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character is not such as to cause us to abandon the faith of the early Church that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.

Notes

1 *The Myth of God Incarnate*, (ed.) J. Hick (SCM 1977).
2 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (ed.) G. Kittel (Eerdmans/SCM Press), Vol.IV, p.793.

2 FRANCES M. YOUNG

IN the review of *The Myth of God Incarnate* published in the last issue of this journal, Prof. Lampe suggested that its attacks are often directed at strangely old-fashioned views. Yet reactions to the book seem to have proved that old-fashioned views have a great deal of life left in them. Let me give some examples of criticisms which reveal the preliminary issues which theology has not yet settled.

1. The idea that scripture states divinely-revealed truth about Jesus may be an old-fashioned view of revelation, but it still dogs our steps. Several critics seem to have supposed that they only had to quote New Testament evidence in order to confute us and establish the divinity of Christ; but one of the basic questions at issue is how to interpret and assess the evidence. How to understand and use scripture is a persistent underlying problem, and the de-mythologizing debate is far from having settled the problems presented by cultural relativism.

2. Assessment of evidence raises another persistent problem—namely the influence of presuppositions on historical judgement. Some critics have fallen back upon the charge that we—and most New Testament critics into the bargain—are led astray by a refusal to recognize the possibility of supernatural intervention; we are accused of approaching historical questions with *a priori* positivistic presuppositions. Such critics seem to think that the breakdown of positivism, together with the recognition that all historical events are in fact unique and unrepeatable, allows, in relation to the New Testament material, the suspension of the rigorous tests whereby evidence is usually assessed, so that the fact that certain unique unpredictable events actually took place may be admitted in this particular case—though presumably they would agree that other claims to supernatural intervention (e.g., in mediaeval times or among pagans) should be subjected to critical scrutiny and met with respectable incredulity. I am afraid it is plain to independent observers that those who advance this case are themselves guided by *a priori* assumptions, and ones which the majority of our contemporaries would regard as quite unjustifiable. The grounds on which biblical events are distinguished from others of a similar character are totally arbitrary; the principle of using 'analogy' in assessing historical evidence cannot be cavalierly dismissed on the grounds that

every event is unique in itself. (For further consideration of the principles involved, see Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (SCM 1967).)

In this discussion, both the philosophy of historical method, and the theological question how does God act within his world, are at issue. The latter question I will return to later, but let me pursue the question of evidence of the supernatural for a moment. Appeals to the supernatural inevitably invite the question, how does one recognize those points at which the supernatural is genuinely operative. Those who appeal to the supernatural in the context of biblical study seem to forget that the non-Christian in our midst is more likely to associate the word with the paranormal activity of the spiritualist seance or the poltergeist. But even without taking such extremes into consideration, how does one distinguish between psychological abnormality and genuine religious experience? The world is an ambiguous place, otherwise the debate between the humanist and the religious man could not go on unsettled, as it undoubtedly does. Furthermore, the biblical material shows an awareness of precisely this problem of ambiguity; the possibility of false prophets is ever-present, and the early Christians were enjoined to 'test the spirits'. If the world of religious experience is ambiguous, so was the life of Jesus. Asserting the possibility of miracles or supernatural intervention cannot remove that ambiguity. Whatever one's presuppositions about miracles, one still faces the question whether anything at all distinguished Jesus from other exorcists and holy men of the First Century. (G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Collins 1973) cannot be lightly dimsissed.) The Gospel evidence itself is enough to indicate that many of Jesus' contemporaries attributed his extraordinary powers to Beelzebub; the very discussions about 'signs' are a condemnation of appeal to the miraculous as an attempt to establish historical certitude, and also a witness to the ambiguity present in Jesus' person and activity. Granted for the moment that divine incarnation *did* take place in Jesus, a genuine incarnation, as distinct from a docetic visitation, must have involved a *kenosis*, a 'hiddenness' which makes 'proof' by appeal to the supernatural impossible. Attempts at this kind of proof merely give a certain respectability to the docetism endemic in popular Christianity and prevent a realistic account of Jesus' genuine humanity.

3. The charge of docetism does not apply to the more sophisticated ontological or metaphysical accounts of the incarnation which have been proposed in answer to our book, especially by theologians of a catholic persuasion. But once again such discussion is only going over old ground. It is not for nothing that a generation of students has been learning to distinguish between an ontological and a functional Christology. The problem with an ontological account is that if it is to be non-docetic, then it can in principle have no discernible epistemological

basis; it must involve so complete a *kenosis* that the identity of God within the Christ ceases to have meaning or effect. Since it makes no apparent difference, it can only be an affirmation of faith—an intellectual leap which many of us find difficult since our educational indoctrination has made us empiricists, whether naïve or more sophisticated. Appeal to such a doctrine of incarnation as meaningful and true, irrespective of evidence, may render it impervious to the kind of historical criticism advanced in the *Myth*, and for some that is an advantage; but it depends too much on an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of the Church to establish for all time the truth of the philosophy on which it is based. Surely we must recognize that serpent as well as dove (to use a mythological expression!) has played a major role in Church history. The Church's record, especially in relation to the progress of humanity's search for truth, has been too reactionary and misguided for us to put uncritical trust in its philosophical formulations, and its history and development have been too ambiguous both morally and spiritually to render its doctrinal formulations beyond criticism. (It is not only Protestants who are alive to this; see Hans Küng.)

Other frequent criticisms of the book have taken us to task for not saying enough about God himself and about the resurrection. But these points, like the other issues I have discussed, all point to one simple underlying problem: how is God related to the world? I suggested in my contribution to the book that Christological positions are intimately related to the answer given to that fundamental theological question, and the discussion seems to have proved that my observation was correct.

