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RECENT THEORIES OF THE INCARNATION.

BY A. J. MACDONALD, M.A., B.D., F.R.Hist.S.

Outspoken Essays (Second series), W. R. Inge. Longman's (1922).

Belief in Christ, C. Gore. Murray (1922).

Christus Veritas, W. Temple. Macmillan (1924).

"The Incarnation." Kirsopp Lake. *Hibbert Journal* (October, 1924).

WHEN Professor Kirsopp Lake claims that the synoptic writers do not teach the doctrine of the Incarnation he is, perhaps, only carrying to a just conclusion the interpretation peculiar to himself and the school of writers to which he belongs. But we cannot so lightly pass by the fact that he claims the support of writers who have not hitherto been associated with that school. It is probable that he seeks more support from certain isolated passages than they would be willing to concede, but the fact remains that a new mode of defending, which will involve a new mode of defining, the doctrine of the Incarnation, is being adopted by more orthodox writers. Dean Inge speaks not uncertainly of the Incarnation. "I have made the weight of my theological position rest on a certain conviction about the historical Jesus—namely, that He was the Incarnate Word or Logos of God, a perfect revelation of the mind, and character of God the Father" (*Outspoken Essays*, Second Series, p. 51). Yet he can also say "the existing Gospel (our Synoptics and others) taught an apotheosis-Christology, whereas the Pauline Churches had learnt an incarnation-Christology" (*ibid.*, p. 81). Dr. Gore is more cautious, he allows value for such passages as Matthew xi. 27, xiii. 32, and Mark xii. 6 (*Belief in Christ*, p. 56). Yet he also contends that "We can conceive nothing further from the method of Jesus than that He should have startled and shocked their consciences by proclaiming Himself as God" (*ibid.*, p. 68). If He did not claim to be God, He certainly claimed to be Son of God, and the difference would amount to very little in Jewish ears. But the most striking example of the modern tendency to seek authority for the Incarnation in some quarter other than the synoptic writers is to be found in Dr. Temple's book. "After a period of specially close intercourse with Him they were ready to follow St. Peter in acknowledging Him as the promised Messiah. But this is still far short of a confession of His deity. In our day many people identify the terms superhuman and divine. They think that if in our Lord besides humanity there was something more than humanity, that something must be divinity. But this is quite a baseless assumption, and the Jews did not make it. What from the scene of Cæsarea Philippi onwards the Apostles certainly believed is that their Master was more than human in the sense that we are human. The Messiah was at that date conceived as a superhuman and celestial Being, who might properly be spoken of as in a peculiar sense the Son of God; but He was not conceived as

divine in such a fashion as would lead to His being spoken of as God the Son" (*Christus Veritas*, p. 107).

This is to suggest that the Apostles held an Arian conception of this celestial Being, a conception which was surely as remote, if not more remote from Jewish thought than the possibility of a revelation of God in the flesh. It is true that the Jewish conception of Messiah did not associate deity with Him. But neither did it associate the attributes of a demi-god with Him. An anthropomorphic appearance of Jehovah was really less contrary to Jewish ideas, at least to some inherited traditions, than the conception assigned to the Apostles by Dr. Temple.

It may also be true that the Jews, as distinct from the Apostles, did not make the assumption that if there was something more in Jesus that something must be divinity. But this does not prove that the claim was never admitted by Jesus. Here lies the main difficulty in the contention both of Dr. Gore and Dr. Temple. If Jesus did not convey this idea to the Jews why did they condemn Him? At the examination before Caiaphas the question was put, "Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mark xvi. 61). Matthew and Luke amended "Son of the Blessed" by "Son of God," and Matthew and Luke in conjunction form a good authority. In all these writers Jesus admitted the charge, and was thereupon condemned for blasphemy. Yet this striking passage receives no attention from recent writers on the Incarnation. The claim that He was Son of God was not merely likely to shock the Jews, as Dr. Gore says, but it actually did so, and they condemned Him.

Dr. Temple's treatment of the New Testament evidence is controlled by his theory that "The Synoptic Evangelists are obviously concerned with history and not with theology" (p. 118). As a general statement this is undoubtedly correct, but in their historical accounts they could not avoid recording some words of our Lord, and of the disciples and the Jews, which have a definitely dogmatic import. The question of Caiaphas and the reply of Jesus are illustrations. Dr. Temple applies his theory to the Atonement. He says (p. 118) that the Synoptics, while minutely telling the facts of the Passion, do not attempt to indicate a doctrine of the Atonement. But he omits all reference to the "ransom" passages (Matt. xxvi. 28; Luke xxii. 19-20). Dr. Rashdall attempted to overcome the difficulty presented by these passages to the radical critic of the doctrine of Atonement by deleting them from the text. But they also belong to the ancient Matthew-Luke tradition which is a good authority.

