

The Metaphor of God Incarnate

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Chapter 1: pp. 1 - 14.

The traditional Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth is that he was God incarnate, who became a man to die for the sins of the world and who founded the church to proclaim this. If he was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions.

In this book, I criticize this set of ideas and point to an alternative. I argue (1) that Jesus himself did not teach what was to become the orthodox Christian understanding of him; (2) that the dogma of Jesus' two natures, one human and the other divine, has proved to be incapable of being explicated in any satisfactory way; (3) that historically the traditional dogma has been used to justify great human evils; (4) that the idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal—Jesus embodied, or incarnated, the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God, so that God was able to act through him, and he accordingly embodied a love which is a human reflection of the divine love; (5) that we can rightly take Jesus, so understood, as our Lord, the one who has made God real to us and whose life and teachings challenge us to live in God's presence; and (6) that a non-traditional Christianity based upon this understanding of Jesus can see itself as one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate transcendent Reality that we call God, and can better serve the development of world community and world peace than a Christianity which continues to see itself as the locus of final revelation and purveyor of the only salvation possible for all human beings.

... The aim of this book is not to polarize positions but to stir public discussion and, hopefully, to move it forward. ...

The theological world is today experiencing an intense flurry of activity in the ... discussion of the religious significance of Jesus Christ. This is because we are (I believe) on the moving hinge between the structure of Christian belief that dominated Western civilization for many centuries and the still forming new structure of a Christianity that is aware of itself as one valid response among others to the infinite transcendent reality that we call God.

... In the history of the church a large number of theories have been offered to explain in what sense Jesus was both divine and human; but in the past they have each had to be rejected as violating the accepted understanding either of deity or of humanity. The question, then, is not whether it is possible to give any coherent literal meaning to the idea of divine incarnation, but whether it is possible to do so in a way that satisfies the religious concerns which give point to the doctrine. ...

¹Excerpts from Hick's book, titled as above. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

It is not always realized that Jesus himself can have had no conception of these issues. He lived in so intense and empowering an experience of the divine presence that his words and his life continue to make God real to those who are inspired by him. But the way in which Jesus understood his role was provided by contemporary Jewish restoration eschatology. ["Eschatology" refers to theories about the end of time, or the end of the normal natural order, and the institution of some sort of divinely-caused new order. Hick holds, along with other scholars, that Jesus actually saw himself as something of a final messenger, proclaiming the end of the old order and the coming of a radically new order, on earth, brought about by God, and fulfilling promises to the Jews to establish a divinely ruled kingdom on earth. When these events did not happen within a few years after Jesus' death, his followers had to come to terms with the apparent lack of progress toward fulfillment of their expectations, and so had to rethink what Jesus meant. As a result of this rethinking,] ... Jesus the eschatological prophet was transformed within Christian thought into God the Son come down from heaven to live a human life and save us by his atoning death. ...

Around this central theme a comprehensive body of beliefs developed concerning the original sinfulness and guilt of the human race; a long story of miraculous divine interventions in the course of Jewish history; Jesus' virgin birth, his miracles, atoning death, bodily resurrection and ascension; the church as the body of the redeemed; heaven, hell and purgatory hereafter; as well as a wealth of other matters.

This collection of ideas, ... began to come under serious strain in the seventeenth century as the modern scientific world-view began to form. This produced a cognitive dissonance which by the end of the nineteenth century had created a rift between those [Christians] who had gradually come to accept the new knowledge ... and those who, on the contrary, reacted in intensified adherence to their threatened world-view.

Such a deep divergence of viewpoint among Christians has been possible because theology is a human creation. It is the product of devout and faithful men and women (but in fact nearly always, in the past, men) some of them extremely intelligent and thoughtful and others less so, who were, like everyone else, enabled and yet also limited by the presuppositions and cognitive resources of a particular time and place. One can usually tell from their way of thinking to what period and sub-tradition they belonged. And because theology is a human artifact, it has changed almost out of recognition as the circumstances of human life have changed. Ideas which at one time seemed self-evident or divinely authorized have sometimes come in a different age to seem implausible or even offensive. To give just one major example which is relevant to the argument of this book, it was for more than a thousand years a firm Christian dogma that *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, 'Outside the church there is no salvation'. [Hick cites the Roman Catholic Council of Florence statement on this point, written in 1438-45.] ... But very few Catholics would dream of affirming this today, and most who are asked about it only find it embarrassing. Here then is a rather fundamental belief, with vast implications, that held sway throughout most of Christian history up to the present time, but which has now simply been discarded. It cannot, therefore, reasonably be supposed that theological doctrines are unchangeable. The body of doctrine has in fact been developing, sometimes more slowly and sometimes more rapidly, throughout Christian history. Proposals for continued change today should accordingly be considered on their merits.

