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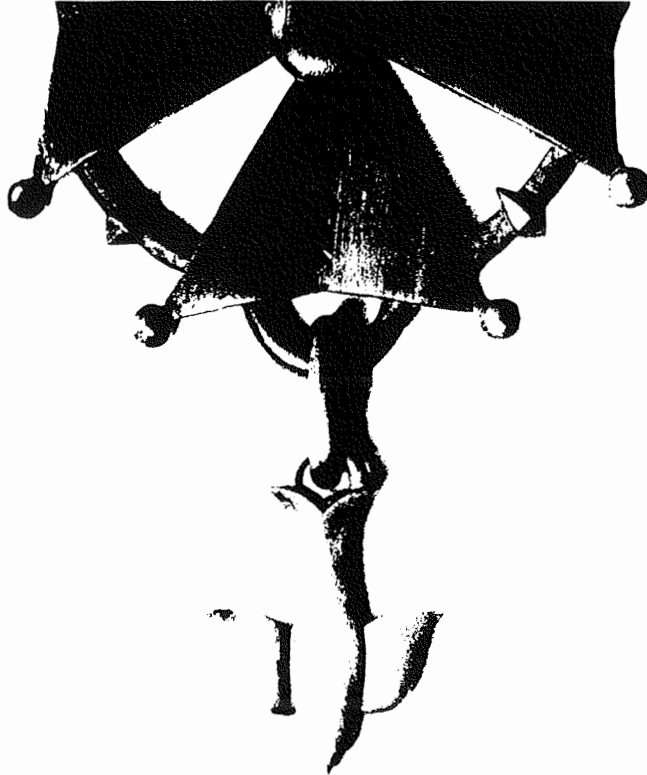
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# Believing in the Incarnation Today

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Richard Bauckham



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The debate over *The Myth of God Incarnate*<sup>1</sup> may be taken as a useful challenge to rethink the credibility and the meaning of belief in the incarnation today. This article will take up just two issues out of the complex variety of questions raised by *The Myth*.

## 1. The Possibility of Incarnation

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism of incarnational doctrine is that it is incoherent or unintelligible. The idea of Jesus' personal identity with God is alleged to be a self-contradictory idea, a logical impossibility, like a square circle. This point is

made, for example, by Don Cupitt: 'The eternal God, and a historical man, are two beings of quite different ontological status. It is simply unintelligible to declare them identical.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly Maurice Wiles asks: 'Are we sure that the concept of an incarnate being, one who is both fully God and fully man, is after all an intelligible concept?'<sup>3</sup>

This problem must not be dismissed too hastily. A student of the history of Christology may well be tempted to think that the perennial difficulty of conceiving what it means for God and man to coincide in one person results from the basic impossibility of doing so. God and man possess contradictory attributes, and it is *prima facie* nonsensical to say that Jesus is both infinite and finite, immortal and mortal, omniscient and ignorant, Creator and created. A good case could be made

for the view that the attempt to combine the two natures in one person has always been a practical victory of one over the other. Much traditional Christology has had a docetic tendency. In spite of their belief in Jesus' full humanity, the Fathers often distorted the human reality of the historical Jesus beyond recognition. Modern Christology is determined at all costs to avoid Docetism: we have re-discovered the real humanity of Jesus, and whatever else must disappear into the doctrinal melting-pot we will not surrender that. Jesus' humanity must mean that he was fully human in ways the Fathers scarcely realized: human in all the historical conditionedness and all the historical relativity of other human existence, human in the depths of his psychology. But now that we more fully appreciate what full-blooded humanity means, where is the room for divinity? The temptation is strong to cut the Gordian knot and admit that the very idea of the God-man is incoherent and unintelligible.

This is the heart of the modern Christological problem. It is a most searching issue because it opens up the whole field of theology. It requires us to relate our Christology to our understanding of God and our understanding of man: is God such and is man such that God *cannot* become man? As R. A. Norris says, 'To understand and criticize a Christology is to understand and criticize a total theological outlook, a total intellectual framework for portraying the relation of man to God.'<sup>4</sup> Whether and how we believe in incarnation is no isolated issue. Moreover there is a serious question of method here: Do we come to the concept of incarnation with a prior understanding of God and man by means of which the possibility of incarnation is to be judged, or do we accept the fact of incarnation and allow it to modify our understanding of God and man?

