

The Myth of God Incarnate

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There is a view that Jesus was not quite as human as we are—that he was the Son of God disguised as a man, not a real man. The authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*¹ some of whom I suspect of having been brought up on this docetist heresy, are in revulsion against it. They reject it, however, not because the Church long ago threw it out as an option incompatible with her life, a heresy, but because it is found to be incompatible with the European way of life in the second half of the twentieth century. It seems odd for Christians to reject a doctrine on these grounds, since it is the very heart of the gospel to challenge conventional and accepted attitudes in any age; still, they do reject docetism, and that can't be bad.

When Christians do this it is customary for them to do so in the name of the incarnation, the doctrine that the one person, Jesus, was both fully human and fully divine. What is peculiar to these authors is that they think the rejection of docetism involves also the rejection of its contrary, the incarnation. At least I think they are rejecting it. Professor Maurice Wiles at first talks definitely about a “Christianity *without* incarnation”, but then goes on to speak of it as a ‘myth’, and it is not at all clear whether a myth is always meant to be an untruth. Sometimes the authors merely seem to mean by ‘mythical’ the same as ‘subject to the limitations of religious language.’ I do not think they have any very clear analysis or critique of religious language (they do not, for instance, distinguish between analogy and metaphor) and I do not find their use of ‘myth’ here particularly helpful or illuminating, but if all they are trying to say boils down to the assertion that the doctrine of the incarnation is a religious or theological statement like any other, then, of course what they say is right though not very interesting.

The question remains whether it is possible to have an authentic version of the christian faith which specifically *denies* this religious statement. This question is a little obscured by the fact that at least one of the authors, (Frances Young) holds, part of the time, the doctrine (usually associated with the medieval Latin Averroists) of the Double Truth—that a statement can be false in philosophy but true in theology: this position is not open to rational discussion. She does not, however, hold it with much conviction

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for she rapidly switches to quite different talk of 'different models'—inevitably bringing up the example of wave/particle models in physics. When some physicists bring out a book called "The Myth of Quantum Mechanics" we shall begin to think there might be a real parallel here.

Of course the doctrine that Jesus is one person in two natures is a theological interpretation of Jesus, and of course it may be replaced by another interpretation using quite different language; Christians managed without a doctrine expressed in these terms for quite a long time and they may turn out to do so again, it is, however, an altogether different matter to use the *same* terms and to deny the doctrine.

Maurice Wiles provides us (p. 2) with a useful parallel from the doctrine of the eucharist. He says that just as many Christians manage without the doctrine of transubstantiation so they may manage without the doctrine of the incarnation. He disregards, however, the two quite distinct ways in which transubstantiation may be (and has been) dropped. It has been dropped by, for example, transignificationists who think they have a *better* way of saying that the consecrated bread and wine are really the body and blood of Christ, on the other hand it has also been dropped by Zwinglians who want to say that the consecrated elements are *not* the real body and blood of Christ but mere representations of it. The former view may reasonably be claimed as a development of doctrine, recognisable in that it puts the whole matter in an entirely new light and calls for a new language; the latter is a denial of the doctrine couched in approximately the same language.

Now in which of these senses do these authors propose to manage without the incarnation? We are accustomed by now to Professor Wiles's wholly admirable plea for real theology—theology in the sense that it was practised by, say, Thomas Aquinas (and by Wiles himself) which is not just exegesis of the Bible or the Fathers but the asking of radical questions and the application of critical intelligence to the formulation of our belief. It was such thinking that produced the Chalcedonian, and for that matter the Thomist, versions of the incarnation, and there is every reason to hope that similar work done by minds illuminated by Darwin, Marx, Freud, Einstein, Heidegger and Wittgenstein will produce its own account of Jesus and his meaning. But, alas, not in this book: for it is in large part devoted to a docetist misunderstanding of the incarnation. "A literal incarnation doctrine expressed in however sophisticated a form cannot avoid some element of docetism and involves the believer in claims for uniqueness which seem straightforwardly incredible to the majority of our contemporaries." (Frances Young p. 32) This is the central assertion of the book and no attempt whatever is made to show that the first part of it is true. Instead we are given accounts of how a docetist ver-

sion of Jesus might have been expected to arise, accounts of 'divine or spiritual visitants' such as are to be found in literature roughly contemporary with the early Church; we are told, by Michael Goulder, about a fascinating, if somewhat hypothetical, 'Samaritan Christianity', but of the christian doctrine that Jesus was not a 'spiritual visitant' but a man who was God we are given no serious analysis at all.

