

Theological Reflection

Religion as a Human Creation: 1. Incarnation

In this first of a series Dinah Livingstone ponders a classic Christian doctrine.

‘Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.’ In Luke’s story of the birth of Jesus angels appear to shepherds watching over their flocks by night and announce the birth of Christ the Lord. The shepherds go and find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. Then the shepherds tell them what they have heard and seen. What Mary thought we can only imagine. In the story, heavily pregnant, she has come a long way on foot (or by donkey) and given birth in a stable. In the Middle Ages in England there was a strong devotion to Mary and, as well as her great shrine at Walsingham, many common flowers were called after her. One of my favourites is lady’s bedstraw, a delicate yellow wild flower which they imagined her lying on in that stable as she gave birth. Then in the words of Tomás Luis de Victoria’s Christmas motet: *O magnum mysterium*: ‘O great mystery, O wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the Lord born and lying in a manger.’

This Christmas we may think of the thousands of refugees now making long and dangerous journeys, some giving birth on the way in even more precarious conditions. In Matthew’s story Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus also have to flee from mortal danger into a foreign country.

The child Jesus grows up and preaches good news that the Kingdom of God is about to come on Earth. The spirit or ethos of this Kingdom is great generosity; we could call it the Reign of Kindness. He is arrested and crucified. After his death he leaves history and enters into myth. He is seen (*ophthe*: 1 Cor 15:5) by some of his followers; they believe he is alive and will come soon to bring the promised Kingdom on Earth. The New Testament gives us the very early prayer in Aramaic: *Maranatha*: ‘Come, Lord!’ (1 Cor 16:22), echoed at the end of the book of Revelation ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ (Rev 22:16).

As the gospel spread from Palestine through the wider Roman Empire and as the wait for the Kingdom grew longer and longer, his followers reflecting on his death and believing in his

resurrection, developed a theology. Theologies deal in cosmic dramas and supernatural beings. If we regard the whole supernatural realm as a creation of the human poetic genius or imagination, then we can think of theology as a sister art to poetry. The cosmic dramas and supernatural beings are ‘poetic tales’.

However, after kindness, poetry in the broadest sense – if you like, what the poet Coleridge called ‘the shaping spirit of imagination’ – is essential to our full humanity. Fundamentalism is literalist (e.g. the Bible says at his Ascension Jesus was lifted up to heaven till ‘a cloud took him out of their sight’ (Acts 1:9), so that must be *literally* true). Fundamentalism is prosaic, it does not know how to read a ‘poetic tale’. It thinks if something isn’t literally true, then it is false. There is no room for poetic truth, no understanding of metaphor. That makes for a stunted, malnourished humanity, unable to access our great common treasury, which offers us a richer, more abundant life.

Actually many Christians today, even those who believe a supernatural God really exists, no longer take much of the traditional story literally.

They don’t think heaven is up in the sky or that at the Ascension Jesus floated up to it and now sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father somewhere up there. They don’t think Hell is somewhere under the Earth and probably don’t think the Devil himself is a real person and so on. They *half* realise that these are poetic tales.

If we think the whole supernatural realm is a product of the human imagination, why keep it? Then what to keep and how? An important task now is to *sift* our tradition and try to answer those questions. I also think that if we know how to read, for example, the story of Christ’s incarnation *as* a poetic tale or myth, it offers tremendous riches and an inspiring vision of humanity, which it would be silly just to dismiss. I would argue that the theology of Christ as ‘true God and true man’ has contributed as much towards the development of a sane and kindly



Refugee child born on the beach at Lesbos moments after his mother arrived by boat. 14th October 2015. Photo Peter Bouckaert

humanism as Jesus's ethic of generosity and the reign of kindness.