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The new knowledge of the human religious world ... raises questions about the theological core of the Christianity that emerged out of the ecclesiastical debates and council decisions of the first five centuries: namely, that Jesus of Nazareth was God the Son living a human life. For from this there follows the world-centrality of Christianity as the only religion founded by God in person. It is here that the strain is now being felt. For Christianity's implicit or explicit claim to an unique superiority, as the central focus of God's saving activity on earth, has come to seem increasingly implausible within the new global consciousness of our time. ...

It has become evident to a growing proportion of educated Westerners that what the Christian faith is to the devout Christian, the Islamic faith is to the devout Muslim, the Buddhist faith to practicing Buddhists Further, it is evident that the religion (if any) to which one adheres, and in terms of which one discerns the meaning of our human existence, normally depends upon the accident of birth. ...

Further, it is now a fairly widespread experience that when one comes to know seriously practicing adherents of these other faiths one does not find them to be any less sincerely intent on living in obedience to God or to the *Dharma*, any less loving and compassionate towards their fellow humans, or any less honest, truthful, generous or thoughtful, than seriously practicing Christians. Again, when one looks at the great saints of these traditions one does not find them to be less impressive than our great Christian saints. Nor again, when one studies their holy scriptures and their theological, philosophical, and mystical literature, does one find that our Christian writings are of a different and superior order. ...

It is this new public awareness that has undermined the plausibility of the traditional Christian sense of superiority and has thereby set a question mark against its theological core in the dogma that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate. ...

The standard orthodoxy ... [concerning the incarnation has been expressed] as the dogma that 'in Jesus Christ God came into history, took flesh and dwelt among us, in a revelation of Himself, which is unique, final, completely adequate, wholly indispensable for man's salvation'.² ... This would be affirmed by the Pope, and is embodied in the World Council of Churches' Basis, in its most recent (1966) formulation, 'the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour'; and it would be difficult for any official church pronouncement explicitly to question it. On the other hand it is in fact questioned today by a large number of highly regarded Christian theologians. The questioning occurs on a continuum from more 'conservative' to more 'liberal' starting points. ... Along the continuum there has been discussion about whether Jesus' uniqueness is one of kind or degree. ... Amongst those who think of 'incarnation' in terms of degrees of human openness to God, there is a question as to whether Jesus should or should not be thought of as the *only* human being who has been so responsive to God that his life has been significantly revelatory. ...

[In the remainder of this book] I shall follow a logical thread which begins with the historical question whether Jesus regarded himself as God incarnate; if he did not, whether it is satisfactory to move the basis of Christian belief, as is now rather generally done, from Jesus' own teachings to those of the church, and particularly to the decisions of the great ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries [which produced such documents as the great creeds now generally used as summaries of Christian orthodox doctrine]. I shall then raise the philosophical question whether the idea of Jesus' simultaneous

²H.H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (London, 1941), p. 18.

deity and humanity can be coherently spelled out; next turning to the ways in which the idea of the absolute and universal lordship of Jesus has been used to justify great evils in the course of Western history; then to the related ideas of atonement and salvation; and finally to the alternative understandings of Jesus and his message that are available today.

The main conclusion of the book ... is that the idea of divine incarnation in its standard Christian form ... has never been given a satisfactory literal sense; but that on the other hand it makes excellent metaphorical sense. ... For a human life can 'incarnate', or live out, truths and values. Here incarnation is a metaphorical idea. ...

What I shall recommend is acceptance of the idea of divine incarnation as a metaphorical idea. We see in Jesus a human being extraordinarily open to God's influence and thus living to an extraordinary extent as God's agent on earth, 'incarnating' the divine purpose for human life. He thus embodied within the circumstances of his time and place the ideal of humanity living in openness and response to God, and in doing so he 'incarnated' a love that reflects the divine love. The epoch-making life became the inspiration of a vast tradition which has for many centuries provided intellectual and moral guidance to Western civilization. Today, many aspects of that tradition have lost their *gravitas* and plausibility, and Western civilization has itself entered a post-Christian phase. But the original inspiration of one who fully trusted in God, though within a human setting very different from our own, is no less powerful than in earlier centuries. If it can be liberated from the network of theories—about Incarnation, Trinity and Atonement—which served once to focus but now serve only to obscure its significance, that lived teaching can continue to be a major source of inspiration for human life.

