THE INCARNATION, THE CROSS AND SPIRITUALITY

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THE INCARNATION means that the christian faith is an historical faith. It speaks of a God who reveals himself in history and makes himself part of it. Not only is the form of christian revelation historical (namely Jesus Christ) but our understanding of it must be historical as well. Whether implicitly or explicitly, all Christians are engaged in a debate with the culture of their time.

No one approaches Jesus Christ in a neutral state. Just as Jesus presented a problem of understanding for the society and culture of his own time, he equally presents a problem for ours, precisely because he challenges the normal categories of our intellectual, social and religious orthodoxies. These orthodoxies and conventions provide the basic structures of our understanding which interpret our world and the experiences we have. In addition to giving us a conceptual framework and common language they also determine what we believe to be possible or impossible; what we can say with 'sense' or would regard as 'non-sense'. We come to Jesus Christ with these presuppositions and already possess notions about 'God' and 'humanity', 'time' and 'eternity'. The problems of christology, the possibility of belief or unbelief, and the intelligibility of christian claims are not primarily to be found in the language and debates about dogmatic formulations and creeds but in the presuppositions we already possess about human and physical reality. The controlling effect that these presuppositions exercise is well illustrated in the contemporary discussion about the starting-point for christology.

In an essay entitled 'Two basic types of christology'[1] Karl Rahner identifies 'a saving history type'—a christology 'from below', and a 'metaphysical type'—a christology developing downwards 'from above'. Although both types are to be found in the New Testament

the classical tradition has been essentially 'from above'. Rahner's own christology is developed out of his understanding of humanity and in this he is following a consensus in contemporary theology (with the massive exception of Karl Barth) that 'a christology which moves from immanence to transcendence, from relationships to revelation, from the Son of Man to the Son of God, rather than the other way round'[2] is more suited to modern times and cultures. The question of finding an acceptable starting-point is also a question of theological method which is related to the credibility of theology for 'modern man'. The problems with a christology 'from above' and the methodological difficulties it encounters are perhaps most incisively argued by Pannenberg.[3] He points out that such a christology presupposes the divinity of Jesus when the most important task is to present reasons for the confession of his divinity. A christology which starts with the Word is also in danger of undervaluing the reality and significance of the 'real, historical man, Jesus of Nazareth'. Moreover, methodologically, such a christology presumes to view things from God's point of view and this is something which is intrinsically inaccessible to us.

The case for a christology 'from below' is clearly based on a concern to engage and speak intelligibly to 'modern man'. It is uneasy with the classical formulations which employ metaphysical categories because our culture no longer thinks in metaphysical terms but understands itself through a pluralism of personalist and phenomenological philosophies, and its understanding of humanity is determined by sociological and psychological sciences. We live in an 'immanentist' culture acutely aware of the historical nature of understanding and the problems that it poses. All of these are operating as determinants not only for the starting-point of christology but also to supply the conceptual framework for what it is possible to say and how it can be said. Yet the criticisms of metaphysical christology and the attempts to construct one 'from below' reveal the deeper problem which the Incarnation raises. Whether from 'above' or 'below' the tension is always between the appropriating and reducing of revelation to the 'given' world of our understanding or, on the other hand, working through the full implications of its challenge.

The Incarnation is fundamentally unthinkable within our existing categories of 'God', 'man', 'time' and 'eternity'. One senses this tension in every classical and contemporary christology working out of existing presuppositions. These categories are understood

and constructed as opposites and it is difficult to avoid always conceiving the Incarnation as a 'union of opposites' no matter how ingenious our theology or anthropology.[4] If a christology 'from above' has difficulties with the historical reality of the man Jesus, a christology 'from below' will experience similar problems in doing justice to his divinity, precisely because divinity and humanity in our thinking are exclusive, and the derivation of one from the other risks the undermining of one in favour of the other. A christology'from below' may give full weight to the man Jesus, but in so far as it still operates with the presuppositions of the classical notion of God which it regards as inadequate in a christology 'from above', it has to be fundamentally agnostic about the divinity of Jesus; perhaps, at best, understanding it as the 'transcendental mystery' informing his humanity. Neither christologies essentially reform the concepts which they use and both accept the classical problem about the relationship of the eternal God and the historical man.