The theology of Christ begins in the New Testament. We have the great hymns or poems, the first being in Paul's letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:6-11), probably written in the 50s but some think Paul may be quoting a hymn he could have learnt as early as the time of his conversion in the 30s. In it Christ who 'though he was in the form of God... *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave and was found in human likeness.' In Colossians, in Christ 'all the fullness of God dwells bodily (Col 2:9 and 1:15-20).' In Ephesians (Eph 4:8-10): 'He who *went down* is the same who went up far above all the heavens so that he might fill all things.' In John's Prologue (Jn 1:1-14): 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with (towards, about) God and the Word was God... the Word *became flesh* and dwelt among us.' Paul gives us Christ as the new Adam, the 'firstborn' inaugurating a new humanity. We are his body, we are one body because we all share the same bread (1 Cor 10:17).

This theology is later thrashed out in the series of christological councils. At the first ecumenical council, of Nicea in 325, Christ is declared to be 'true God ... of one substance' (*homoousios*) with the Father. This Christ 'came down, became flesh, became human'. The proponent of the famous *homoousios* was Athanasius. At the SOF conference last summer I was talking to a Unitarian about the run up to the council of Nicea and mentioned I'd read that the Arian opponents of the *homoousios* had chased Athanasius down the street and he had to escape at night by boat. 'Oh good!' replied my Unitarian friend. 'The Council backed the wrong side.'

I disagree. Like the Arians, their Unitarian descendants hundreds of years later were still arguing on the assumption that a personal God actually exists. The dispute was about how many persons, one or three. But if we regard the story of that supernatural God's human incarnation as imaginary, a poetic tale or myth, then the full-blown orthodox statement of Christ being true God and true man leads to the most humanist outcome. The whole fullness of God is emptied into humanity, comes down.

In fact, humanism developed in countries with a Christian tradition. Although the Church often resisted Enlightenment ideas and social struggles in an attempt to maintain and entrench its power base, the Christian story itself, the theology of incarnation as humanity aspiring to fullness, 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:13), is the root

of a humanism that seeks to be humane and humanitarian, and sees the liberation and flowering of humanity as the chief object of culture. A sane and kindly humanism is Christianity's natural outcome.

Christ becomes the head, the namesake hero, the protagonist, the figurehead of humanity as a whole. We are his body. The new humanity – the whole species – becomes 'the whole Christ'. (These are *metaphors!*) As Teresa of Avila put it: 'Christ has no body now on Earth but yours, no hands but yours...' If they expected a supernatural intervention shortly to bring the Kingdom to Earth in power, Jesus and his followers were mistaken. There is no supernatural being to do this. We have to do it ourselves. John's first Letter tells us: 'God is love.' We could put that: love is God, kindness is God. Although, of course, there have been plenty of examples over the centuries of great love and kindness, we still haven't managed to bring a Reign of Kindness on Earth.

Crabb Robinson reports a conversation in which he asked William Blake what he thought about Christ's divinity. Blake, he says, replied: "*He is the only God.*" But then he added, "And so am I and so are you." Despite all our failings, Blake maintains in his *Jerusalem*:

The Divine Vision still was seen,
Still was the Human Form Divine;
Weeping, in weak and mortal clay,
O Jesus! still the Form was Thine!

And Thine the Human Face; and Thine
The Human Hands, and Feet, and Breath,
Entering thro' the Gates of Birth,
And passing thro' the Gates of Death.

The Reign of Kindness is a project of *Humanity*. We cannot look to any supernatural aid, just to our own ideals.

We may mention briefly the two richest christologies of the last hundred years, both of which reflect on the theological tradition of Christ in terms of current issues. First Teilhard de Chardin on evolution and 'cosmogensis'; then liberation theology. (Incidentally both these christologies were developed by Jesuits and both in their day got into trouble with Rome.)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century when enlightened intellectuals were beginning to discuss evolution, the poet Coleridge, William Blake's contemporary, wrote:

A male and female tiger is neither more nor less
whether you suppose them only existing in their
appropriate wilderness or whether you suppose a
thousand pairs. But man is truly altered by the co-

existence of other men; his faculties cannot be developed in himself alone, and only himself. Therefore the human race not by a bold metaphor, but in sublime reality, approach to, and might become, one body whose Head is Christ, (the Logos).

Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published 57 years later in 1859. Despite the strictures of the Church at the time, the geologist and palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) strongly defended evolution. He thought of the universe as evolving to a higher level of material complexity and consciousness – in human beings, the most conscious beings so far known – towards an Omega point, which is Christ, the incarnate Logos. This is 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' and fulfils the longing expressed in the Letter to the Romans: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait...' (Rom 8:22-23). Teilhard called this process 'cosmogogenesis'. Rather than us versus nature, subduing it, we are part of nature. Christ becomes the evolutionary Cosmic Christ and the whole Universe is seen as one process, one life.

Teilhard's ideas on evolution were developed by modern theologians, such as Thomas Berry, and contributed to an increasing ecological awareness that we must take care of our own planet and its life, for example in Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Laudato Si'* (which mentions Teilhard). Although Teilhard focused on the evolution of the material universe (where there was no place for heaven as 'pie in the sky when you die'), he believed God foreknew it all from the beginning. But if we reject the supernatural, we can also consider God as an 'emerging property' in us, an ideal, a goal, an Omega. In the book of Revelation the Omega is both God and Christ (1:8; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13).

Liberation theology developed in Latin America and inspired strong social movements on that continent and well beyond (for example, black theology in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa). Two Latin American Bishops' Conferences, in Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1969, declared 'a preferential option for the poor'. One of the main proponents of this theology was Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador. On 16th November 1989 he and his fellow Jesuits at the University (except Jon Sobrino who happened to be abroad), together with their housekeeper and her daughter, were murdered by the Salvadoran National Security Forces Atlacatl battalion, who had received 'counter-insurgency' training in the USA in its notorious School of the Americas.* Then after losing his whole community, Sobrino himself was censored in 2007 by the Vatican

Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (Inquisition) and prevented from teaching (this ban has now been lifted).

The central focus of liberation theology is that Christ is to be found on Earth today in human beings now living, particularly the poor and oppressed. It looks to the beatitudes. First of all: 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6: 20). In Matthew this is softened to 'blessed are the poor in spirit,' which Ellacuría translated 'poor *with* spirit'. Then: 'Blessed are the hungry, for they shall be filled...' This beatitude also 'builds up Christ's body in love'(Eph 4:16) by making it come true that 'we are one body because we all share the same bread.' Another core text for liberation theology is Jesus in the story of the Last Judgment saying: 'I was hungry and you gave me food... I was a stranger and you welcomed me... what you did to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did to me' (Mt 25:35-40). So here we have not only Jesus' ethic and kingdom of kindness, but also Christ to be found in *human beings on Earth today*, particularly those who are enduring hardship. These theologians focus on life on Earth, not an afterlife. The idea is expressed, for example, in the popular song by Carlos Mejía Godoy, *The Christ of Palacagüina*, a small poor village in Nicaragua (where liberation theology helped topple a dictator who chucked peasants out of helicopters into live volcanoes):

*Cristo ya nació en Palacagüina
del Chepe Pavón y una tal María.*

'Chepe' is a familiar form of José (Joseph) and 'una tal María' means 'just some girl or other called María,' a very common name. So I've ventured to translate it:

So now Christ is born in Palacagüina
from this or that Joe Bloggs and just another Mary.

That brings us back to our nativity scene at the beginning of this reflection. And to refugees, some even giving birth on their perilous journey. In liberation theology it is among poor people like these that Christ is first and foremost to be found on Earth today.

So we find no contradiction between Jesus' preaching of the Reign of Kindness and the potent myth and metaphor of Christ, who is true God and true man. They go together and reinforce each other. It would be a pity to lose either of them, the human form divine.

*See Jon Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: The Murder and Martyrdom of the Salvadorean Jesuits* (trans.DL, CIIR, London 1990). Both the motet *O Magnum Mysterium* and the song *El Cristo de Palacagüina* can be heard on YouTube.