Chapter 10: Divine Incarnation as Metaphor **[pp. 99- 111]**

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The metaphorical stands in contrast to the literal use of language. The latter is simply standard use within a given linguistic community, employing words to convey agreed meanings, which may be recorded in a dictionary. Thus the literal meanings of a word are, roughly, its dictionary meanings, and to speak literally is to intend one's utterance to be understood in this standard or dictionary sense. In distinction from this, metaphor is a form of non-literal or figurative speech Thus metaphorical speech is a use of language in which speaker-meaning differs from dictionary-meaning. ... [T]he central idea [regarding the way in which it differs] is indicated by the derivation of the word ["metaphor"] from the Greek *metaphorien*, to transfer. There is a transfer of meaning. One term [gains meaning] by attaching to it some of the associations of another [term]. ... This is what is happening when one speaks, for example, of ... 'a rhetorical smoke-screen', or 'food for thought', or 'a sharp retort', or of 'our heavenly Father', 'Rock of Ages', 'lamb of God', or when we say ... 'the Father begat the Son before all ages'.

If, for example, I speak of the journey of life, I am applying some of the associations of 'journey' in most of our minds to the experience of living and am thereby highlighting aspects of this experience. Like a journey, life is a process through time, with a beginning and an end; as on a journey, one moves on from stage to stage; new and unexpected experiences can occur; one can proceed on a planned route, or one can get lost; and so on. In spelling out these similarities, or analogies, I have been translating the

metaphor into literal speech. But this does not exhaust the metaphor. For such translation can never be complete and definitive, both because there is no fixed boundary to the range of similarities that may occur to different people, and because these similarities can activate an indefinite range of varied associations and feelings. ... A metaphor's central thrust can be literally translated, but its ramifying overtones and emotional colour are variable and changing and thus are not translatable without remainder into a definitive list of literal propositions. ... Metaphorical speech is indeed akin to poetry, and shares its non-translatability into literal prose.

...We speak metaphorically almost as much as literally; language is highly plastic and its use is an art.

Nor is the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical permanently fixed. 'Dead' metaphors become literal usages, being now so common and well established as to have acquired dictionary status. 'Pig-headed', for example, means, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'obstinate'. ...

Let us now move from these generalities to 'incarnation'. Prior to the theological settlement reached at Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451), Christian language exalting Jesus as Lord, Saviour, Son of God and God seems generally to have been devotional, or ecstatic, or liturgical (or all three), rather than an exercise in precise theological formulation. It was analogous to the language of love, in which all manner of extravagances and exaggerations are entirely appropriate but are not intended to be taken with strict literality. But within the more formal language of theology 'incarnation' began as a technical term.... And here it was not intended as metaphor but as shorthand for the doctrine that Jesus was God the Son living a human life, being both 'truly God' and 'truly man'.... He was literally (not metaphorically) God and literally (not metaphorically) human. In earlier centuries the main stress was often upon Jesus' deity, although during the last hundred years or so more often upon his humanity; but despite this varying stress the church has always, in its official pronouncements, insisted upon both....

The doctrine was clearly assumed to have a meaning capable of being described in literal terms. The terms used in the definitive Chalcedonian definition were ['being', treated as equivalent to 'person', and 'nature']. Jesus was ... one being and person...in two natures. In other words, the one person, Jesus, had two natures, divine and human. However, ...their pronouncement did not pretend to spell out what it is for a person to have these two different natures. And yet there is an obvious puzzle as to how the same being can jointly embody those attributes of God and of humanity that apparently incompatible. God is eternal, whilst human have a beginning in time; God is infinite, humans finite; God is the creator of the universe, including humanity, whilst humans are a part of God's creation.... Let us call this the incompatible-attributes problem. And so the general statement that Jesus had both a divine and a human nature needed to be explicated in a way that could solve or avoid this problem. This is what the various theories produced during the christological controversies from about the fourth to about the seventh century were attempting to do. ...