Christologies are also evaluated and determined by their implications for our understanding of salvation. Just as a christology 'from above' can so abstract God and man as to separate the Incarnation from its effects, so a christology 'from below' can confuse personal integration and wholeness with salvation, thus permitting current philosophical or psychological fashions to dictate the requirements of redemption. Whether we start from above or below, the question is whether the Incarnation is conceiveable. It is experienced as a problem because of what is thinkable and unthinkable according to the canons of our age. Every christology which takes revelation seriously is driven to speak in apparent paradox as it comes up against the boundaries of thought.

Incarnation and spirituality

If the starting-point of christology reveals the presuppositions of our culture, it also has implications for spirituality. Christian spirituality is concerned with the Incarnation because it is concerned with the relationship between God and humanity and the consequences of God's self-revelation in Christ for our lives and our world. Spirituality cannot be divorced from theology for it constantly presupposes it; it needs a 'theology' of Incarnation. A spirituality which works out of a christology 'from below' is in danger of forgetting that revelation is grace and cannot be appropriated by techniques. It runs the risk of becoming a spiritual

romanticism about humanity and human nature which obscures the need for the Incarnation. Equally a spirituality which starts 'from above' can undermine creation and humanity to the extent that it does not take their reality seriously. Such spiritualities tend to see the world as passing and are mistrustful of human nature. They can undermine the great truth of the Incarnation that God has made his 'home' with us and has therefore not rejected the reality of creation and our nature but established it. We cannot do justice to the Incarnation if we so exalt 'God' that we diminish his work; the Incarnation is not the cause of our exile but the basis of our homecoming—not a leaving of creation but a repossession of it.

The Incarnation stands as a challenge to all our conventions and in its refusal to be reduced to the 'thinkable' it stands as a threat and critique of our beliefs about 'God', ourselves, eternity and time. At its core lies the fundamental question, 'Who is the God that it reveals?' As the question is asked in the Incarnation so it can only be answered there. It means that we are dealing not with an abstract concept of 'God' but a living God revealing himself in our time in the reality of Jesus Christ. This is a God who reveals himself as Trinity and any understanding of the Incarnation must be a radically trinitarian one if it is to speak about *this* God and not some conceptual mutation. The difficulty of classical and contemporary christologies, whatever their point of departure, is that their concentration on the God-man relationship tends to ignore the fact that such a relationship is founded in, and only makes sense as trinitarian action. If the Incarnation is fully understood within the context of the Trinity then it means that, in the face of God's revelation of himself, we must think again and abandon the boundaries of the possible and impossible; what we think about ourselves and the world in which we live. Essentially, the Incarnation requires a *metanoia* of the intellect as well as the heart.

The Incarnation and the cross

In the course of our discussion we have been concerned to explore the implications of the Incarnation for Christianity's engagement with the prevailing culture and its presuppositions which determine our understanding of God. In so far as the Incarnation is a question about who God is, the reality and meaning of his existence, it is a question for every age and its

particular form of atheism. We have seen how the starting-point for christology is determined by this engagement and the importance that the two types of christology have for spirituality.

In this second part I wish to explore the possibility of understanding the Incarnation in terms of the cross and its consequences for christian spirituality. In a short essay it is not possible to do justice to such a rich and difficult theology which has informed all the major christian traditions. The best that can be attempted is a sort of sketch which may be useful in pointing the way and identifying the questions.

The cross is a scandal because of what it implies about the nature of God and humanity. It is the point at which our presuppositions about God are thrown into confusion and where the question about the intelligibility of human endeavour and the meaning of existence is raised by the spectre of suffering and death.

A christology which starts from the cross can be in no doubt about the humanity of Christ. It is not simply that the reality of his humanity is evident in suffering and humiliation, but also that it is there in death. Death is the seal on our finite existence, not only exposing our frailty but the quiet whispering that undermines all that we would do and be. As the inevitable horizon of our life it calls into question all that we would wish to say about the meaning and purpose of our lives. The fact of Jesus's death is the fullest expression of his humanity.