This older tradition supplies us with another passage bearing on the doctrine of the Incarnation which is also rejected by Dr. Temple. (Matt. xi. 27; Luke x. 22.) "All things are delivered unto me of my Father and no man knoweth the Son save the Father neither doth any man know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him." The unmistakable Johannine ring in this passage proves that the teaching which has been labelled Johannine was being given in some form by the earliest disciples.

Whatever additions may have been made by the writer of the Fourth Gospel, his doctrine is a development of what dated back to the earliest traditions of Christian teaching.

Dr. Temple contends that a change in the conception of the disciples dates from the death of Stephen and that it was developed by St. Paul. But he offers no explanation of so extraordinary a change beyond the theory that dogma followed experience. Nor does he explain how the experience of Stephen became at once the experience of the Church. Even if a vision of the ascended Christ might have won from Stephen the cry, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," how did that experience suddenly become the experience of the rest? Moreover, even Stephen's experience would be contrary to all our notions of psychology, unless an idea of the divinity of Jesus had existed previously in his mind. He could not have interpreted the vision in these terms, unless at least, the possibility of the divinity of Jesus had been previously fixed in his mind. Experience follows doctrine.

In a similar manner St. Paul's experiences, and even that which took place on the Damascus road, were originally based upon a growing conviction, derived from instruction in some form, whether from reports of the disciples' life and teaching, or from his own meditation on them. The revelation of God to the soul never begins with a vision. It is always commenced by instruction, by doctrine, no matter how rudimentary. Experience may develop the doctrine and even enlarge it. Our view of the nature of religious experience, and of its course in the history of Israel and apostolic days, as well as in later times, will have to be completely revised if Dr. Temple's argument from Stephen is to be accepted. It is the theory that experience precedes doctrine which causes him to reject the passage in Matthew xi. 27, already noticed.

The evidence of the Fourth Gospel need not be considered at length. As Dr. Kirsopp Lake says, the doctrine of the Incarnation and deity are clearly stated there. But, being written at the end of the first century at the earliest (Streeter, *Four Gospels*, pp. 456-61), its evidence cannot be adduced with the same confidence as that of the Synoptics, save by those who believe in the Zebedean authorship. Now, Dr. Temple accepts the Zebedean authorship of the Fourth Gospel (p. 107), and yet declines to admit that the sayings of Jesus in that book conveyed the impression to the minds of the disciples that He was divine. The confession of St. Thomas is dismissed with the remark that "This remains an isolated utterance, and the theology implied by it was not yet intellectually grasped," and he continues, "If the Apostles reflected at the time on the saying, 'I and the Father are one,' they would remember that He justifies that saying by a reference to the psalm where those to whom the word of the Lord came are dignified with the divine title. He claimed to be the revelation of God, but the disciples who heard Him say 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father' only reached, before the Passion at any rate, the confession that He was one sent by God." We may agree with the next statement, "Our Lord's language does

not necessarily imply that He claimed to be Himself Jehovah," and also with what follows, "And if it had, we can see that it would have baffled and perplexed their minds." But that is exactly what took place in the minds both of the disciples and the Jewish hierarchy, though with different results. The hierarchy were so perplexed that they condemned Him to death for blasphemy. The disciples, by degrees, recognized the import of the teaching, so that we have not only the confession of Thomas (if as Dr. Temple maintains this is a Zebedean report), but an apostolic faith which was imparted, not indiscriminately, as when Peter preached publicly to the Jews, but privately—a faith held and imparted so sincerely that it created a background for the visions both of Stephen and Paul.

But Dr. Temple is not sure. His reservation "before the Passion at any rate" really surrenders his contention. It was indeed the Passion and the events which followed it that finally opened their eyes. Some, perhaps considerable, hesitancy before the Passion must be conceded, even at Cæsarea Philippi. But if they realized the conception of the deity of Jesus after the Passion, even though that realization appears to be closely related to definite incidents or phases of their religious experience, His own teaching must have prepared the way for it.

