God Incarnate: Myth or Truth?

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Members of the Reformed Church in America unite with Christians everywhere to confess belief in one Lord Jesus Christ, "very God of very God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." The content of these articles of the Nicene Creed has come under attack from a group of British churchmen and theologians who have recently published the papers of their symposium under the title The Myth of God Incarnate. The rationale behind their efforts is summarized in the words of T. S. Eliot: "Christianity is always adapting itself into something which can be believed."

This serious questioning of Christian essentials has touched off a sharp theological controversy in Great Britain, where another group of scholars and churchmen has published a volume of rebuttal called The Truth of God Incarnate. The fact that both books have now been published on this side of the Atlantic, that the echoes of the debate will be heard in Christian circles for some time to come, and that at issue is the traditional confession about the person of Jesus Christ has led the editorial committee to publish this and the following articles.

The Myth of God Incarnate offers ten essays by seven English theologians and churchmen. John Hick explains why the book was written. In the nineteenth century Western Christianity adjusted itself to the enlargement of human knowledge represented by evolution and biblical criticism. Now another adjustment is called for:

The need arises from growing knowledge of Christian origins, and involves a recognition that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2.21) "a man approved by God" for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us (p. ix).

The body of the volume follows a 1-4-4-1 pattern. Maurice Wiles, a professor at Oxford and the chairman of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission raises the fundamental question in a chapter entitled "Christianity without Incarnation?" He contends that this question is a proper, necessary, and constructive one to ask and concludes that the abandonment of the incarnation as a metaphysical claim about the person of Jesus "would not involve the abandonment of all the religious claims normally associated with it."

The case for abandoning the incarnation is now put in two parts of four chapters each. Part I, "Testing the Sources," deals with what Hick described above as "growing knowledge of Christian origins." Herein, Frances Young and Michael Goulder argue that the traditional formulations of christology, so far from enshrining revealed truth, are themselves the product of witness and confession in a particular historical environment.
Goulder rejects the unhappy choice between the abyss of atheism and the fixity of traditional orthodoxy and offers Christians a new path, "round the mountain to heaven." This path involves substituting "the unity of activity of God and Jesus" for "the unity of substance" (*homopraxis*, if a Greek word is wanted, rather than *homoousia*). In the process Jesus becomes "the man of universal destiny," which means that he was "destined by God to establish the community of selfless love in the world." Goulder's second essay is a hypothetical reconstruction of how the faith of the primitive church was transformed into the doctrine of the incarnation. His "The Two Roots of the Christian Myth" are traced to early Galilean Christianity and Samaritan Christianity respectively. The first accepted an eschatological myth of Jesus as a man who rose from the dead and was to return ("a take-off-and-landing myth"). The second developed a gnostic myth of the Son of God who came from heaven and returned to glory ("a landing-and-take-off myth"). Paul combined the two into a conception of Jesus who was first incarnated, then returned to the Father, and who is to come again ("a landing-take-off-and-landing myth"). Once we perceive that both historical roots of Paul's position are unbelievable, concludes Goulder, "the idea that the combination of them is revealed truth falls apart." The title of Young's second essay, "Two Roots or a Tangled Mass?", shows that she really believes it is more accurate to describe Christian origins as a "tangled mass" than as "two roots." Although she admits at the outset that "there seems to be no exact parallel to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and certainly not in indisputably pre-Christian material," she remains convinced that incarnational belief belongs naturally enough to a world which was accustomed to supernatural ways of speaking.

Part II, "Testing the Development," deals with what Hick called above "the later conception of him as God incarnate" and offers four essays that are only loosely related to each other. Leslie Houlden in "The Creed of Experience" simply argues against credal formulations on the grounds that the theological creativity of a surging spring of inspiration (experience) is preferable to a controlled flow of thought (creed). Don Cupitt ("The Christ of Christendom") believes that the classical doctrine of the incarnation belongs not to the essence of Christianity but only to a certain period of church history, now ended. Specifically it was the product of the merger of Christianity and the state under Constantine. Inasmuch as modern man no longer holds the Constantinian union of church and state, it follows that he can no longer hold the incarnational faith which it produced. "Myth in Theology" (the second contribution of Maurice Wiles) is essentially an essay on the use of the term "myth" in theology. In view of the title of the book one might have expected this attempt at history, definition, and use to have stood first. John Hick concludes this second part with what is surely one of the overriding concerns behind the whole symposium: the problem of "Jesus and the World Religions." For Hick the unique character and claim of traditional Christianity are obstacles in the way of attaining "a global religious vision" to which he feels Christians are being called. To speak of Jesus as the Son of God, God the Son, the Logos incarnate, and the God-Man is to mistake "the hyperbole of the heart" for theological fundamentals, and this is an error Christianity will happily outgrow. Only then will Jesus be able to be the "Christian gift to the world."
The epilogue is provided by Dennis Nineham and ends the book on a note of warning. He observes that the moral perfection of Jesus has always been rooted in his metaphysical uniqueness. This means that when the symposium’s authors deny the latter they had better know that they will be left with a different Jesus than they seem to expect. In Nineham’s view the impossibility of justifying any unique claims for the man Jesus on purely historical grounds seems doomed to end in a new agnosticism.

