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*Incarnation — the essence of Christianity?*

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour’s love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh and die?

This popular Passiontide hymn expresses very simply a characteristic Christian devotional response to the Incarnation. I take it that the writer meant by the first line not that this love remains unknown, but that, prior to the taking of frail flesh, it was (relatively speaking) unknown. Now, by contrast, the saving action of incarnation – to the point of crucifixion – has revealed that previously unknown love, and the effect of this revelation is to be the transformation of the loveless into the lovely.

There can be no doubt that the doctrine of the Incarnation has been taken during the bulk of Christian history to constitute the very heart of Christianity. Hammered out over five centuries of passionate debate, enshrined in the classical Christian creeds, explored and articulated in the great systematic theologies, the doctrine expresses, so far as human words permit, the central belief of Christians that God himself, without ceasing to be God, has come amongst us, not just in but as a particular man, at a particular time and place. The human life lived and the death died have been held quite
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literally to be the human life and death of God himself in one of the modes of his own eternal being. Jesus Christ, it has been firmly held, was truly God as well as being truly man. As we have seen, this belief is not only expressed in the doctrine of the Incarnation, but also in countless hymns and devotional rites that belong to the very stuff of living Christianity, not to mention the art and sculpture which it has inspired down the centuries.

This extraordinary doctrine has, nevertheless, been widely questioned since the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science, not only from without but from within the Christian Church. Recently, in England, there has been a spate of books and articles criticising traditional incarnational Christology as unintelligible and defending a non-incarnational Christology as quite sufficient to do justice to the figure of Jesus and to what God did in and through him. I wish to discuss this present phase of the debate, not because there is anything particularly original in current non-incarnational Christology in England (as opposed to that of Ernst Troeltsch, for example, in the early years of this century in Germany), but because the issues are being presented now with great simplicity and clarity, and this makes for easier dialogue. Examples of the writings which I have in mind are Norman Pittenger’s Christology Reconsidered, John Robinson’s The Human Face of God, Maurice Wiles’ The Remaking of Christian Doctrine, John Hick’s God and the Universe of Faiths, and an article by Don Cupitt, now reprinted in The Leap of Reason, called “The Finality of Christ”.

Two claims stand out as typical of these approaches to Christology. On the one hand, it is asserted that we cannot accept the old formulations since it is simply incoherent, self-contradictory, to speak of one who is both God and man; and on the other hand, it is urged that what the old formulations were trying to express about the significance of Jesus for us can be rescued from its involvement in this incoherence and expressed more simply and more adequately by speaking of
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God’s acts in and through the man Jesus, or of Jesus’ peculiar, indeed unique, openness to the divine Spirit. I wish to refute both these claims, and, in doing so, to bring out their interconnection.

My colleague, Don Cupitt, writes: ‘The eternal God, and a historical man, are two beings of quite different ontological status. It is simply unintelligible to declare them identical.’ Similarly, John Hick has repeated Spinoza’s comment that talk of one who is both God and man is like talk of a square circle. Both writers are so convinced that a literal doctrine of Incarnation cannot be true, that they try to represent this as a logical impossibility. Yet as soon as we examine these assertions it becomes clear that no case whatsoever has actually been made out for the conclusion that incarnation-talk is self-contradictory. What, after all, is the basis for comparing talk of one who is both God and man to talk of a square circle? Certainly a square circle is a contradiction in terms. The terms ‘square’ and ‘circle’ are precisely defined terms, and their logical incompatibility is obvious from the definitions. But ‘God’ and ‘man’ are far from being such tightly defined concepts. It is difficult enough to suppose that we have a full and adequate grasp of what is to be a human being. We certainly have no such grasp of the divine nature. Who are we to say that the essence of God is such as to rule out the possibility of his making himself present in the created world as a human being, while in no way ceasing to be the God he ever is? A similar point can be made in respect of Cupitt’s remarks. Certainly the eternal God and a historical man are beings of different ontological status. But the claim of the Christian tradition has been that the ontology of God is such as to permit the infinite source of all created being to come amongst us as a man. Again, who are we to say that the ontological status of God is such as to render this logically impossible? Modern theologians are much too ready to cry ‘contradiction’. As Ninian Smart has wisely observed in
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another context: ‘It is doubtful whether the God–manhood of Christ is a strict contradiction, e.g., Christ was for a time in Galilee while God is from eternity in Heaven, and Christ is God: does this constitute a contradiction? Only if Heaven and Galilee are both places in the same sense of “place”.’

We shall see in a moment why the writers in question feel bound to press their case so far as to accuse the doctrine of the Incarnation of self-contradiction. For the moment we note the baselessness of this accusation and turn to their other claim, namely that everything which the tradition has claimed regarding the revelatory and salvific significance of Jesus Christ can be retained without the belief that he was God as well as man. I should like to test this claim by describing two features in incarnational Christology which seem to me to be of great profundity, and asking whether non-incarnational Christology can ever hope to give us such religiously significant insights into the ways of God with man.