At the time, the death of Jesus derives its meaning from the fact that it is accepted in faith and obedience to the Father's will. It is this relationship which is revealed at the deepest level as the reality which gives the cross its meaning. As is perceived by the early fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa, the cross is not simply the consequence of the earthly ministry of Jesus but is the goal of the Incarnation.[5] Yet it is also the act in which the Father is most hidden and because of this hiddenness the question which death places over humanity is placed over God himself. The cross is the supreme act of faith which reveals Jesus as the Son; but it is also the point where faith is most at risk for it stands before the darkness of revelation with all its ambiguity.

It would be a mistake to think of this ambiguity as confusion or lack of clarity. This is not its quality; rather it is ambiguous in virtue of the double nature of the action there. On the cross Jesus places himself in the heart of darkness but because he does this on the basis of his surrender to the Father, he calls the Father into

that darkness as well thus calling upon him to show himself as Father. On the cross Jesus's witness and openness to the reality of the Father also demand that the Father witness to the truth of the relationship.[6] The Father's silence in the cross is not only the void of death and the dissolution of meaning which threatens all existence, but it is the darkness of God himself which reveals him as the one who calls all our ideas into question and breaks the limits we have set for him. In the cross we know that we are dealing with God and none other.

In the darkness of the cross the cappadocian fathers saw the 'incomprehensibility' of God's revelation and this is the mystery of salvation for it is God's emptying of himself which fills up the abyss of death. The self-emptying of God is the fulness of salvation; the glory which now fills the whole of creation and must issue in the resurrection and Pentecost. If the cross is Jesus keeping faith with his Father, the resurrection is the Father's witness that his faith was not in vain. In this way we can see that the cross and resurrection are the same event of revelation.

Taken together this is a fully trinitarian event. The older tradition in the New Testament connects the activity of the Spirit with the resurrection and exaltation of Christ (Rom 1, 3). However, it would be a mistake to see the Spirit as somehow at the end of the event. In so far as Jesus's life and ministry are lived and constituted 'in the power of the Spirit', it is also in that same Spirit that the relationship to the Father is realized in the surrender on the cross (Heb 9, 14). It is the Spirit who at every point witnesses to Christ's relationship with the Father and therefore reveals 'the depth of God'. The fact that the whole event of Incarnation and redemption is a trinitarian action is the guarantee that at every point we have to do with God. Moreover, it ensures that we are not dealing with a 'union of opposites' but with the way in which God chooses to be for us, thus recognizing the integrity of revelation.[7]

Implications of Incarnation

The cross reveals the Incarnation as God's witness not only to himself but also to humanity. Before the cross we are called to face the meaninglessness and emptiness of self-definition. The true meaning of death itself is exposed: against the current of the age the cross maintains that death is not some inevitable but natural cycle of animal and material life. It is the consequence of sin and

God's uncompromising judgement upon it. In the presence of the Incarnation we cannot pretend that sin is not a reality or that it is a social misdemeanour. We must insist that it betrays and destroys our humanity.

The cross, however, understood as the fulfilment of the Incarnation, reveals that there is no necessity about death; it is not the defining horizon of our existence for God has placed himself as our horizon; no abstract philosophical concept but a living incomprehensible Trinity of love. The Incarnation is the reconstituting of humanity as part of a trinitarian reality. This means that for Christianity no social, physical or psychological science can ultimately grasp our reality apart from this.

The other implication of the Incarnation is that humanity itself becomes the first sacrament and this must have profound consequences for our understanding of the Church, human behaviour and the ordering and quality of our relationships with each other.

When viewed from the perspective of the cross the Incarnation forms the basis of a theology of sin which has important consequences in spirituality and christian practice. There are dangers in spiritualities which have a defective theology of sin for they can often turn a proper and necessary appreciation of our sinfulness into a form of self-hate. They can confuse a pathological mistrust of human nature with a true understanding of our woundedness. The cross regarded as the fulfilment of the Incarnation offers a way of understanding. It is certainly God's 'No' but it is no hatred of us or deprecation of our humanity . It is his 'No' to the scandal of our sin which robs us of the dignity of our humanity and the glory of our freedom created in his image. It is his judgement upon the emptiness of sin whereby we renounce our place as the crown of creation, denying our responsibility and robbing it of its voice to praise the Creator. His 'No' is the horror of truth before the complacency of our self-deception. Yet the cross remains the 'Yes' of God's forgiveness which says that sin never was and never could be the final word about us. On the cross the 'Yes' and the 'No' of God stand together for it is the 'No' which we need in order to understand and open our hearts to the 'Yes'. Both are in the language of the cross; both are words of love.