It may help at this point to remind ourselves of a central Christian affirmation with which the authors of *The Myth* agree and even stress: that Jesus reveals God, and reveals God to be self-giving love. This revelation of God in Jesus is not a trivial illustration of what we should know perfectly well without Jesus. It determines the central content of the Christian concept of God, and we may not therefore judge the possibility of incarnation by any other standard than this. From the definition of God as immortal, invisible, omnipotent, omniscient—as all the negatives and superlatives which seem to rule our incarnation—we should not have guessed that God's character is self-giving love. Without Jesus we should have had only hints of that. So if incarnation turns out to be after all a

possibility for the Christian God, it should have something to do with this specifically Christian revelation of God's character in Jesus. We shall return to this point.

The problem of the two natures with the two irreconcilable sets of attributes can be approached in two ways, both of which are probably necessary:

(a) One way is to insist that after all divine and human nature are not so dissimilar. They look contradictory from the point of view of the meta-physical attributes of God, but from the point of view of the moral attributes the problem is quite different. God is love, and love can be human nature as well as divine. Jesus, it may be said, is God precisely in being perfect man.

There is truth in this approach, but it cannot be sufficient. If we base our doctrine of the incarnation simply on an assertion of the general compatibility of divinity and humanity, we shall end by dissolving altogether the distinction between God and man. This was the path taken, notoriously at the time, by the Conference of the Modern Churchmen's Union in 1921, which proposed that: 'Perfect humanity is deity under human conditions.'<sup>5</sup> From which the conclusion is that Jesus is the supreme example of the potential divinity of all men.

(b) The better way to begin is by recognizing that God and man are even more incomparable than the authors of *The Myth* allow. Man is finite and God is infinite: they are not at all in the same category. But this is precisely why we must admit the possibility of incarnation. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ would be an absurdity if divine and human nature were two varieties of the same kind of thing: then it would be, as it has sometimes been said to be, like putting two men together to make one. But precisely because God, unlike man, is infinite, his infinite life may *include* a finite existence in human history. Only this recognition of God's utter incomparability with creaturely being makes incarnation conceivable.

The doctrine of the incarnation involves us in saying that the God who made this world of finite experience is not by his infinite perfection excluded from it forever. Rather his perfection is an infinite richness of possibility which permits him to enter his own creation and experience time and ignorance and suffering and death. It might still be useful to recall two old analogies of incarnation: the playwright who writes himself a part in his play, or the king who goes in disguise to live among his subjects. They are only parables. We who are bound by finite experience cannot know what it means for



God to become man. But it seems an inadequate concept of God to deny him that possibility.

Of course this is not to suggest that God became man in order to enrich his experience. On the contrary: 'Christ who was rich, for your sake became poor' (2 Cor. 8:9). God is not like the prince who becomes a pauper because he envies the pauper's carefree existence. He is rather more like the prince (unknown among human princes) who leaves the palace to share the misery and the starvation of his subjects.

The infinite nature of God allows us to envisage the *possibility* of incarnation. But the mere possibility of incarnation may not lead us to the fact of incarnation as a matter of course, especially when we remember the kind of incarnation of which Christians speak. The incarnation of God in Jesus does not mean simply that God became man in order to live the one supremely perfect human life. That can seem, in the light of our first approach by way of the compatibility of God and man, to be something rather appropriate for God. The incarnation of God in Jesus means that God became man in order to live and die in self-identification with sinners. This (as Luther saw so clearly) is what contrasts so brutally with what men expect of divinity. Men who naturally define God by excluding from his perfection all the undesirable aspects of their own condition would never have guessed at the possibility of *that* incarnation.

It is the self-giving love of God which determines the astonishing fact of incarnation. We could never have known the full reality of either without the other. Only because God is self-giving love was he not content to remain in the sufficiency of his own perfection but entered also into the negative and impoverishing experience of incarnation in order to enrich us. Of course, because he is self-giving love, our enrichment becomes also his enrichment.

The claim that incarnation is an inconceivable idea must be given its due. It may serve to remind us that the incarnation is not to be regarded as a matter of course, something we should have expected. As Karl Barth says, 'The statement that Jesus Christ is the One who is of divine and human essence dares to unite that which by definition cannot be united.'<sup>6</sup> Christology is not obliged to dispel the ultimate mystery of the incarnation which is the mystery of God's astonishing love.

