The Invisibility of God and the Incarnation

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AT the centre of the controversy between Church and Synagogue stands the christological question. This is not a question whether Jesus is the Messiah, but whether the Christian understanding of the Messiah is admissible in view of the Jewish concept of God. Here lies the dividing line between Judaism and the Church. On this point neither can afford to compromise. This is the reason why an Unitarian form of Christianity is a contradiction in terms; at best it can be a Gentile Synagogue, but it can never be the Church. It is important, however, to remember that christology to the Church is not an abstract theological subject which can be discussed on purely theoretical lines. It is not that christology was first formulated and then adjusted to fit the case of Jesus of Nazareth. The process was the reverse: the Church defined her christology in view of Jesus Christ. He must remain at the centre of Christian thinking: otherwise it ceases to be Christian. For the Christian theologian the question is therefore not an academic one but a matter of faith. The Jew is in a different position. He can afford to treat the subject theoretically without involving himself in a statement of faith. This "advantage" on the part of the Jewish scholar gives an appearance of logicality which is of necessity lacking on the Christian side where faith is already assumed in the argument.

The christology of the Church is essentially Johannine. Without the Fourth Gospel even the Pauline Epistles would not have sufficed as a basis for the Trinitarian doctrine we have today. Admittedly, Col. 2:9 comes very close to a Trinitarian view but this and similar texts in the Pauline corpus could have been viewed as an exaggeration on the part of an enthusiast, had they not been backed by the Johannine biography of the life of the Logos. We will not go far wrong when we say that the starting-point of the Church's christology is the sentence: *verbum caro factum est* (John 1:14). With this utterance we find ourselves in the heart of the Fourth Gospel; all that follows is a description of how *truly* the Word became flesh. This means that for St. John, the Gospel is not what Jesus said or did, but what He was—the Incarnate Word of God. The words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth derive their importance from the fact that He is the Son of God.[1] In the Johannine usage *Son of God* and *Word of God* are synonymous and refer to the historic person of Jesus the Messiah.

In this essay it is our purpose to relate the peculiar Christian doctrine of the Incarnation to the concept of the invisibility of God.

1. On this subject, see the author's essay in *Judaica*, III, 1957, "The Son of God."

I. The Synagogue's Position

Christian theologians seldom pay any attention to the views of the Synagogue. This is a definite loss to the Church, for she understands her own position best when confronted with Judaism. Furthermore, the Synagogue is the Church's only legitimate partner in the discussion: *Cur Deus homo*? She, the historic guardian of ethical monotheism, has a special right to question the Church regarding the Trinity. For the Synagogue this questioning is not a matter of curiosity but of conscience. The honour of the God of Israel is involved in it. The Synagogue therefore asks with some insistence: How does the Church hold a monotheistic faith in view of her Trinitarian position?

Judaism points to the Second Commandment which follows with logical sequence upon the First, namely, that the One and Only God must of necessity remain the invisible God. Judaism deduces God's invisibility from His spirituality. This is the reason why He cannot be represented by any visible form of the created order, as He is incommensurate with it.

The Synagogue's teaching regarding the invisibility of God has an interesting history. In it is revealed the distance between the God of revelation and the god of philosophy.

By way of illustration we shall start with a classical example from the Torah. In Ex. 33:11 God is represented as speaking to Moses *panim el panim* (face to face). This expression was felt by Jewish commentators to be an embarrassing anthropomorphism. Targum Onkelos therefore tries to soften the impression by using the *Hitpael* form in the rendering of the text, and this makes it appear that God spoke to Himself but in the *presence* of Moses. The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi follows the Targum's example in order to circumvent the difficulty.[2] But the anthropomorphism is by no means the only difficulty in this text; the real difficulty arises from the context which contradicts the statement about Moses' vision of God *panim el panim*. First, God's glory which Moses asks to see is equated with God's "goodness" (Ex. 33:19); then, the text tells us that Moses was placed in a position from which he could only see the "back;" finally, what was meant to be a vision turns out to be an audition in which the so-called thirteen *middot* (attributes) are announced; and worst of all, verse 11 is flatly contradicted by verse 20 which states that no man can see God and live.