The first feature of the traditional belief to which I should like to draw attention is its insistence on the direct personal encounter between God and man made possible by the Son of God’s coming amongst us as one of us. Certainly God’s dealings with man prior to the Incarnation and through other religious traditions can be construed as personal. Spirituality, prophetic inspiration, mystical experience, can all be construed in personal terms, as they are in all the great religions of Semitic origin, and indeed in many of the Eastern faiths as well. But the Incarnation represents a new and much more direct, face-to-face way of personal encounter this side of the divide between infinite and finite than is envisaged in the modes of inspiration or illumination. Certainly those modes imply an immanent, not just a transcendent God, but the manner of the divine presence in the world is surely differently conceived when it is supposed that God comes face to face with us as another human being. The difference is brought out beautifully by Søren Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments* by means of his parable.
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of the king and the humble maiden. The king can only win
the maiden’s love if he lays aside his royal robes and woos her
as an ordinary man, person to person, in her own village.
There are two points here. The king must do this himself; it
is no use just sending a messenger. Secondly, he must do so
in a way which does not overwhelm the humble girl by the
panoply of royalty. Of course, this is only a parable for the
incarnation, and it fails at many points, especially in so far as
the king’s ‘condescension’ involves only a change of clothes.
But the main point stands, that there is a difference between
God’s making himself known indirectly through the awe-
inspiring medium of ‘the holy’ or through a prophet, and
God’s coming himself incognito, and winning a purely per-
sonal response. To suppose that God’s act in or presence to
the man Jesus is simply a higher example of the kind of in-
spiration or illumination to be found elsewhere in the history
of religions and thus of supreme exemplary significance for
our own ‘God-consciousness’ is not to reinterpret the Chris-
tian tradition. It is to lose the peculiarly Christian contribu-
tion, namely that experience of God can now take a much
more direct and personal form, since God himself has humbl-
ed himself and come among us as one of us.

My second test for non-incarnational Christology’s ade-
quacy concerns the way in which Christianity claims to meet
the problem of evil. One of its most profound claims is that
God in Christ subjected himself to the world’s evil at its most
harsh and cruel, and by so doing both revealed his love and
accepted responsibility for the suffering entailed by the crea-
tion of an organic self-reproducing world of sentient and free
persons. There is a profoundly moral insight here. The divine
love and forgiveness are shown most clearly in the lengths to
which our God is prepared to go to win the love of the loveless
‘that they might lovely be’. These things cannot be done
through a representative. No doubt it is possible to express
sympathy and sorrow indirectly through someone else. But
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there is all the difference in the world between the sending of condolences and actually bearing the brunt of the suffering oneself. The point about God’s taking responsibility for the world’s evil, moreover, depends wholly on the Incarnation. In no way can he be supposed to take responsibility for the world’s ills through the suffering of a human representative.

By both these tests, then, a non-incarnational Christology fails. The moral and religious significance of Christ’s life and death depends on his being God in person. But now, perhaps, we see the reason why our christological revisionists have to press their case to the point of crying contradiction. The moral and religious sense which I have claimed to discern in the doctrine of the Incarnation depends, of course, on that doctrine making sense. If the notion of God made man is a nonsense, then any purported moral and religious significance in the notion must be illusory. If in the nature of the case God’s presence in the world can take no deeper form than that of inspiration or illumination, then it is folly to suggest or claim anything more. God is as fully present in and to the inspired prophet Jesus of Nazareth as it is logically possible for God to be present in and to a man. But if, on the contrary, something more is logically possible, then non-incarnational Christology is on pretty shaky ground. If God might have become man, but did not, then the reduced claims for what God has done in Christ fail to satisfy. But, as we have seen, the case for holding the notion of one who is both God and man to be self-contradictory has not been made out. So the moral and religious sense which we can come to see in the belief that the Cross of Christ is God’s Cross in our world is bound to make the non-incarnational Christologies appear inadequate and a pale shadow of orthodox Christian doctrine.

Many writers have spoken of the appropriateness of the Incarnation. Not that we could have predicted it very easily, although there are significant intimations of the notion elsewhere in the history of religions. But given the life, death
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and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the experience of the gift of the Spirit, the resultant doctrine of the Incarnation evokes our immediate recognition of its appropriateness. Many creative innovations in religion and ethics have this curious ability at once to introduce something new and to make us say, yes, it could not have been otherwise.

