J. Fredoso, 'Human Nature, Potency and the Incarnation', *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), pp. 27-53; Richard Cross, 'Nature and Personality in the Incarnation', *Downside Review* 107 (1989), pp. 237-254.

45. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986). See also the excellent earlier study of R. T. Herbert, *Paradox and Identity in Theology* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1979). For a rather wooden and unpersuasive response, see J. Hick, 'The Logic of God Incarnate', *Religious Studies* 25 (1989), pp. 409-423.

46. See the excellent discussion of the views of Spinoza and others in G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987-92), vol. 2, pp. 347-351.

47. Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is For Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 70-1.

48. C. S. Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves, 11 December 1944, in W. Hooper (ed.), *They Stand Together* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 503.