[Hick then reminds the reader of the difficulty of solving the incompatible attributes problem. He has argued earlier in the book that the standard approaches to solving the problem are not successful.] Previous chapters ... have led to the conclusion that a Chalcedonian-type christology cannot be spelled out as a literal theory in any religiously acceptable way. ... I must always be theoretically possible for a new theory to be conceived that is free from serious objection. However, an immense intellectual effort has

been put over the centuries into what must be regarded as unsuccessful attempts to formulate the incarnation dogma as a literal assertion. ...

[Rather than continuing to try to treat the incarnation as literally true,] let us consider the alternative possibility that 'incarnation' in its theological use is a metaphor. ...

The metaphor of incarnation is a familiar one. We meet it, for example, in 'the qualities incarnated in a hero', or 'great men are incarnations of the spirit of their age'. Recently General Eva Burrows of the Salvation Army said in a BBC radio programme (1 July 1990), 'we want to be an incarnation of Christ in the world'. She did not mean that we want to be 'of one substance with God the Father', but to be Christ's dedicated servants, carrying out God's purposes on earth. Again, if we say that ... Winston Churchill incarnated the British will to resist Hitler in 1940, we are using a natural and effective metaphor which communicates something important about the historical role...of Winston Churchill. It says something that is capable of being true or false – true or false in the sense that the metaphor is appropriate and illuminating or inappropriate and misleading.

In the case of the metaphor of divine incarnation, what was lived out, made flesh, incarnated in the life of Jesus can be indicated in at least three ways, each of which is an aspect of the fact the Jesus was a human being exceptionally open and responsive to the divine presence: (1) In so far as Jesus was doing God's will, God was acting through him on earth and was in the respect 'incarnate' in Jesus' life; (2) In so far as Jesus was doing God's will he 'incarnated' the ideal of human life lived in openness and response to God; (3) In so far as Jesus lived a life of self-giving love, or *agape*, he 'incarnated' a love that is a finite reflection of the infinite divine love. The truth or the appropriateness of the metaphor depends upon its being literally true that Jesus lived in obedient response to the divine presence, and that he lived a life of unselfish love.

It is worth noting at this point that metaphor can readily develop into myth in the sense of a powerful complex of ideas, usually in story form, which is not literally true but which may nevertheless be true in the practical sense that it tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter. ... Thus there is a ... [George] Washington myth, and a Churchill myth, in which these are seen and revered in their own contexts as saviour figures. The historical reality was in each case more complex and ambiguous; but the myths nevertheless have their degree, perhaps a high degree, of validity and truthfulness.

The myth of God incarnate is the story of the pre-existent divine Son descending into human life, dying to atone for the sins of the world, thereby revealing the divine nature, and returning into the eternal life of the Trinity. The mythic story expresses the significance of a point in history where we can see human life lived in faithful response to God and see God's nature reflected in that human response. ... The idea of the incarnation of God in the life of Jesus, so understood, is thus not a metaphysical claim about Jesus having two nature, but a metaphorical statement of the significance of a life through which God was acting on earth. In Jesus we see a man living in a startling degree of awareness of God and of response to God's presence.

...My thesis concerning the Christian doctrine of incarnation is that as a literal hypothesis it has not been found to have any acceptable meaning. [Hick's arguments for that claim have been omitted here.] ... But, on the other hand, as religious metaphor or myth the idea of incarnation communicates something

of momentous importance about Jesus, something that forms the basis of distinctively Christian experience and faith. ...

[T]he realization is only now dawning on any wide scale that the belief in Jesus as God incarnate is a metaphorical rather than a literal physical, psychological or metaphysical affirmation. ... [I]f...we see in the life of Jesus a special instance of the fusion of divine grace/inspiration and creaturely freedom that occurs in all authentic human response and obedience to God, we can ask how this particular instance compares with others. We are not speaking of something that is in principle unique, but of an interaction of the divine and the human which occurs in many different ways and degrees in all human openness to God's presence. ... It leaves open the further question of the relationship between the operation of God's grace/inspiration in Jesus and in other outstanding religious figures. In other words, whereas the Chalcedonian christology entailed the unique status of Jesus as the one and only person with both a human nature and a divine nature, a grace/inspiration christology [such as the one described by Hick in his metaphorical interpretation of incarnation] does not by itself single him out in this way. It can no longer be an *a priori* dogma that Jesus is the supreme point of contact between God and humankind. This is now a matter of historical judgment, subject to all the difficulties and uncertainties of such judgments.

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This now opens up the questions of other intersections of divine grace/inspiration and human freedom lying at the origin of other religious traditions....