

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Degree or Kind? A Christological Essay

W. NORMAN PITTENGER

THE purpose of this paper is to discuss afresh the question: Is the difference between our Lord Jesus Christ and other men (who, in Christian faith, are always to be understood as in some genuine fashion "indwelt" by God—sometimes it is thought by the "spermatic Word," sometimes it is thought by the Holy Spirit) a difference properly characterized as of degree or of kind?

I am quite aware that the immediate reaction of many readers will be that the discussion of such a question belongs to a period twenty-five or more years ago, rather than to our own day. It presumes an interest in the philosophical investigation of religious affirmations; and in our contemporary theological situation, philosophical thought is regarded by many as utterly beyond the concern of the theologian. It sounds like a revival of the problems which arose in the "age of liberal religion"; and, of course, we are (so many think) now living in a time when "liberalism," with its questions, is dead. It implies that we may discuss, in rational manner, the doctrines of the Christian Church and their relationship; and in a time when "biblical theology" has for many superseded all such endeavour, problems of this sort may seem irrelevant. That is to say, the raising of such a question may appear to run counter to neo-orthodoxy, whether in its Protestant or in its Catholic dress.

I concede that these objections may be made, but I am quite unmoved. Perhaps I can put my attitude in this way. It is my conviction, for what it is worth, that the view of theology which regards it as concerned only with "domestic housekeeping" and concerned not at all with the relation of the theological household to its neighbours, is in the long run destructive of any meaningful theology at all.

Theology, in its great days and among its great exponents, was (as Canon Raven has pointed out in an appended note to the first volume of his recently published Gifford lectures) vitally interested in the whole world and everything in it, seeing the world as the creation of God and the redemption wrought by Christ as a clue to his final purposes; hence theology was concerned with the attempt to work out, in the light both of the Christian revelation and also of our wider knowledge, the pattern of things entire. Nowadays, too often, theology is concerned (as one of my students has lately put it) "with explaining itself to itself," with talking about a specially selected series of historical events in isolation from the rest, with arranging and re-arranging biblical motifs, types, developments, and ideas, and with

finding ways of re-furbishing ancient formulae so that they will have some appearance of verisimilitude.

On the other hand, there is hope for the future. In many different quarters and by many different thinkers, this "dead-end" kind of theology is now seen for the sterile enterprise it is. Paul Tillich, whatever one may think of his specific teachings, has led the way on this side of the Atlantic; his successor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, Daniel Day Williams, has written wisely and well in this same vein; Canon Raven's Gifford lectures have been published (to be greeted with ill-disguised sneers by those who represent the prevalent movement in theology) and are being read; some of the younger theologians in Britain and in America have ventured to publish articles—although not yet many books—in which they dare to discuss theology philosophically; and a member of the editorial board of this journal, Dr. Eugene R. Fairweather, who very likely would not agree with the line I shall take in this paper, has just lately given a series of Paddock Lectures at my own seminary in which he bravely called for philosophy in theology. From these and other signs—including my own experience in teaching and lecturing to students who have responded enthusiastically to the possibility of rational discussion of theological themes—I am emboldened to say that the question which I put in this paper is a real one, is one which can be discussed, and is one which ought to be discussed.

Let us begin by stating briefly what the Christian faith in Christ affirms as to his person. In Chalcedonian language it states that he is one Person, in whom are two natures: one divine, the eternal Word who is of the same substance as the Father, the other human, the nature which is of the same substance as Mary his Mother (and of men generally). In his Person, the two natures are united indivisibly, inseparably, unchangeably, unconfusedly. In another way of phrasing the assertion, God the eternal Word in the human life of Jesus, body, mind, and spirit, is united with the reality of human nature in such a fashion that of him who is the union we may say "He" rather than "they." Or in language made familiar by St. Athanasius, we may say that the life born of Mary was at every point and in every way the sufficient *organon* for the eternal Word in his man-ward self-expression.

Two points are at once clear. In the first place, it is the eternal Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who is incarnate. Indeed the whole theology of the Trinity is, from one point of view, a development of the evaluation of Jesus Christ as incarnate God. To avoid the danger of ascribing deity to Jesus absolutely, the trinitarian theology was essential. Whatever is divine in Jesus Christ is all divine but it is not all *of* divinity. Any other view would lead to the Swedenborgian identification of "Jehovah" with "Jesus." The second point is that the humanity of Jesus is declared to be full and real humanity, body, mind, and spirit. Nothing that men possess—save the sin which possesses them—is absent from the life of the incarnate Lord. As every historian of doctrine knows, it was to safeguard this

major insistence of Christian faith and experience that the Church fought for centuries with various docetic tendencies which would have reduced the fullness of the human nature which by incarnation God made his own.