## 2. The 'Myth' of Incarnation

The confusing term 'myth' seems to be most often used in *The Myth* to mean a story which conveys truth but is not itself literally true. I have already referred to parabolic illustrations of the idea of incarnation, which might be called 'myths' of incarnation. It is as well to realize that the New Testament writers also use mythical language about incarnation, when they speak of Jesus as a divine being who existed before the incarnation in heavenly glory and *descended* from heaven into this world. But in these cases myths are being told about what is taken to be the fact of incarnation. The authors of *The Myth*, however, claim that the idea of incarnation itself is myth and that Christology is mistaken to take it literally.

In that case, what is the truth of which the incarnation is only a picture? The credibility of the argument of *The Myth* depends entirely on a credible answer to this question. The authors have several different answers, of which we shall here examine two.

(a) John Hick regards incarnation as 'a mythological expression of the immense significance of our encounter with one in whose presence we have found ourselves to be at the same time in the presence of God'.<sup>7</sup>

No doubt this expresses why it was that the early Christians found themselves obliged to use language of deity with reference to Jesus. Jesus they knew as the mediator of God's saving presence to them, the one through whom they knew the Father. Jesus was the focus of all their experience of God. He

was not, like Mahomet, a prophet who communicated God's revelation and then stepped aside. Jesus became himself *part of* the early Christian experience of God. He embodied God's saving purpose and action and presence in his own person. In the Christian experience of God Jesus was so identified with God that in the end he had to be identified as God.

Hick wishes us to stop before the end of that development. Jesus had indeed those functions in the Christian's relation to God, but he is not (literally) God. But a functional Christology which thus stops short of Jesus' essential divinity must finally be what Jews and Muslims have always argued it is: blasphemy and idolatry. No human representative of God may rightly fill the role which Jesus fills in the New Testament writings, and which the authors of *The Myth* (with the exception of Don Cupitt) want him to continue to fill in the Christian religion. In our encounter with this man (says Hick) we are in the presence of God. If the God in question is the God of the Old Testament, the God who requires that nothing creaturely be confused with him, then it follows that this man *is* God.

In the development which led to the early Christian confession of Jesus as God there are three basic steps: (i) Jesus functions as God, (ii) Jesus is therefore worshipped, (iii) Jesus is therefore identified as God. In that case, John Hick's explanation of the myth of incarnation takes us back to the fundamental reason for belief in the fact of incarnation.

(b) Frances Young says that the truth of the myth 'can be summarized approximately by saying that God is to be understood as a *suffering God*'.<sup>8</sup>

This is a rescue of something of value from the sinking ship. Frances Young can certainly say what she says about God's loving involvement in the suffering of his world, without the need for belief in a literal incarnation. But Young's God suffers in sympathy with his world: he does not precisely subject *himself* to the world's evil as men experience it. To turn to the parable I used earlier, the God who becomes incarnate is like the king who leaves his palace to come among his subjects and share their sufferings at first hand as one of them. Young's God is like a king who sends someone else to do that on his behalf, so that his subjects can believe that the king in his palace sympathizes with their lot. As Brian Hebblethwaite says, 'there is all the difference in the world between the sending of condolences and actually bearing the brunt of the suffering oneself'.<sup>9</sup>

Now it could be objected that my parables are too anthropomorphic, but it may be that at this point

anthropomorphism is justified. It is helpful to recall the point at which the Old Testament reaches its profoundest understanding of God's suffering love for his people, in the prophecy of Hosea. Hosea's perception of God's suffering love for Israel is achieved by the analogy of his own love for Gomer. The analogy holds only by gross anthropomorphism, but with Christian hindsight this seems one of the highpoints of the Old Testament revelation of God.

The incarnation is the ultimate step in the same direction. God's love is now seen not just by human analogy. It takes human form, so that the earlier anthropomorphisms of speech are now, as it were, justified by an anthropomorphism of fact. The culmination of God's loving self-involvement with his people is that he comes among them as a man to suffer as human suffering the evil of the world. If that is myth, not fact, then the cross has less to say about the problem of suffering than it might.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick, SCM Press, 1977.
- <sup>2</sup> 'The Finality of Christ,' *Theology*, 78 (1975), p. 625.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Myth*, p. 5.
- <sup>4</sup> *Manhood and Christ*, Clarendon Press, 1963, p. vii.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Charles Gore, *Belief in Christ*, John Murray, 1922, p. 171. On this Modernist doctrine see A. M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple*, Longmans, 1960, pp. 68-73.
- <sup>6</sup> *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, T. and T. Clark, 1958, p. 61.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Myth*, p. 184.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36: the whole passage, pp. 36f., should be read.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Incarnation—The Essence of Christianity?', *Theology*, 80(1977), p. 88.