Whatever the history of the text, the complex theophany can only be understood from the characteristic biblical concept of revelation which implies an encounter with God, but at a distance, and only by mediation. What hinders man from approaching is not His invisibility but His holiness. To the ancient Hebrew, God was not a philosophical concept but an awesome and terrifying *Presence*. Man cannot see God, not because He is a rarefied Spirit, but because flesh and blood cannot endure Him with

2. Cf. M. Rosenblum and A. M. Silberman, *Pentateuch* (1930), p. 188.

immunity. That God is a *real* Presence could not be doubted by the Hebrew.

The ancient Synagogue still reckoned with the possibility of a concrete encounter with God by means of the *shekinah*: *reot pene shekinah*—to see the face of the *Shekinah*—meant to appear in the Presence of God. The rabbis held to the view that every man, be he good or bad, had ultimately to meet God *panim el panim* at the hour of death. But for those who are righteous is reserved the perfect vision of God which is the consummation of all bliss.[3] It is thus obvious that to them an encounter with God was more than a mere mental realization of God; it meant a real and personal *vis-à-vis* meeting of God and man. Though most of the rabbis were well versed in mystical lore, their sense of God's holiness and their knowledge of man's sinfulness prevented them from seeking the unitive experience of the mystic. They regarded it as a dangerous path leading to destruction. It is said, that of the four men who "entered the Garden" only R. Akiba managed to return unhurt.[4]

The God of the ancient Synagogue is anything but a mental concept, nor is his invisibility a philosophical postulate. He is invisible only because the human eye cannot endure His splendour. The Talmud tells the legend how Hadrian the Emperor asked Yehoshua b. Hananya (*ca.* 90 A.D.): "I would like to see your God." Yehoshua replied: "You cannot see him." The Emperor said: "Indeed, I must see him." Then the rabbi took Hadrian and placed him in the full blaze of the sun and said to him: "Look into it"; he answered: "I cannot"; Yehoshua replied: "If of the sun you say 'I cannot look at it,' which is only one of the servants who stand in the presence of God, how much more is it true of the *shekinah*?"[5]

We want to quote one more passage to illustrate our point. The *Pesikta Rabba* comments on Ps. 92:6: "How great are thy works, O Lord! Thy thoughts are very deep"—"Come and see the miracles of God . . . He created this world; he created men and demons (*mazzikim*); the demons see men but men see them not. He created demons and Servant Angels, the Servant Angels see the demons, but the demons see not the Servant Angels. He created Servant Angels, demons and men: He sees all, but all his creatures see him not. Say then: Thy thoughts are very deep!"[6] From this we can gauge what the invisibility of God meant to the rabbis: His blinding glory makes Him invisible to his creatures' eyes. They thus cry out: "Who is like the God of gods? Who sees and cannot be seen!"[7]

In the Old Testament the awareness of God's splendour is magnificently symbolized by the behaviour of the Seraphim covering not only their faces but their bodies with their wings so as not to be seared by God's holiness (Is. 6:2).

3. For the whole subject see Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum N.T. aus Talmud und Midrasch*, I, 206 ff.
4. Cf. *Babylonian Talmud*, Hagigah, 14b.
5. *Ibid.*, Hullin 59b, Engl.
6. Pesikta R. 6.
7. Deutr. R. 1.

It was only under Greek influence and by slow degrees that God's presence became conceptualized in the Synagogue. This led to conceiving the invisibility of God as a philosophical postulate. Before the Greek world, biblical anthropomorphism was felt to be an embarrassing feature. It had to be explained apologetically. Here is a typical example: "The King (i.e., Ptolomaeus Philometor) asked in what sense the Scriptures ascribe to God hands, arms, face, feet, walking. He (i.e., Aristobulus) explained it to him in keeping with the divine nature of God."[8] We can rest assured that the "explanation" was in keeping with Greek philosophical ideas more than with the "divine nature of God."