In the light of these two points, it seems to me evident that the Christian Church's intention has been to relate the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as closely as possible to that more diffused and pervasive operation of God whose agent is the eternal Word and whose expression, so far as we are concerned, is peculiarly in the men whom the Word (in Johannine phrase) "lightens." Jesus Christ is unique (*monogenes*), yet at the same time he is related to that universal movement of the Word in and to man of which the Johannine prologue speaks. One might almost say that the basic christological problem is the relationship of the unique and the universal, so far as the work of the eternal Word is concerned.

The one thing that one *cannot* say was once said in my hearing by a distinguished Jesuit divine, Francis Woodlock. He had heard someone insisting that God in Jesus and God wherever else found are all of a piece; and in indignation he said, "The Catholic theology says that there is an absolute difference in kind between God in Jesus and God in other men." I was able to reply by a quotation from St. Thomas Aquinas, commonly regarded by Roman Catholics as a reputable Catholic theologian, in which the Angelic Doctor states quite clearly that God, being "simple," is therefore simply *God* always and everywhere. Of course what Father Woodlock intended to say was that the difference between the *union* of God and man in Jesus and the union of God and man elsewhere, is (for Catholic theology generally) a difference of kind, not of degree. But even that statement could be questioned. For there have been some writers, not condemned as heretical (Cardinal Bérulle, for example), who have spoken of the Incarnation "as the manner and mode by which God ever works in his creatures" (*Oeuvres*, p. 990). Baron von Hügel, in his letters and in his christological discussion in the essay on Christianity and the Supernatural, found in *Essays and Addresses*, speaks in the same vein.

The fact is that the Catholic understanding of the nature of man, which sees him as made by creation *capax infiniti*, can hardly fail to imply at the least a close relationship between Christ and his brethren. It is true that sin has seriously damaged this "capacity"; man is not only *privatus boni* but *vulneratus in naturalibus*, to use the Thomist phrases. But Catholic Christianity, in whatever form (Anglican as well as Roman and Orthodox), has consistently refused to see man as utterly *non capax infiniti*; it has therefore been accused by some Protestant theologians of lack of realism about sin. The truth is, in my judgement, that Catholic Christianity has, rather, been truer to the biblical teaching that man is made in the Image of God than have those professedly biblical theologians who somehow seem to think that they honour God by denigrating his creation. Indeed, one might say that the really valuable element in what is nowadays called "old-fashioned liberal Protestantism" was its reaction (violent because there was so much to react

against, and because violent therefore overdone) against the appallingly low view of man which the Protestant scholastics, although not always the great continental reformers themselves, were accustomed to teach as biblical. And I think that one reason that writers such as Reinhold Niebuhr cannot profit from the careful analyses of F. R. Tennant in his treatment of the doctrine of "original sin," is that they are not really able to see that if man is what the Bible says he is, some unbreakable ontological relationship must continue as between him and God, and (in our immediate context) between the Saviour and those whom he came to save. Their use of Scripture is, to say the least, highly selective.

However all this may be, it is my contention—as one who rejoices in the name of "Catholic Modernist" or "Modernist Catholic"—that we cannot in fact talk about that which is *unique* without reference to that which is *universal*. Anything which is *absolutely* unique would, so far as I can see, be absolutely unknowable; we should have nothing with which to compare it, nothing as criterion by which to describe it. Of course we could accept it by a sheer act of faith; but the faith in that case would appear to me to be closer to credulity than to faith in the strictly proper sense of commitment to that which speaks meaningfully to our condition. In this sense, logical positivism (*not* logical analysis, which is a legitimate enterprise) would seem well married to "neo-orthodox" theology.

Some contemporary theologians, in this case Anglican, have attempted to revive the Scotist conception of *haecceitas*, usually translated "singularity," as true of each and every instance of manhood; hence as true *a fortiori* of our Lord. Two observations may be made. In the first place, the very way in which this position is phrased brings it once again into the logic of relationships (true of every man, true *a fortiori* of Christ), and leaves us still with the problem of degree or kind. Secondly, Duns Scotus' conception does not seem to me to be as markedly different from St. Thomas's individuation theory concerning each concrete manifestation of a class, as these thinkers appear to assume. I believe that "singularity," in any event, is appropriate only insofar as it is an emphasis on the quite obvious fact (which nobody in his senses has ever denied) that each instance of manhood is in fact *an* instance, with those characteristics and qualities which are properly its own, but also with such relationships and connections, such community and continuity, as make it possible to put it in the class "man."

But if this be true of manhood, and therefore of the manhood of Jesus, what of the *union* of God and man in him? We have seen, first, that God is God wherever he is and however he manifests himself: there are no "degrees" of Deity. We have seen that man is man, but with real differences, so that our Lord may rightly be said to be in actuality what all men are potentially. May the same be said of the union of God and man in him? For me, the answer is an unreserved affirmative.