Aquinas begins his discussion of whether this doctrine can be true or not (*Quaest. Disp. De Unione Verbi Incarnati*) by saying "In order to answer this question it is necessary first to consider what we mean by 'nature' and secondly what we mean by 'person'." No such necessity seems to have weighed upon these authors. The word 'person' does not even figure in the index. At one point it is said that the incarnation means that Jesus was not a human person (they are not alone in thinking this: I have seen the same muddle in works of debased scholasticism). Part of the doctrine of the incarnation is precisely that Jesus was and is a human person; the other part is that this same identical person was and is divine. The adjectives 'divine' and 'human' express *what* Jesus is (his nature), the name 'Jesus' refers to *who* (which person) he is. In virtue of his human nature certain things can be asserted or denied about Jesus; in virtue of his divine nature certain other things can be asserted or denied of him, but all these assertions are about one person. The point is a logical (or, as these authors prefer to call it, a 'metaphysical') one. Thus it is true to say "God died on the cross" or "God suffered hunger and thirst" because in these sentences 'God' is a referring expression in Strawson's sense, indicating the subject, the person, about whom the assertion is being made. It is not, however, true to say "Jesus, *qua* God, died on the cross" for here 'God' belongs to the predicative part of the proposition and has the role of signifying a nature. There is no special mystery about this: it is no more than the logical difference between saying "A policeman murdered his wife" and saying "Mr X, *qua* policeman, murdered his wife." The mystery of the incarnation lies in the fact that while, alas, there is nothing in the least odd about someone happening to be both a murderer and a policeman, when we are dealing not with what someone *happens* to be but with what constitutes him as what he fundamentally is, with what it takes for him to be at all, with (if you will pardon the expression) his essence or nature, then it does seem extremely odd for him to be two kinds of thing at once. It is in this way that Chalcedon points to the mystery of Jesus. Let me repeat: we may well find other ways of articulating this mystery, but if we *are* to speak in these old-fashioned terms of essence, nature, person, then to deny the paradoxical proposition of Chalcedon is to fail to grasp in faith the mystery which is Jesus.

For Professor John Hick it is all rather simple: he writes as

though no one had hitherto observed the oddness of ascribing two natures to Jesus. "For to say, without explanation, that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square." (p. 178) (It is not clear how any amount of 'explanation' could render meaningful something that begins by being devoid of meaning, but let it pass.) It is with statements like this that these theologians illustrate the perils of not having done much theology in Maurice Wiles's sense. A man accustomed to radical questioning of that kind would, of course, immediately ask: "Can it be that being divine is related to being human in the same way as being circular is related to being square?"

The mystery of Jesus is, like all mysteries, the mystery of what 'God' means. If we are to explore it we shall have to explore what we can, and more particularly what we cannot, confidently assert concerning God. We should be able to avoid, for example, the grotesquely infantile picture offered, apparently seriously, by Michael Goulder: "Once the world was on its way God did not interfere with it; but he surveys it with loving care, triumphing in man's loving response, agonizing with his suffering." (p. 61) You would think that two thousand years of Christianity would have got this idolatry of a celestial Housemaster out of our system once and for all. (We would also avoid such hair-raising sentences as "To reduce *all of God* to a human incarnation is virtually inconceivable". (p. 35) What could possibly be supposed to be meant by *part of God*?)

Circles and squares and triangles and such occupy their mutually exclusive territories in the common logical world of shapes. It is part of the *meaning* of a circle that it is not a square or any other shape; hence to say that something is both a circle and a square is to say both that it is and is not a circle, and this (*pace* the Latin Averroists and, possibly, Frances Young) is to say nothing at all. Similarly being human and being, say, a sheep occupy mutually exclusive territories in the common logical world of animals. It is part of the meaning of being human that one is not a sheep. And so on. But just what or where is the common logical world that is occupied in mutual exclusion by God and man? A circle and a square make two shapes; a man and a sheep make two animals: God and man make two what? It may be part of the meaning of man that he is not any other creature; it cannot be part of the *meaning* of man that he is not God. God is not one of the items in some universe which have to be excluded if it is just man that you are talking about. God could not be an item in any universe.

It follows that there is not, after all, the same contradiction in saying that Jesus is both man and God as there would be in saying that a circle is a square or that Jesus is both man and sheep. This does not mean that we actually *understand* what it means to say

that Jesus is man and God; of course we do not clearly understand this any more than we clearly understand what it means to say that God created the world or that the consecrated elements are the body and blood of Christ or indeed that God exists or that I am a sinner. The doctrine of the incarnation, like the doctrines of creation or redemption, is not conveying information, it is pointing to a mystery in Jesus. We require of such a doctrine not that it be clearly intelligible but that at least it should say something i.e. that it should not contradict itself. This requirement, I think Professor Hick must on reflection agree, is satisfied by the doctrine of the incarnation.