Most people would find their difficulties reduced if they could accept the Zebedean authorship of the Fourth Gospel. But having succeeded where others failed, he strains at the gnat. Yet his own doctrine of development and especially of survivals can be applied to the problem of the relation between Matthew xxi. 27 (Luke x. 22) and the Fourth Gospel. The teaching of the Fourth Gospel, more especially if it be Zebedean, implies the existence of some previous teaching such as that of Matthew xi. 27, and "uses (that) for its expression." So also, the teaching of Matthew xi. 27 finds its fulfilment only "when possessed by the higher grade of teaching" supplied by the Fourth Gospel.

Before passing on to consider the philosophic basis of the doctrine of the deity of Christ, one other possible source of evidence for the existence of this doctrine at an early date must receive attention. By the end of the first century Cerinthus was at the head of a flourishing school of critics of the doctrine. Gwatkin dated the Ebionites as early as A.D. 70, which does not seem to be too early if the school was flourishing twenty or thirty years later. Now, critics do not attack what does not exist. If all the records of the Tory party were to perish, it would still be possible to substantiate, five hundred years hence, the doctrine of Mr. Chamberlain, from the records of the Liberal party. If the doctrine of the deity of Christ was not being taught by the disciples at least as early as the fall of Jerusalem, it is difficult to account for the teaching of the Ebionite School.

Let us now turn to the brilliant definition of the nature of Reality, and the relation of its different aspects to each other, contained in *Christus Veritas*. Reality, says Dr. Temple, is stratified in the form of matter, life, mind and spirit.

“ We have seen that every grade in Reality finds its own fulfilment only when it is possessed by a higher grade, and that each higher grade uses those which are lower than itself for its expression. From this it follows that humanity only reveals its true nature when it is indwelt by what is higher than itself—and supremely when it is indwelt by the Highest ; and that the Highest uses what is lower to express Himself and does this more adequately as this lower approximates to likeness with Himself, so that of all things known to us human nature will express Him most perfectly. But if this is so, and if in Jesus Christ God lived on earth a human life, then it must be true that in Jesus Christ we shall find two things. In Jesus Christ we shall find the one adequate presentation of God—not adequate, of course, to the infinite glory of God in all His attributes, but adequate to every human need, for it shows us God in the terms of our own experience. But in Jesus Christ we shall find also the one adequate presentation of Man—not man as he is apart from the indwelling of God, but man as he is in his truest nature, which is only made actual when man becomes the means to the self-expression of God ” (pp. 124-5).

If this description had been confined to an attempt to define the relations of matter, life, mind and spirit as they are revealed in “ existence ” or by the phenomenal, as distinct from “ being ” or Reality as the ultimate content of the universe, it would meet our requirements more completely than any other attempt which has hitherto been made. Moreover, its description of the relation of God to man, and of man to God, as revealed by Jesus Christ in the time-process of the evolutionary development of the spirit of man, leaves no ground for criticism, especially in view of the elaboration of the second part of the thesis given on p. 138.

“ When life supervenes upon matter, it does not indeed lead to any contradiction of the ‘ laws ’ of physical chemistry, but it takes direction of the physico-chemical system ; it asserts priority in the sense that the explanation of the action of the living thing is sought in the requirements of its life. The physical system supplies the requirements *sine quibus non* ; the life supplies the efficient causation. So when mind supervenes upon the living organism, it takes direction and becomes the cause of the agent’s conduct. We shall expect, therefore, to find that when God supervenes upon humanity, we do not find a human being taken into fellowship with God, but God acting through the conditions supplied by humanity. And this is the Christian experience of Jesus Christ ; He is spoken of as a Mediator, but that expression is used, not to signify one who is raised above humanity by an infusion of deity, but one in whom deity and humanity are perfectly united.”

But the theory breaks down when considered as an explanation of the place and function of the Incarnation in the scheme of Reality. Dr. Temple introduces the Incarnation as the crown of that stratification of Reality upon which his explanation is based.

... “ What we find in Christian experience is witnessed not to a man uniquely inspired, but to God living a human life.

. . . " Now this is exactly the culmination of that stratification which is the structure of Reality." . . . " Even had there been no evil in the world to be overcome, no sin to be abolished and forgiven, still the Incarnation would be the natural inauguration of the final stage of evolution " (p. 139).