The Incarnation calls into question all our talk about 'God' and cautions that the 'god' of philosophers is an amusement but without power to save or speak. However, within the context of the cross the Incarnation implies that the traditional exercises in

theodicy are but empty games. The cross realizes the insight of Job and carries it further, saying that God's response to suffering and the meaninglessness of evil is the revelation of himself in the outpouring—the double action of *kenosis* (self-emptying) and *pleroma* (fulness)—of his presence filling out the abyss of pain.

The freedom of God is at the heart of the Incarnation and the cross reveals that freedom too is at the heart of humanity. As Christ is most fully and completely himself in the free gift of his life and identity to the Father, so our humanity is most complete in the free gift of ourselves to this God and the humanity he has chosen. The cross, however, locates the essence of that freedom in faith. Without it freedom is only a disguise for deterministic surrender or self-centred pragmatism.

On the cross it is in the freedom of the gift of himself in faith which reveals the ground of Jesus's humanity as the Son of the Father. Similarly in Jesus the Father freely chooses to be himself for us. Only in the context of mutual faith is there no violence to freedom and hence the fullest possible realization of identity. Our salvation, in so far as it is the restoration of humanity, is a reconstitution of that humanity in freedom and faith. These are the gifts and qualities of grace, as the example of Mary demonstrates.

The meaning of obedience which the cross puts before us is precisely freedom realized in the surrender of faith. Spiritualities which have not understood obedience within the incarnational context of the cross will ultimately distort and wound our humanity with a false notion and practice of obedience.

Finally, we have suggested that the Incarnation understood within the context of the cross has extensive implications for our understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, grace and nature. It also has implications for time and eternity. In the light of the Incarnation our understanding of these realities must undergo a profound re-evaluation. They can no longer be conceived as exclusive of each other: the Incarnation reveals time as already part of eternity. Time ceases to be for us the measure of our finite nature and the harbinger of dissolution and decay; it loses its character as *chronos* and becomes always the *kairos*. Time becomes the action and promise of grace.

The point of this essay has been to explore the implications of the Incarnation for our culture and our spirituality. At the end of any exploration one is always conscious of the limitations and questions, the problems and gaps. Nevertheless, I hope that it has

been able to suggest that the implications of the Incarnation may be more far-reaching than we may think.

NOTES

[1] Rahner, Karl: 'The two basic types of christology' *Theological investigations,* vol XIII.
[2] Robinson, J. A. T.: *The human face of God.* Cf also Küng, H.: *On being a Christian.*
[3] Pannenberg, W.: *Jesus—God and man.*
[4] The classical credal formulas are certainly not naive about this difficulty and take positive steps to avoid it. The chalcedonian definition is aware that any description of the Incarnation that implicitly sees it as a union of opposites has failed to grasp it. In its qualifying participles 'unmixed', 'untransformed', 'unseparated' and 'undivided', it is precisely defining against this conception of the two natures which is implicit in the christological heresies it is concerned to deal with. The chalcedonian definition also needs to be read in the light of the theological concepts of anhypostasis and enhypostasis which are meant to give a positive understanding of the integrity of Christ's person.
[5] Gregory of Nyssa: *The Great Catechism* XXIV.
[6] In this witness the cross becomes an eschatological event of revelation ushering in the kingdom. It is the point at which the kingdom is grounded in the surrender to the Father and the Father's acceptance which issues in the pleroma of the Spirit at Easter and Pentecost.
[7] If our understanding of the economy of salvation starts with a christological narrative then the *filioque* preserves the pattern and order of the historical form. However, if we view the economy of redemption from its internal reality as a trinitarian action then the Orthodox Church's insistence on the possession of the Spirit from the Father is exactly right, allowing us to understand the historical life and ministry of Jesus as grounded in and part of the Trinity through the work of the Spirit.