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Editorial

For theologians and cross-cultural communicators, the centre of the theological debate has shifted to issues in the relationship of the Gospel to culture. It is a sign of growing maturity that evangelicals are willing to listen to those from whom they differ on issues of contextualization. This is especially true in Latin America where Liberation Theology has challenged evangelicals to examine their own cultural heritage and Protestant history. While rejecting the implications of the Marxist analysis of history, they have recognised that true theologising can only take place through involvement in the historical moment. Too often western evangelicals continue to answer questions that only the elite are asking. Their answers appear irrelevant to the poor and oppressed who constitute the world's majority.

The search for *dynamic equivalence* for biblical language and concepts which has long been the concern of Bible translators is now the concern of theologians who are beginning to interact with the anthropologists and sociologists.

Many of us have warned against the dangers of universalism and syncretism but we must not allow fear of syncretism to paralyse boldness to experiment with language and concepts. But in contrast to modern existential theologians who begin with the relativity of culture, Paul began with the interpretation of the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. It is true that the Bible is culturally conditioned, but our belief in the unique inspiration of Scripture assures us that this cultural conditioning was also under the sovereign hand of God. The prophetic nature of the faith helps us to understand God's reforming acts in culture. But in order to comprehend the truths of biblical theology, we must constantly examine our use of the grammatico-historical method of exegesis and test the claims of critical and redaction research in the light of the Bible's own truth-claims. For this we need well-trained biblical scholars. But here too the communicator must first critically examine his own pre-understandings and approach his task with humility and reliance on the Holy Spirit, for the act of contextualizing can never be absolute. He will accept the mutual correction of God's people. In other words, it is the Church living under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, who can faithfully interpret the Word for our world today. [p. 3](#)

Believing in the Incarnation Today

by RICHARD BAUCKHAM

The Myth of God Incarnate (SCM 1977) Pp. 212 edited by Professor John Hick of Birmingham University, gathered well-known and time honoured arguments against the deity of Jesus Christ. The novelty lay in the number of leading Anglican Churchmen who contributed to the

book. In *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Hodder 1977) Pp. 144 Michael Green assembled a cross section of orthodox opinion (Protestant and Catholic) to reply. In this article Richard Bauckham, lecturer in the history of Christian thought at the University of Manchester focuses the main issue raised by Professor Hick's book.
(Ed.)

THE DEBATE over *The Myth of God Incarnate*¹ 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*.

I. 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.'² Similarly Maurice Wiles asks: 'Are we sure that the concept of an incarnate being, P. 4 one who is both fully God and fully man, is after all an intelligible concept?'³

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 rediscovered 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 realised: 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.'⁴ Whether and how we p. 5 believe in incarnation

¹ ed. John Hick, London: SCM Press, 1977.

² 'The Finality of Christ', *Theology*, 78 (1975) p. 625.

³ *The Myth*, p. 5. Cf. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins, 1977), p. 170: 'Every attempt to specify further the idea that Jesus was both God and man has broken down. It seems impossible to take the thought of the God-Man beyond the phrase "God-Man" and to find any definite meaning or content in it.'

⁴ *Manhood and Christ* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. vii.

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 out 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 metaphysical 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.'⁵ p.6 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.

⁵ Quoted in Charles Gore, *Belief in Christ* (London: John Murray, 1922), p. 171. On this Modernist doctrine, see A. M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple* (London: Longmans, 1960), pp. 68–73.

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 [p. 7](#) 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.'⁶ Christology is not obliged to dispel the ultimate mystery of the incarnation which is the mystery of God's astonishing love.

II. 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 realise that the New Testament writers also use mythical language about incarnation, when they speak of Jesus as a divine [P. 8](#) 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.'⁷

⁶ *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), p. 61.

⁷ *The Myth*, p. 184.

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 has 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 p. 9 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. The logic of the third step is irrefutable given the first two. 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*'.⁸

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 return 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.'⁹

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 p. 10 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

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36: the whole passage, pp. 36f., should be read.

⁹ 'Incarnation—The Essence of Christianity?', *Theology* 80 (1977), p. 88.

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. [p. 11](#)

The Fundamentalism Debate: A Survey of Reviews of James Barr's Fundamentalism

by A. N. S. LANE

*List of Reviews*¹ (followed by abbreviations used in this article)

- J.R.W. Stott, *All Souls Magazine* Sept–Oct 1978, pp. 12f. (AS) (also repeated, in an abridged form, in *Church of England Newspaper* 22.9.1978, p. 7 and, in a slightly modified form, in *Christianity Today* 8.9.1978, pp. 44–6)
- G. Whitefeld, *The Ampleforth Journal* 83, 1978, pp. 67f. (AJ)
- L. Misselbrook, *Baptist Times* 28.7.1977 (BT)
- M. Wadsworth, *British Book' News* November 1977 (BBN)
- A. N. S. Lane, *Christian Graduate* 30, 1977, pp. 77–80 (CG)
- J. Goldingay, *Churchman* 91, 1977, pp. 295–308 (Ch)
- D. L. Edwards, *Church Times* 15.7.1977 (ChT)
- D. Williams, *Crusade* October 1977, p. 49 (Cr1)
- P. Cousins, *Crusade* October 1978, pp. 32f. (Cr2)
- B. C. Farr, *Digest* April 1978, p. 5 (Dig)
- D. W. Cartwright, *Elim Evangelical* 30.7.1977, pp. 8–10 (EE)
- A. S. Wood, *Epworth Review* 5, 1978, pp. 123f. (ER)
- R. M. Horn, *Evangelical Times* November 1977, p. 7 (EvT)
- C. S. Rodd, *Expository Times* 88, 1977, pp. 353–5 (ExT)
- L. Jacobs, *Jewish Chronicle* 5.8. 1977, (JC)
- D. R. Hall, *Methodist Recorder* 3.11.1977 (MR)
- Anon, *The National Message* June 1978, p. 185 (NM)
- M. Warren, *New Fire* 4, 1977, pp. 456–9 (NF)
- H. Dean, *The Officer* September 1977 (Off)
- P. Wells, *Revue Reformee* 29, 1978, pp. 85–94 (RR) [p. 12](#)
- G. W. Anderson, *SOTS Booklist* 1978, p. 84 (SOTS)
- D. F. Wright, *Themelios* 3, 1978, pp. 86–9 (Them)
- K. Ward, *Theology* 81, 1978, pp. 145–7 (Theol)
- P. Helm, *Third Way* 14.7.1977, pp. 17f. (TW)

¹ I am indebted to the SCM Press for supplying copies of some of the reviews. Since I have often been dependent upon copies I have not always been able to supply full details of volume, page, etc. The reviews are listed in alphabetical order of periodical. A chronological study might reveal some interesting unacknowledged borrowing, but this task I will leave to the literary critic. I have sought as far as possible to let the reviews speak for themselves and so have quoted freely. In giving short quotations there is always the danger of misrepresentation. I have sought to the best of my ability to avoid this but I apologise for any instances where I may have failed.