But surely the Incarnation, when expressed in these terms, although admirably related to the time-process of the development of matter, life, mind and (human) spirit, yet represents a doubling-back upon the scheme of Reality, if that term means the ultimate constitution of Being, and it can scarcely mean anything else. In the stratification of Reality God is surely the topmost stratum in the structure, which He has erected within, or out of Himself. He, indeed, implies the lower—spirit, mind, life, matter ; and the lower finds its fulfilment in Him. But an Incarnation of God on the plane of the human is unnecessary even under the terms of the theory. Mind, for example, does not descend on to the plane of matter in order to complete its evolution, there is no " inmaterialization " of mind, although undoubtedly mind implies matter, and matter finds fulfilment in mind. The evolution of Reality proceeds by regular stages, of which God is the final result. But it is necessary to observe that when described in this way the starting-point, or the foundation stratum, is a point or phase in the time-process, the whole of which is already in God. We shall return to this qualification shortly. To proceed, the stratification can allow for an Incarnation for the purpose of Atonement or illumination, but not for an Incarnation which is a culmination of that stratification which is the structure of Reality. The Incarnation cannot be a final cause, it is solely an efficient cause ; it was an auxiliary phase, not the conclusion of a teleology.

Only if God is the outcrop of the stratification can the Incarnation be described as the culmination of the process. This is not what Dr. Temple means, but it is a second difficulty suggested by his theory, for the theory suggests that God was not until the Incarnation took place. He who is timeless "was not" until an event, the Incarnation, took place in time. It is of course possible, if not probable, that the Incarnation is a function of the timeless condition of Being, but if so, it cannot be fitted into a structure, even metaphorically, of which the starting-point is matter. The evolutionary or creative process may comprise the evolution of God. In this case the evolution of humanity is a phase in the process, though whether the final phase or not we cannot say. By taking man into Himself a contribution is made to divine evolution. The Incarnation will then be the means by which that phase of the process is completed. But the stratification metaphor does not describe the whole process. It carries with it the implication that there was a time when God was matter, when He was the lowest stratum in the evolutionary process, unless we are to postulate God as being at both ends of the stratification and at the same time passing through it with the purpose of the creation and the assumption of humanity. The antinomy in the centre of the theory arises from a confusion of the timeless with the

time-process, with the result that the metaphor breaks in two and becomes divided against itself.

The theory is put forward ostensibly as a reaction from the out-worn terminology of Greek Christology and theology. But it is doubtful whether an illustration taken from theology, although *ipso facto* modern, represents an advance upon Greek thought, which at least had a metaphysic. A new metaphysic has still to be supplied, and it is our obvious need. In the meantime a more subtle metaphor might have been devised by developing another of his definitions—"centre of consciousness," a term which besides being related to modern psychology, is free from the rigidity of the stratification metaphor. On pp. 116-17 Dr. Temple says:

"It seems to me that we are distinguished from one another by two principles. One of these is essential; it is the mere numerical difference in the centres of consciousness themselves. I, being myself, am not you; you, in being yourself, are not I. We are distinct selves. We may hold the same opinions, share the same experience, aim at the same goal; but we do it together and remain distinct. The other principle is accidental. I am the child of my parents, a native of my country, a member of my school and university: these things are not mere external appendages to my personality, but actually make it what it is. And any two finite persons living under the conditions of space and time will be distinguished for ever by the variety in the circumstances of their history. . . .

"Clearly these differences which I have called accidental are due to the conditions of our finitude. If we conceive centres of consciousness capable of envisaging the totality of things and themselves immune from the conditions of time and space, differences of this kind would vanish. But the other differences would remain. What we should then have would be three centres of one consciousness. Any further treatment of this theme must be postponed." . . .

But can we not at once apply it towards the solution of our problem? As Dr. Temple points out (p. 139), the problem is not to explain the relation of deity to humanity in Christ. That can never be done. The nature of the union must remain for us a mystery, and the Greeks broke in the attempt to solve it. The practical problem is to attempt an explanation of the relation of Jesus to God on the one hand, and to man on the other.

What is the normal relation of God to man and of man to God? Relatively to men as a race God transcends them. He is set up over against them, at a distance, the object of worship and the standard of spiritual aspiration. Or, as Dr. Temple says (*Mens Creatrix*, p. 23): "the Infinite will not be something divided from the Finite, but just the system of the finites." But relatively to men as individuals God can be imminent, inspiring individuals who open their hearts to Him. Thus men and women consist of separate centres of consciousness cohering in God. The being (essence) of the universe, of existence, is ultimately God, supplied by Him and from Him for the creative or evolutionary process. If the

consciousness of man coheres in anything but God we are face to face with a hopeless dualism. In Him we live, move and have being.