Of all the writers I mention at the beginning, John Hick is the one who has come up with the most persuasive reason for demythologising the Incarnation. Only by so doing, on Hick’s view, can one make moral and religious sense of the relation between the developing world religions as different and equally valid channels of the saving encounter between God and man – man, that is, in his different historical and cultural traditions. I say that this global ecumenism makes moral and religious sense, but one cannot proceed in an a priori manner in these matters. One has actually to look at the beliefs and doctrines of the religions as they have emerged, and it is very hard to see that the specifically Christian claims can really be made to fit this pattern. Moreover I have to set against the appealing nature of Hick’s relativistic hypothesis the moral and religious sense of the doctrine of the Incarnation as I have tried to expound it above. This, I urged, depends on our recognising in the man Jesus God himself come amongst us to make himself known in personal encounter and to take the brunt of the world’s evil upon himself. This, one realises, could only be done at the cost of introducing an asymmetry into the history of religions. (The notion of many incarnations cannot carry the same force, if God is one, and a particular man can be God to us in a fully human personal context. To suppose that God might have several human faces is to lose the real personal revelatory significance of the Incarnation.) Consequently, whatever knowledge and experience of God is mediated to our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist friends by their respective traditions – and it is a mistake to depreciate that knowledge and experience –
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the Christian cannot withdraw his invitation to them and to all men to see in Jesus Christ something more, and something necessarily unique.

It is interesting to note that Hick has to reinforce his relativistic view by going on to urge that the notion of one who is both God and man is self-contradictory. But this contradiction was only ‘discovered’ after he had already adopted the relativistic view of God and the Universe of Faiths on other grounds. Such a belated logical discovery does not inspire confidence. I recall the discussion of these topics at the Society for the Study of Theology at Lancaster some years ago, when Ninian Smart made the nice point that he could not see why Professor Hick was so sure that ‘God’ and ‘man’ were incompatible, when he was equally sure that the religions’ different concepts of God as ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ were ultimately compatible. The point is worth pondering. One might well think that the latter conjunction has more in common with a ‘square circle’ than the former.

I should like to turn to the recent article by Harry Williams in Theology for January 1976. That article seems to me to be totally misconceived. It begins with the false premise that ‘it is difficult for us not to assume that in the doctrine of the incarnation we have some sort of literal description or representational picture’. We assume nothing of the kind. The statement that God reveals himself and his forgiving love by coming amongst us as one of us and bearing the brunt of the world’s evil himself is in no sense a symbolic, picturing or representational statement. No doubt it assumes some personal model in respect of its subject, ‘God’, but the statement itself remains quite agnostic about the ontological possibilities of God’s self-manifestation or the manner of his making himself present in our midst. Certainly there are ways of picturing the incarnation – the kotic model, for instance, or Kierkegaard’s model of the king and the humble maiden – and they are admittedly highly anthropomorphic. No doubt,
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as Williams suggests, we need a mutually qualifying plurality of models of the Incarnation. But the point is that these are models of the Incarnation. Incarnation is not itself one of the models. Rather it is what is being pictured in these various inadequate ways.

Treating 'incarnation' as itself a model leads Williams at once into the 'square circle' dilemma, which, as we have seen, has no real basis. It is precisely because we are not operating with a readily available concept or picture of God, but pointing away from our own pictures to an infinite transcendent reality much greater than anything we can think or say that we can consider the possibility that God is literally such as to be able, without ceasing to be God, to make himself known in human form.

Having started off on the wrong foot, Williams goes on to make confusion worse confounded by offering as one among many models a psychological model, in which the split between the knowing subject and the known object is overcome. But the irrelevance of this model becomes apparent only too soon; for we find that Williams is not really offering this as a model for the Incarnation at all, but rather for the relation between God and man as such. But that is a different subject. Maybe the psychological model might help us with a doctrine of the Spirit, but, as we have seen above, the notion of the divine inspiration of a human prophet cannot do the same job as the doctrine of the Incarnation. The moral and religious force of Jesus’ life and death depends on his being God incarnate. And if Williams is to press the argument the other way and suggest through his psychological model that we are all God incarnate, well, that is an interesting piece of theosophy, but it has little to do with Christian doctrine.

The suggestion that, of all the human beings who have trod the earth, Jesus of Nazareth alone was divine is undoubtedly an extraordinary suggestion. It is not surprising that in our relativistic and secular age even Christians find it hard to
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swallow. But then belief in God is an extraordinary belief for the scientific or historicist mind. If we are seriously to suppose that there is a transcendent source of being and value, an infinite Creator on whom this whole evolving world and the whole history of man depend, then we cannot refrain from taking seriously the different possible ways of construing the self-revelation of God to man that have emerged from the history of religions. One such way is to see that revelation as focused in a unique personal presence of God as a particular man at a particular time and place within the historical process. I have said something of the moral and religious force of such a view. There is a great deal more that could be said. Moreover the question of the historical evidence for reading things this way has not been examined here, and much depends on the plausibility of that case. But of one thing I am quite certain — that the doctrine of the Incarnation represents the peculiarly Christian contribution to the religions’ ways of speaking of God’s dealings with man and man’s experience and knowledge of God.