This need for "explaining" may perhaps be compared to our modern need for "demythologizing," and it is interesting to note where it led to. The greatest protagonist in explaining the Bible and Judaism to the Greek world was undoubtedly Philo of Alexandria. He may not have succeeded in working out a synthesis between Greek philosophy and biblical faith, but towards the process of ratiocination he made a major contribution. Here is Philo's philosophical definition of God: a Being better than Good, more honourable than Unity, purer than the number One. God cannot be seen by anyone else, because he can only be comprehended by Himself.[9] It is obvious that "seeing" for Philo is a mental act, whereas for the rabbis of the ancient Synagogue, as for the Old Testament, seeing God is an encounter.

With the medieval Jewish philosophers the process of rationalizing is completed. The impact of Greek and Arab thought proved irresistible. God is now a completely spiritualized *concept* to be apprehended mentally. It would lead us too far to quote the evidence. But the central figure of medieval Jewish philosophy must not be passed over.

Moses Maimonides occupies a special place in Judaism. His influence extends far beyond the field of philosophy. His contribution to the general thinking of the Synagogue makes him one of the most outstanding leaders in Jewry. The "Creed" which Maimonides composed entered the liturgy and is recited daily. The third article reads: "I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be his name, is not a body and that he is free from all accidents of matter, and that he has not any form whatsoever." The meaning of this highly philosophical formula becomes clearer when read in conjunction with his other works. Here we confine ourselves solely to his *Guide for the Perplexed.*

In this book Maimonides concerns himself with a number of difficulties which arise when the Old Testament and philosophy are confronted. He spends much time explaining biblical anthropomorphism and deals with the question of God's attributes. He stresses that these attributes must not be understood as "qualities" but as acts because the conceptualization of God demands such an attitude. For him God exists without the attribute of

8. Quoted by Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica,* VIII, 10.
9. Philo, *De praemiis et poenis,* II, 414.

existence and he is One without the attribute of Unity.[10] Maimonides explains that all which is said of God in the Bible is said parabolically. He even goes so far as to contradict the notion that God "speaks"; what it really means is that God is the cause and creator of all that is said. When we read in the Scriptures that God spake to the prophets we are meant to understand that these men attained to divine knowledge.[11]

Building on the premises of Aristotelian philosophy, Maimonides established the concept of the incorporeality of God and from thence he proceeded to prove God's Unity on the supposition that incorporeal things cannot be counted. By a similar token he shows God's eternity, because motion cannot be predicated of him, which means that he is outside the limitations of time.[12]

The difference between the Maimonidean God and that of the Bible is only too obvious. Maimonides' God is a philosophical postulate neatly adjusted to all the requirements of logic, but he is not alive; He is a concept. No wonder that the philosopher met with such fierce opposition on the part of the rabbis.[13] Only by slow degrees and after years of opposition did he win a place in Jewish thinking.

The Synagogue's doctrine of God is largely influenced by opposition to the Trinitarian view of the Church. In her efforts to contradict Trinitarianism she was driven to an almost numerical concept of the Unity. Thus Bahya ibn Pakuda (second half of the eleventh century) uses the numerical idea in order to show on Euclidean evidence that Unity precedes the number One.[14] For God to be God, he says, He must be an absolute, that is, a non-composite Being. The Midrash already speaks with a view to the Church when it affirms that God can have neither brother nor son.[15] Yehuda Halevi (*ca.* 1085-1142) points out the unreasonableness of the Trinitarian doctrine in his apologetic work: *Alchazari*,[16] and Hasdai Crescas (*ca.* 1340-1412) shows how it contradicts the postulate that God is a necessary existence.[17]