Leaving out of consideration, lest this paper become altogether too long, the question of the relationship of the eternal Word—Deity in his self-

expressive "mode of being and acting" both in the divine life of God himself and also in the created world where it is specifically his "economy" so to express the "unmeasured Godhead," as St. Irenaeus put it—and the order of nature generally, let us turn to the historical realm of human life and experience. Every man, I should say, is united with God in several ways, quite apart from Jesus Christ's particular person. He is united by God as creature to Creator; he is related to God as agent for God's will to the God who wills in him, however brokenly, imperfectly, sinfully he may respond to that will; he is related to God as object of love to the Love which is God himself in his care for his human children; he is, or may be, related to God "attentively," as the traditional writers phrase it—that is, by prayer, by meditation, by contemplation; he may be united to God "mystically," in which (despite the misinterpretation of mysticism so prevalent today among the "neo-orthodox") no identification of substance or ontological status is intended but a genuine union *in charitate*: the entrance into the vision of God.

Or, to put it in another way and with the use of another mode of philosophical theology, man is "grounded" in the eternal Word, who in divers manners and in varying intensity works in and through him in realizing the perfection of manhood which is the divine intention in the creation of man. That Word, as "ground" of man, is of course not *identical* with man: man is not "really divine at bottom." The Word is the divine creative energy, if you will, which both calls man into being and holds him in being; he is the power working in man, "the light lightening" man, "the life which is the light of man"—thwarted by sin, denied by self-will, rejected but never ejected from the life of the creature. Furthermore, the Word is prevenient to man's response; in trinitarian terminology, the Word "enters" the world, the Holy Spirit "responds" through the world—and above all, this is true in and of man in his history.

Now it is my conviction that if all this be true, the only way to understand the Incarnation of God in Christ in the context of an incarnational presence and operation of the Word of God in nature, in history, in human life, is to see that what is, so to say, "diffused" elsewhere ("at sundry times and in divers portions") is "focussed" in our Lord Jesus Christ. But the difference between diffusion and focussing appears to me to be, *par excellence*, a difference of degree. There is always union between God and man, of some sort and in some way; in Jesus Christ, that union is *the* union, towards which all others point and from which they are seen (once we accept Christ as being what Christian faith declares him to be) in all their rich potentiality yet all their tragic failure.

Furthermore, *the* union of God and man in Christ is of such an intensive degree that the two are in fact made one, so that (as I have phrased it in a recent paper for the World Council's Theological Commission) "the eternal Word so appropriated and used the humanity which by providential operation was conceived and born of Mary that he possessed in that humanity,

by its free human response, an organ for self-expression which was adequate for his purpose; while the human life which was so conceived and born appropriated and expressed the eternal Word's gracious movement in and through it so that the organ was in fact available for the Word's purpose among men."

I am aware of the possible criticism that this is a christological formulation which is on the "Nestorian" side. I acknowledge this; indeed, I rejoice in it. For while it is not "condemned Nestorianism," it is certainly the kind of view and the kind of way of stating the Incarnation which is found in Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on the Nicene Creed (now available to us in English, in Dr. Mingana's translation published by the John Rylands Library), and which is also, I believe, the intent of Nestorius's own argument in *The Bazaar of Heracleides* where (as I think rightly) he demonstrates that his actual christology was that which Chalcedon was later to accept as orthodox.

Probably one reason that many theologians have rejected the "difference of degree" is that they think that it makes our Lord only slightly different from the rest of us. It may be pointed out, however, that a difference of degree is not only a difference of 1.2.3.4, but may be a difference between 1.2.3. and infinity. As Hastings Rashdall once remarked, differences in degree "can amount to difference in kind." Or, as I should prefer to phrase it, the difference in degree between our Lord's actualization of union between God and man, and our own pitiful approximations, is a difference so great that it leads us to adore him, to find in him both our Lord and Saviour (because of what the difference results in, in our experience of new life in union with him) and also our Master and Pattern (and hence one whom we can love as Brother as well as worship as Lord).

Gerard Manley Hopkins, in one of his poems, uses some daring words:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

May we not say, with Douglas Richardson, that Christ our Lord and we men who are his brethren, are in one sense "of the same stuff," all of us "carbon?" But that he in whom God was manifest in human life, with a fullness and adequacy which brings us to our knees before him, is the "immortal Diamond," while we are but the charcoal?