Somewhere at the back of the minds of these authors lurks, it seems probable, the idea that the doctrine of the incarnation ought to tell us what Jesus was like, or what it was like to be Jesus. ("Orthodoxy has never been able to give this idea any content"—Hick; "The empirical content of what is understood to be involved in the incarnation"—Wiles.) Of course it does not; it does not tell us of his life but of the *significance* of his life. It authorises us to say, for example, because of the life of Jesus, that our God was whipped and spat upon and that God has experienced total failure and death itself (and, incidentally, *not* to say, as Frances Young carelessly does, that, in Jesus, God "bore the pain and the guilt" of evil.) It may be that Hick himself is groping towards such an idea when he says that the doctrine is intended to "express an evaluation and evoke an attitude." Of course it is; but this is just what Holy Mother Church has been teaching since before Chalcedon, there is no need for all this ambiguous and misleading stuff about myths.

A prominent symptom of misunderstanding the doctrine of the incarnation as telling us what, empirically, Jesus was or is like is confusion about Jesus's knowledge. I know that large claims have been made for Jesus's human knowledge, not only by Professor Mascall who is quoted here with proper disapproval by Wiles (p. 5) but by many other Christians, including St. Thomas Aquinas, but none of these claims have any logical connection with the incarnation. They seemed 'appropriate' to Mascall and to Aquinas; they do not seem appropriate to Maurice Wiles (or to me), but anyway to deny them has nothing to do with denying the doctrine of the incarnation any more than to assert them has to do with docetism.

People ask, then, did Jesus in Galilee assent to the Chalcedonian definition of himself? And nearly everyone nowadays says: No, he didn't. He lived in a time before the language of Chalcedon was formulated; he no more accepted this than he accepted Newton's third law or the theory of surplus value. But what about Jesus's self-understanding *as God*? There seems to be an idea that if we once admit (with Chalcedon) that Jesus was divine in Gali-

lee—and hence living not merely in history but in eternity—he must, by the power of his divine nature, have foreseen the propositions of Chalcedon and assented to them. Once again the theological mind boggles. It would have seemed absurd to, for example, Aquinas, to say that Divinity ever assented to *any* proposition at all. The idea that Jesus, *qua* Son of God, constructed some special divinely authorised set of propositions such as the christian creed is as anthropomorphic as the idea that God has a white beard. Whatever we can mean by speaking of God’s knowledge, we know that it cannot mean that God is well informed, that he assents to a large number of true statements. Jesus’s knowledge of history, as Son of God, was no different from the existence of the world; it was not in the same ball-game with what he learnt as man.

At the root of all this lies a deficient doctrine of God, and this must be partly due to the authors’ omission of a thousand years of hard christian thinking on the topic. Apart from a trivial reference to John Damascene (Cupitt, p. 133) the book shows no understanding of any theological work between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries—and not much after that either until the nineteenth—e.g. Frances Young: “*Modern* discussions have insisted on the impossibility of treating God as a thing like other things about which factual statements can be made.” (p. 41, my italics.) Only such ignorance (which is quite standard in the theological departments of British universities) could account for the uncritical view of God manifest in these pages. I am sure it is true, as Frances Young clearly explains, that for many of the early Fathers there was a problem of the relation of God to the world and of Jesus to God which was seen in terms of platonist or neo-platonist puzzles about the One and the Many, but this was quite soon superseded by a more radically christian understanding of God in terms of creation—a notion not available to Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus.

With the idea of God as creator, as source of *esse* (roughly the being of the thing not just over against a world-without-it, but over against *nothing*, not even ‘logical space’) comes the idea of God as relevant to things precisely in virtue of transcendence. This God cannot be a Top Person summoned to fill the gaps in the natural order; this God must be at the heart of every being, acting in every action (whether determined or free), continually sustaining her creation over against nothing as a singer sustains her song over against silence—and that too is only a feeble metaphor, for even silence presupposes being.

To begin to grasp the christian notion of God that was hammered out particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is to recognise the crudity and utter irrelevance of Feuerbach’s polarisation of man and God. It may well be the case that the bigger place you give to some non-christian god the less room is left for man,

and vice versa; any interference by the celestial Housemaster may well restrict man's freedom or compete with him for attention. For the Christian, however, Divinity is creative of man's freedom, and the more man is himself, the more he is free, the more is the action of God manifest.