II. Christian Apologetics

To the Synagogue's questioning regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the Church answered with *catenae* of proofs from the Old Testament. To establish their case Christian apologists were forced upon the slippery path of exegetical acrobatics. Some of this very dubious exegesis is still reproduced in pious tracts for the purpose of converting Jews.[18] But worse than

10. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Engl. tr. by M. Friedlander, I, 54 (p. 75 f).
11. *Ibid.*, I, 65 (p. 97 f).
12. *Ibid.*, II, I (p. 145 f).
13. Cf. M. Simon, *Jewish Religious Conflicts* (1950), Ch. V, Maimunists and anti-Maimunists.
14. Cf. *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906), VI, 11a.
15. Deutr. R. c.2.
16. Usually referred to as *Kusari*; cf. *ibid.*, I, 5.
17. *Bittul ikre ha-nozrim*, p. 23.
18. Cf. J. Jocz, "Das exegetische Problem und die Judenmission," *Judaica*, I (1956).

questionable exegesis is the philosophical attempt upon the Holy Trinity. It is our conviction that an effort to establish the doctrine of the Trinity on philosophical grounds is to contradict it. It is not and was never meant to be a logical deduction.

Christian writers have occasionally abandoned the method of logical deduction and adopted the argument of religious usefulness. They point out that the Logos concept is a necessary intermediary to bridge the gulf between God and man. Jesus Christ acts in the capacity of mediator between the invisible God and the created world. All this is based on the assumption that the Johannine Logos is essentially the same as that of Philo. But it seems to us that the resemblance is only in name. It is enough to place the Philonian Logos emanating from God, side by side with the opening words of the Johannine Prologue to see the difference: *en arche en ho logos . . . kai theos en ho logos.* Here the Church acted with unerring instinct when it formulated its credal statement regarding the Trinity as co-eternal and co-equal, "none is greater, or less than the other." This is a flat contradiction of what Philo means by the Logos. The Johannine Logos is no "middle-link" between God and man, but completely God and completely man. This is the meaning of the statement: *Verbum caro factum est.*

We thus want to reiterate: the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be proved from the Old Testament, or from philosophy, or from logic; it is essentially a theological concept. By this we mean to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is the Church's peculiar answer to the question: Who is Jesus Christ?

III. The Christian Position

We hold to the view that there is an important connection between the concept of the Invisible God and the doctrine of the Incarnation. It is our conviction that in the New Testament, exactly as in the Old Testament, God is the Invisible One not because He can be only mentally conceived, but because He is the Holy One of Israel. In other words, here, as throughout the Bible, God's invisibility is not philosophically founded but religiously. He is *aoratos* because of his tender mercy towards man; man cannot survive his visibility, for the God of Israel is a consuming fire (Hebr. 12: 29; Deutr. 4:24). It is interesting to note that the expression *aoratos* belongs exclusively to the New Testament. Though God is here referred to in several passages as the Invisible One, we look upon Col. 1:15 as the *locus classicus* because of its christological importance. There is an obvious association of ideas between Col. 1:15—Christ "the Image of the Invisible God"—and John 1:14—"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In the first case, God's invisibility is founded upon His holiness; in the second, God's visibility in Christ is founded upon His love (cf. John 3: 16)—and both are supplementary. He remains the Hidden God not to

consume us, and He becomes God incarnate to save us, from the same motive, for He is a God of Love.