If we can and do say this, as I for one should do, we must guard against a possible misunderstanding. It may be thought that we are guilty of portraying Jesus Christ as the mere evolution, from within humanity alone, of divine potentialities. Such a view would, of course, be inadequate to the whole spirit of Christianity, in which our Lord is always seen, not as the highest product of humanity, but as the greatest gift of God. But our safeguard here is a soundly based incarnational theology; and it is at this point that the developed trinitarian doctrine of God is of quite enormous impor-

tance. For God "above us," unexhausted in his being and hence transcendent, and God "within us," the immanent Spirit driving through the world to conform it to the divine purpose, is in this trinitarian doctrine seen in relationship to God "with us," the concomitant presence and power of Deity, operative in and upon the world and evoking the response which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus in Jesus Christ, seen as the focal self-expression of God the Word in human terms, in a world which is itself also the Word's self-expression in varying manner and degree, we have not an "evolution" in the sense of the unfolding of what is immanently present, but rather the "emergence," within a continuity of God-man relationships, of a new fullness which is thus a real novelty.

I have used the word "emergence" because it suggests, in contemporary process-philosophy, that which is, on the one hand, genuinely *new*, and which is also, on the other hand, intimately related to all that has gone before or that goes on round about. But here once again we run into possible objections. For, as I have heard it said, "the eternal Word in Christ comes into the world, not out of it." I think that this is true in one sense, but absurd in another. It is true in the sense that every operation of God the Word in the creation is an "entrance" into the finitude of the creaturely order. It is absurd if it is intended, as it would seem in this case to be, to suggest an almost spatial notion of the divine in relation to the created. The trouble here is in a confusion between psychologically apt (and liturgically suggestive) expressions of the experience of man as "visited" by God, who "comes down" and "breaks into the closed circle of our humanity" and thus "raises us" to himself, and theological precision in statement. But statements that are psychologically apt and liturgically suggestive are, theologically speaking, metaphorical in quality. They are not to be taken in any *literal* sense. Our difficulty so often is that what is really a psychological description of experience as we feel it is taken to be a theologically appropriate formulation. With whatever refinements we must make (and make them we must) as between metaphor, symbol, and analogy in theological discourse, we must at least never fall into the egregious error of confusing the language of devotion, of conversion, of "rescue from sin," with theologically precise definitions. St. Thomas Aquinas, to name no other, knew better than that.

So if "emergence" implies, as it does (say) for C. Lloyd-Morgan and his followers, a fresh intensification of the divine *Nisus* (by which he means, as he affirms at the end of *Emergent Evolution* and *Life Mind and Spirit*, what the Fathers meant by the *Logos*) in action in the creation, we may appropriately apply it to our Lord. He is *the* Emergence of the eternal Word in full human expression, by perfected union with the creature; of which Emergence, the lesser emergences of that Word in and through other men, each in their own small degree, are the adumbration and intimation. Thus once again we are brought back to difference in degree.

There are two final considerations which I believe should be noted. The

first is a logical one. What, in fact, is meant by difference of degree or difference of kind? It was, I think, William Temple who in a footnote to *Christus Veritas* (I do not have a copy of this important book ready to hand and cannot "verify my reference") said that when the problem was put to him in this fashion, he always wished to reduce it to the logical *absurdum*, "Is the difference which may be predicated between a difference of degree and a difference of kind, itself a difference of degree or a difference of kind?" And lest this be thought to be nothing but logic-chopping, I should refer to Robin Collingwood's admirable treatment in *Essay in Philosophical Method*, where he shows—convincingly, to my mind—that in a world in which there is organic consistency and co-inherence, there can in fact be no absolute differences in kind; save, I should add, as between the uncreate and the created, God and the world, but not as between finite realities as such or between the divine operations in them at the several levels which have appeared in the course of creation.

The last point is simply that the proof for our Lord's uniqueness is in any case not in the sort of difference between him and other men, but in the work which he does for those other men. If it be true, as Christian experience affirms, that in and through him God does unite men with himself in deep communion and fellowship, bringing them life and joy, forgiveness and peace, then we are bound to see in Jesus Christ something different from that which is true, in that sense, of other men. Yet it is also a fact—or so it seems to me—that a doctrine of the person of our Lord which would lift him altogether out of the context of the divine-human relationship as men otherwise know it and share it, would have the terrible result of making him a mere prodigy, a "bolt from the blue," not really speaking to our condition but in effect denying our condition because the human is not truly related to the reality of God in the very roots of its being. That is to say, I am convinced that there is a *religious*, as well as a theological and philosophical, interest in maintaining, as I have sought to do, that the difference is of degree and not of kind.

If what I have said in this paper is at all cogent, it carries a corollary. We have learned, during the Christian centuries, to use the focal fact of the Incarnation of God in Christ as our clue to the nature of God and the purpose which he has in his world. May we not, ought we not, use that same focal fact as our clue to the divinely-intended nature of man himself, to the potentiality which by divine creation is implanted in man, to the partial realizations of that potentiality in the great and holy ones of our race, to the divinely-purposed end for which man was created and towards which, under the guidance and in the power of God, he is meant to move? In other words, is not this part of what we ought to mean when we call our Lord the *proper* Man, the "representative Man," and say (with the New Testament writer) that we are "to grow up in all things unto him who is the head, even Christ"?