Now on this issue, Christian history provides two directions of thinking which are in fundamental tension with one another—and, before I go further, let me plead guilty to sharpening the contrasts in order to clarify what is involved. The first sees God's activity as primarily displayed in *exceptional* events which are understood as his direct intervention, often flouting the normal pattern of the working of the universe. A decent theology of God, it is said, has to allow for his omnipotence and his freedom to do what he likes with his creation —nothing is impossible with God. There are no *a priori* reasons for denying the virgin-birth, the resurrection, etc., provided one accepts that the Christ-event is the supreme act of intervention, of a kind so different from any other event that it is to be accounted *sui generis*. Needless to say, this kind of theology has tended to dominate Christian thinking and lies at the basis of a number of the objections raised against our book. It is capable of naïve or highly sophisticated presentation, and I suppose the supreme expositor of such a view was Karl Barth, the enemy of natural theology.

As a rather naïve 'commonsense' empiricist, I feel that this view

cannot avoid claiming certainties about particular events which inevitably go beyond the evidence, and I do not find it surprising that it is widely rejected by 'liberals' on the very good evidential grounds that the universe appears to work according to consistent patterns of cause and effect. It also seems to me that it is open to a number of serious theological objections. Ultimately it has the same theological fault as the Gnostic systems—it points towards a dualism which does scant justice to God as *creator*. Against the Gnostics, Irenaeus firmly argued that creator and redeemer are identical; this has remained a persistent theme in Christian theology and implies the possibility of a natural theology. Unless we can make sense of the world as *God's world*, in which he is consistently and not just exceptionally involved, then theology, it seems to me, is saying nothing to the point as regards our experience and understanding of the universe. The question is not: *has* God the freedom to do what he likes? Rather it is: *Does* he exercise the freedom which, as God, of course he has? Does it not seem that in the very act of creation, God willingly 'abdicated', to use Simone Weil's phrase? I do not wish to suggest that he withdrew in a deistic sense. What I mean to say is that in creating, God expresses himself, and the suggestion that he needs to intervene is a refusal to take his self-expression in creation sufficiently seriously. It may be that certain events act as 'disclosure situations' but, in principle, if this is God's world, everything is disclosive of him, not just certain unpredictable and abnormal phenomena or events.

Now, of course, such a view is inevitably confronted with the problem of evil, which the other standpoint can face more easily in that God's activity is seen not *in* the process which includes evil, but *against* it by miraculous intervention—hence its implicit dualism. I cannot possibly embark upon a full discussion of this central problem here, but it seems to me that what is significant about Jesus is not that he *conquered* evil and suffering, which rather obviously still continue, but that he acts as a 'disclosure situation' of God's involvement in his world, even at those points which seem most certainly to negate his presence. If we discern God's glory in the cross, then we can also discern it in the concentration camp and the deformed baby.

So Jesus, a man fully part of a created order which is expressive of its creator God, has in his life and suffering become for Christians a 'disclosure' which enables us to discern within the very depths of human cruelty and sin, within the very mortality and finitude of human existence, the presence of the glory of God. The seriousness of evil is not played down, nor is it miraculously wafted away with a magic wand, but it is confronted and mastered and transformed by the light of God's presence shining in the depths of the world's darkness. The Christian is called to share in the divine process of transformation *within* the contradictions and antinomies of our earthly experience,

not to trust in supernatural escape from them. The resurrection is not the miraculous act of a *deus ex machina* (its evidential security is in any case at best shaky); rather it is the pointer to God's gracious presence even within the pain, suffering and death of his creation.

3 H. J. RICHARDS

On a recent visit to Jerusalem, I took the opportunity to attend a Mass celebrated in Hebrew, since I was interested to hear how the traditional Catholic prayers would translate into the language of the Bible. Only one thing shook me, I was surprised to discover on reflection, and that was something with which I am so familiar that I had never questioned it—the doxology with which we end so many of our prayers. In Latin, French, German or English, the words had become simply a reassuring background noise: *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto, Gloire au Père et au Fils et au Saint Esprit, Ehre sei dem Vater und dem Sohn und dem Heiligen Geist*—Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. But to hear these words for the first time in a language which emphasizes so strongly that to one alone belong the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory—*Kabhod laAb ulaBen ulaRuah haKodesh*—this sounded like some exotic pagan incantation at which any monotheist would be entitled to raise his eyebrows. Nor could the Christian celebrant have avoided the dilemma by explaining that he was only distinguishing the persons, not the divine nature, which remained numerically one. The monotheist might justly reply: 'What have mathematical formulas to do with God?'

The appropriateness of trinitarian language is only one of the many issues raised by the current debate on the Incarnation. If 'incarnation' is symbolic language rather than a statement of metaphysical fact, if considerable qualifications have to be made on many of the apparently factual statements about Christ in the Christain creed—'eternally begotten', 'God from God', 'of one Being with the Father', 'he came down from heaven', 'he ascended into heaven'—then in what sense is it any longer appropriate to say that 'with the Father he is worshipped and glorified'? How much longer is even our 'Glory Be' viable?

Many have welcomed the re-opening of the Incarnation debate. There have been loud protests from some quarters, on the grounds that theological formulations of such venerable antiquity are no longer open to question. To cast doubt on them is not merely a kind of profanation but equivalently an abandonment of Christianity. But most people are aware that, behind their closed doors, theologians have been asking questions on this topic for some time now, and see it as no bad thing to bring the matter out into the open, where the layman (who has been asking the same questions for considerably longer) can join in. A Christian Church cannot be in a healthy state if it is so