Within months of their appearance the essays described above drew a response from five very different-minded English theologians and churchmen in a symposium entitled The Truth of God Incarnate. Michael Green, whose voice is dominant in this slim paperback, answers Maurice Wile’s question, “Christianity without Incarnation?” with an analogy: you can no more remove the incarnation from Christianity and still talk about what is left as Christianity than you can remove the engine or chassis from a car and still talk about what remains as a car. He and his colleagues believe, therefore, that “it is high time for those who do not accept a reductionist Christology to stand up and be counted.”

Green’s first chapter (“Jesus in the New Testament”) addresses the “Testing the Sources” section of The Myth of God Incarnate. What is the testimony of the New Testament itself? Key christological passages and titles are surveyed to demonstrate that the New Testament writers saw in Jesus “no mere man, but the one who shared the nature of God Almighty.” Furthermore, there are no genuine parallels to the incarnation in either Greek or Jewish literature. “The really special thing is this: nobody had ever attributed divinity and a virgin birth, resurrection and ascension to a historical person whom lots of people knew.” The only credible source for the Christology of the early church is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself.

The next two chapters are done with gusto and wit by Stephen Neill. In “Jesus and Myth,” Neill lets his critical powers range all over The Myth of God Incarnate, noting particularly that its authors are quite correct when they confess that “there is nothing new in the main theme of this book and we make no pretense to originality.” The fact is that other Christians have been pondering all these problems for many years, with almost the same evidence available to them, and yet have reached very different conclusions. In reaction to one of the writers who offers a long list of occurrences of resurrection mentioned in scripture without mentioning that none of them bears the smallest resemblance to the resurrection of Jesus, Neill makes what is clearly the most devastating comment in the book: “If this passage in The Myth of God Incarnate had been shown up to me in an essay by a first-year theological student, I would have put my pen through the paragraph, marked the essay gamma, and told the student to do the work all over again” (p. 69). His chapter on “Jesus and History” understands the latter as dealing with the unique, and unpredictable, the unrepeatable, the unalterable, and the irreversible and places him among those who welcome the reemergence of the historical Jesus from the mists of critical uncertainty. For if the final result of critical study was to leave us doubtful whether there is any historical basis for the faith, “Christianity would be reduced from the level of a religion of history to that of a religion of ideas, and that is something entirely different” (p. 78). Neill also draws upon his expertise in comparative
religions to speak to John Hick's call for a "global religious vision," free from any attempt to convert people from one religion to another. As Neill sees it the vision cannot survive the light of two realities: first, the fact that the great religious systems of Islam, Buddhism, and Marxism freely admit that they claim to have the whole truth and the final word for men; second, the fact that converts to Christianity rarely speak of their former religions as a preparation for the gospel, but much more often as a hindrance, as a world of darkness, from which they have escaped with great joy.

"Jesus and Later Orthodoxy" is Christopher Butler's response to "Testing the Development," Part II of The Myth of God Incarnate. In the theological formulations which issued from the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Chalcedon we witnessed the church doing what the New Testament books did not do: meet philosophy head on and respond to its legitimate requirements while steadfastly refusing to accept an allegorical explanation of Christianity and its eventual assimilation to comparative religion. Although these classical doctrinal statements may be criticized at many points, this is not the real issue. "The real issue today is whether or not we can believe in Christianity. Those who reject the Formula of Chalcedon are, almost without exception, men who have in fact answered that question for themselves in the negative" (p. 99). In the shortest chapter in the book (barely five and one half pages), Brian Hebblethwaite states the importance, the implications, and the possibility of the incarnation.