It is in this perspective (not in the perspective of the god that is rival to man) that developed christian theology saw the incarnation. Thus grace which, in Aquinas's view, was our personal openness in faith/knowledge and love to the divine life which is in any case always at the centre of our being, finds its culmination in Jesus who is totally transparent to divinity in that the I which is the centre of his being is not even created but simply known and loved into being by the Father. From this perspective there is not the same anxiety about the 'uniqueness' of the incarnation in Jesus. It is not that Christians expect to find another God/man in India or California (though Aquinas thought this perfectly possible in principle if not in the actual historical divine plan) but that the *exclusive* uniqueness of Jesus (Jesus-and-not-me instead of myself-in-Jesus) is simply the sin of the world. What we expect to find in India or California is not an alternative Christ but *alter Christus*. It is not that by grace we become extra incarnations of the Son of God but that by grace we belong to the one incarnation of the Son of God—we are 'in Christ' as Paul kept saying.

One of the concerns of these authors, particularly John Hick, is that the incarnation seems provincial in that it makes Christianity something utterly different from all other world religions. Now quite apart from the presence of grace and therefore of incarnation in the followers of other religions, it is really time we stopped and criticised this phrase. There is no significant world religion except Christianity. Every other religion, however many its adherents, has shown itself incapable of breaking free from a particular culture or even a particular people. Atheistic humanism is worldwide but not a religion. Indeed the paradoxical concept of a religion (something tied to history and tradition and particularity) which is nonetheless worldwide, transcending cultures and histories, is itself a peculiarly christian and 'incarnational' notion. The Greek term for a world religion is Catholicism.

The motives of most of the authors of this book are to commend Christianity to men (including themselves) who cannot believe in a 'supernatural visitant' and cannot believe that God has remained silent except in the Judaeo-Christian tradition—I hope that I have shown that these ideas have nothing in common with orthodox traditional belief in the incarnation. It is not so with the author of what seems to me the most lucid and perceptive chapter in the book. Don Cupitt's reason for rejecting the incarnation has nothing to do with making Christianity more palatable to modern man; on the contrary, for him the incarnation is all too palatable

in that it proposes the humanity of God. For him the message of Jesus was the opposition and challenge of God to man. "What matters in Jesus's message is his sense of the abrupt juxtaposition of two opposed orders of things . . . the doctrine of the incarnation unified things which Jesus has kept in ironic contrast to each other." (p. 140) Don Cupitt comes clean; his article is an outright rejection of Catholic Christianity and in particular of the Catholic idea that 'grace perfects nature'. It is good, vigorous, Protestant stuff which it would be a pleasure to answer had we but space—suffice for the moment to say that it seems to me to involve an antithesis of God and man (as distinct from an antithesis of the World and the Kingdom) appearing, despite much wisdom and insight, in Luther and made fully explicit in Feuerbach, an antithesis which is not to be found in the New Testament. It will perhaps be even more pleasant to watch the debate on fundamentals which surely ought now to arise between Don Cupitt and his fellow-symposiasts.

Lonergeran : A Final Word

William Mathews S.J.

My reply to 'Lonergeran's Wake' has drawn widely contrasting reactions from Nicholas Lash and Fergus Kerr.¹ Lash, in leaping to the defence of the critics, presents me with a Catch 22 type dilemma by characterising in advance anything I might say in defence of Lonergeran or against the critics as mindless discipleship.² I can but hope that there will be others who will have a more open

¹ 'Lonergeran's Wake' appeared in *New Blackfriars*, July 1975, my reply 'Lonergeran's Awake' in January 1976. The replies were printed in February and March. My present remarks deal mainly with the third and fourth criticisms of Kerr on pp 62–64 of his February article.

² Lash, after accusing me of not attempting 'first to understand the standpoints from which the scholars offer a critical response to Lonergeran's achievement' then goes on completely to misunderstand the standpoint of my own article. He interprets me as attempting to defend the absurd position that (a) Lonergeran's work is above criticism and (b) is definitive for theological method, whatever definitive might mean. I wish completely to dissociate myself from these positions. I welcome enlightened criticism and have in the present instance learned much from Torrance and Pannenberg, and from the rather constructive summing up by Outler in the Perkins Colloquy (*Perkins Journal*, Spring 1975). Rather than seeing *Method* as in any sense definitive I consider it as a very precarious first step towards coming to terms with the problem of the internal structure of current theology. Practically everything in it needs considerable further elaboration before it can become marketable. My reply to 'Lonergeran's Wake' had but one goal, namely to challenge Fergus Kerr's conclusion that *Method* was, as he put it, a gross error, ramshackle, that the Maynooth seminar was its watershed, in short, its wake. I thought I had made this clear in my opening paragraph. The body of the article was concerned with suggesting in the limited space available, that the various criticisms were not themselves definitive, above criticism. The final paragraph indicated the extent of the claim I was prepared to make on behalf of *Method*.