In *Christus Veritas* (p. 151) Dr. Temple describes "each man" as "a focussing point for Reality as seen from the place within it which he occupies." He uses this argument to define the unique humanity of Jesus. "He, more than others, is Humanity focussed in one centre" (p. 152), but may we not apply the argument to His divinity? Jesus becomes a focussing point for divinity as well as humanity, for that ultimate spiritual condition of humanity which is already implied in humanity as we know it. In the Incarnation God becomes immanent in a man, not merely imminent to him. God as a centre of consciousness coheres in a man, but not in the race, a centre of focus of divine consciousness. He coheres, becomes incarnate in the man Jesus. The centre of human consciousness in Jesus is expanded and becomes conterminous with a centre of divine consciousness or Being, with the eternal Son. The process is not a taking of the manhood into God, but a taking of the Godhead into man, as the Greeks long ago taught. It is not denied that the taking of the manhood into God is involved. But that is not incarnation, it is involved in the later process descriptively defined by the Church as Ascension, a process which necessitated the laying aside of the externals of humanity as we know it. Because, then, the divine gained coherence in a centre of human consciousness, God appeared as a man. Transcendence and immanence are equated in the Incarnation.¹

But how is this possible without destroying for a time, at any rate, the existence of the One, who has now become immanent in an item of the many? "To say that God the eternal Son at a moment of time divested Himself of Omniscience and Omnipotence in order to live a human life, reassuming these attributes at the Ascension, seems to me to be just the kind of thing that no event occurring on this planet could ever justify" (*Christus Veritas*, p. 141). Yet we cannot go to the other extreme and say, "Inasmuch as God is one it is not part of God, but God in His fulness who is incarnate thus" (*ibid.*, p. 115), for the difficulty still remains, as Dr. Temple sees—"it is God in one of the three Persons or centres of His spiritual Being who is incarnate, and that one which though co-equal in glory is derivative not primary" (p. 117). This surely contradicts the preceding statement, but its reference to the doctrine of the Trinity does offer the solution. In God are three centres of one divine consciousness or Being. In men the centre and the consciousness are identical. There are many human consciousnesses. Dr. Temple says that humanity, which is focussed in the individuals who comprise the race, is a unit. But as Gregory of Nyssa taught, no such unit as humanity exists. When we speak of Peter, James and John, we speak of three men, not of "man" in which Peter, James and John share. But in the Incarnation one centre of the single divine

¹ "Divine immanence" is a term which should be confined to the personality of Jesus. To men God becomes imminent (not immanent) if they allow Him, by consciously turning to Him.

consciousness became immanent in one centre of human consciousness, which is at the same time one of many human consciousnesses.

So, in relation to God, the historic Jesus is a centre of human consciousness, in whom a centre of divine consciousness is immanent. In relation to man He is a centre of divine consciousness which has occupied a centre of human consciousness, though without displacing it. In relation to man He is God, God immanent in a man.

The objection may be raised that the restriction of divine immanence to the person of Jesus unduly limits the range of divine operation among men, and an influential body of Anglican thinkers have for long sought to extend the range of the Incarnation by teaching that the sphere of the Incarnation is extended in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist. As God became incarnate in Jesus, so the now glorified Jesus becomes incarnate in the faithful who receive His body and blood in the Sacrament. But the teaching of the Western Church has seriously over-emphasized the significance of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Sacrament. There is little Scriptural evidence for regarding the Sacrament as an exterior of the process of Incarnation, and a widening of the area of divine immanence. If we were to look for divine immanence, apart from its manifestation in the person of Jesus, we shall find it rather in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit than in that of the Holy Communion. There is much New Testament teaching to support the contention that if God is immanent in the hearts of men, and not merely "imminent to" them, as we have already argued, it is by the operation of the Holy Spirit, who, hovering over the hearts of all men, enters those who consciously appeal to Him. Thus the Incarnation is extended by the Holy Spirit. God comes into the human heart by His agency. This was the teaching of Jesus, namely, that after His Ascension the Holy Spirit should have charge of the spiritual destiny of all who believed in Himself.

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For those who "press towards the mark," and specially for His servant Paul and his message to us.

Let us pray—

For those who have lost heart through dwelling on the past, that they may find it again.

For ourselves, that we may press on in hope, with our faces towards the goal.

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S. R. C.