Michael Green's second contribution, "Jesus and Historical Scepticism" is the final chapter. After exposing some of the underlying presuppositions behind much of the current skepticism in theological circles, he proceeds to demonstrate why this skepticism is unwarranted. He concludes with the warning that the consequences of regarding the incarnation as a myth are: no knowledge of God, no atonement, no resurrection, no Holy Spirit, no sacraments, no message, and no Christianity. As a postscript, John Macquarrie's review of The Myth of God Incarnate is reprinted from Theology. He regards as major defects the book's chiefly historical orientation while taking little note of contemporary systematic theologians, its failure to define carefully and use consistently such key terms as myth and incarnation, and the fact that whereas its authors are united in their dissatisfaction with traditional doctrines of incarnation, they have no common reconstruction of belief to offer: "Inevitably, therefore, the impression produced is negative and reductionist."

With this survey of the two books before us, a few additional comments may be in place. First, if one is going to read only one of the two, The Truth of God Incarnate would be the most worthwhile. For a genuine understanding of the issues, however, both need to be read. Second, the authors of The Myth of God Incarnate have ill served the cause of biblical studies (not to mention the unity of evangelical Christians) by suggesting that the acceptance of a constructive biblical criticism is simply a stage in a development which leads to understanding the incarnation as a myth. Michael Green is surely right to say that the "scientific and historical study of scripture does not make a man conservative or liberal any more than the scientific and historical study of economics makes a man a Marxist or a Tory" (p. 110). Third, The Myth of God Incarnate contains an unfortunate number of serious misconceptions. It is, for example, not true that
the New Testament contains little or no trustworthy witness to the Jesus of Nazareth of history (as I. H. Marshall has demonstrated in his recent book, I Believe in the Historical Jesus). It is not true that the New Testament itself does not offer a high Christology (as C. F. D. Moule's The Origin of Christology shows). It is not true that one can attribute the rise of the doctrine of the incarnation to the general syncretistic state of religion in the relevant period (witness Frances Young's own conclusion: "There does not seem to be a single, exact analogy to the total Christian claim about Jesus in material which is definitely pre-Christian; full scale redeemer-myths are unquestionably found AD but not BC" [p. 118]). It is not true that one can describe the incarnation in precisely the same way as the creation, fall, and consummation. For in the incarnation one cannot evade the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. Finally, it is not possible to maintain from the New Testament that one can abandon the doctrine of the incarnation without abandoning all the religious claims normally associated with it. The suggested substitute, "Jesus, man of universal destiny" makes that painfully evident. A negative is the only appropriate response to the question, Christianity without incarnation?

Fourth, when proper deference has been paid to John Hick's statement that The Myth of God Incarnate needed to be written because of growing knowledge of Christian origins, one suspects that a motive at least as strong is the opinion that Christianity must surrender the uniqueness of the incarnation in order to make peace with the other world religions. More than one writer mentions the need for making Christianity harmonious with modern religious pluralism and Hick has recently written elsewhere "that the attempt to combine the traditional claim to the salvific uniqueness of Christianity with a realistic acknowledgement of God's salvific work within other religions is inherently incapable of achieving coherence, and can only be a phase on the way to a more radical restructuring of Christian theology" (Expository Times, 89 [1978], 101f.).

Finally, we may anticipate some benefits resulting from the desire of Hick and his colleagues to place the doctrine of the incarnation "firmly on the agenda of discussion." It does not appear likely that their book will have the impact of J. A. T. Robinson's Honest to God (with which it was compared at the press conference called in connection with its launching), for its style is scholarly rather than popular. It is, however, bringing forth responses that may find a much broader readership. In addition to The Truth of God Incarnate, there has also appeared an attractively written booklet God Incarnate: Meeting the Contemporary Challenges to a Classic Christian Doctrine (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977, 67 p., $1.95), by George Carey, vicar of an Anglican parish in Durham, England. In seven chapters Carey summarizes the contemporary challenge to the doctrine of the incarnation; points out the serious theological inadequacy of reducing Jesus to "the most wonderful man who ever lived"; demonstrates that when the early church claimed Jesus was divine it was only witnessing to truth learned from Jesus himself; emphasizes the close and essential connection between incarnation and atonement; witnesses afresh to Jesus as the unique and final revelation of God, particularly in the context of contemporary competition from other world religions; and contends that Christianity alone, with its incarnation faith, can pass the ultimate test represented by the question, "Is it preachable?" God Incarnate seems tailor-made for church discussion.
groups interested in wrestling with a current theological issue put in clear and helpful form. Carey's aim is not to concentrate upon the argument in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, but to look at the subject of the incarnation more generally and to place some modern questions in a scriptural context. Fresh opportunity and encouragement for Christians to do that can only be cause for rejoicing.

**FOOTNOTES**