The crux of Christian theology is how to co-ordinate logically the contradiction implied in the Incarnation: the Holy Invisible God becomes visible within the limitation of a human life. The Fathers have wrestled with this problem from their own particular point of view. With the Greek philosophical tradition behind them they felt uncomfortable at the thought that their faith carried a hidden illogicality. The history of dogma is largely the search for a formula which would reconcile the paradox lying at the heart of the Christian faith. The hypostatic Union, *communicatio idiomatum*, the simile of Soul and Body, and many other devices were employed in the attempt to solve the difficulty.[19]

Every age tries to give its own answer to the perennial problem of Christian theology. In our times of humanitarian liberalism when the distance between God and man is reduced to a minimum, the miracle of the Incarnation is neutralized by the Promethean apotheosis of Man: Jesus Christ is only more fully what we already are, *viz.* sons of God and bearers of the divine spark. If we understood W. Norman Pittenger's article correctly, this is what he intends to say. Here are his own words: "He (i.e. Jesus Christ) *is the* Emergence of the eternal Word in full human expression, by perfect 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. . . ."[20]

Whatever else the above quotation and the rest of the article may mean, one thing is unmistakable: this is not Incarnation in the New Testament sense. For the Fourth Gospel, as for Saul of Tarsus, the Incarnation was an incomparable, unique, and non-repeatable Event. It had no parallel in history and was outside human anticipation. It was not founded upon logic or necessity but solely upon the free love of God. There can be no analogy for the Incarnation if we mean what the New Testament means: the Word become flesh. There is only one valid explanation: the measureless love of God. This overwhelming, outrageous love made the Holy One of Israel stoop down and meet the sinner at the point of his deepest need. This is the Gospel: that God becomes Visible as the Saviour of sinners. Apart from the Incarnation He remains the Invisible and Holy God.

IV. The Necessity for Theological Precision

The paradox which is implied in the Gospel message is an offence to the Jew and the Greek. This is something we must acknowledge and not gloss over. The offence of the Cross is that it is the man Jesus who died for the sins of the world and that *this* man is the Son of God. But to acknowledge

19. Cf. G. D. W. Ommanney, *A Critical Dissertation on the Athanasian Creed*, (1897) 352 ff.

20. W. N. Pittenger, "Degree or Kind?" *Canadian Journal of Theology*, October, 1956.

the paradox does not exonerate us from confusing our terms. We frequently use language which is not only offensive to the Jew but which is theologically unjustified. One sometimes hears theologians speak of Jesus as the Incarnate God. The Church Fathers frequently offended in this respect. The author is not too sure whether the term *theotokos* was a felicitous choice though he sympathizes with the issues involved at the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Though Barth defends the term it is not one which is even remotely related to biblical terminology, and where it led to, can be seen from Barth's own evidence.[21] The Poles have no other word for Christmas, except *Boze Narodzenie*—the Birthday of God. There is little difference between *theotokos* and the Polish word for Christmas; neither expresses the miracle of the Incarnation. In the Johannine sense God became man; man did not become God. The New Testament never speaks of the birth of God; such an expression would have been impossible against a Hebrew background. The Fourth Gospel is very cautious; it says that the Word became flesh and leaves it at that. The birth of a god is a pagan possibility. We may legitimately speak of the Second Person of the Trinity, but then we already mean the risen and ascended Christ. That Jesus was God in disguise is something which the ancient Church vigorously opposed. But much of our devotional literature and specially our hymns give that impression. Such a suggestion is foreign to the Bible. It would be wiser to curb exuberance of language and to keep strictly to New Testament terminology which operates within the Hebrew tradition. Israel Abrahams was well justified in his assumption when he said: "It is a plausible suggestion that John had the Shekinah in mind when he spoke (1: 14) of the Word or glory as tabernacled (eskenosen) in man."[22] Language more closely related to the New Testament will greatly help us to grasp the meaning and wonder of the message that the Word became flesh. It may even happen, as it happened to the writer of the Fourth Gospel, that as we ponder on the miracle of God's love in Christ and try to put it into words, we will behold his glory, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). This is exactly what S. Paul meant when he spoke of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." This is the theme of the Incarnation that the glory of the Invisible God becomes endurable for sinners in the face of Jesus Christ. Christology is ultimately not a matter for discussion but an encounter with the Invisible God in the historic person of Jesus the Messiah.

21. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Engl. tr. I/2, 138 ff.
22. I. Abrahams, *The Glory of God* (1925), p. 52.