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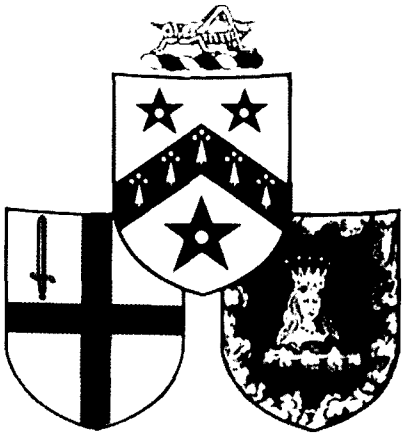

THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY

Lecture 3

THE MYTH OF THE INCARNATION

by

PROFESSOR RICHARD HOLLOWAY
Gresham Professor of Divinity

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The Myth of the Incarnation

Professor Richard Holloway

The great Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, died unexpectedly a couple of years ago. In his scholarship, as in his style as a lecturer, he was eirenic and essentially a man of the centre in the various disputes that rage round the historical status of the New Testament and the emergence of the Christian Church. In a series of lectures he gave in London in 1998 on 'The Emergence of the Christian Church'[1] he spent one lecture meditating on the paradox that any institution should have emerged to represent and maintain in history the memory, the words and the acts of Jesus of Nazareth. The Church has been called the extension of the Incarnation and the phrase is worth a moment's thought. The theological short-hand for the developed understanding of the status of Jesus of Nazareth is that, while he was truly and actually a man, a human male in every sense, he was also the incarnation of God, the vessel chosen by God to enter history and 'become flesh', to use the language of John. It is the Church's role and vocation to continue that divine work, so it could be described as the extension of the incarnation through history. His earthly life having ended in his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, or return to heaven, his presence is now continued or extended through the Christian Church.

In his lecture on Jesus, Brown meditated on the unlikely paradox that any institution could represent this man, because institutions, by their very nature, have to follow particular laws if they are to survive and prosper; and the main law of institutional survival is that the many take precedence over the few or over the one. If institutions are to endure they have to place their own endurance higher than loyalty to individuals, no matter how attractive or charismatic they may be. The patron saint of institutions of any sort, not just religious institutions, is Caiaphas the High Priest who determined the death of Jesus. The following incident from John's Gospel is a perfect example of institutional pragmatism:

> *'Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all. Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not'.*[2]

Most of us, if the situation were put as starkly as that, would probably make the same choice. The moral logic always points to the necessary sacrifice of one or two for the sake of the larger whole, in this case, according to unanswerable high priestly logic, the whole nation. Jesus was supremely uninterested in that logic. His whole attention seems to have been focused upon the individual sacrificed for the larger good, the person expended or sacrificed or declared redundant by the institution in question, whether religious or political. He would not have lasted long as a tutor in an agricultural college, because he said that the good shepherd should leave the ninety nine sheep in the wilderness and go in search of the one who was lost. And the local business organisation would certainly have refused him membership because, when asked how many times we should forgive the local embezzler,

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[1] Raymond Brown, *The Emergence of the Christian Church*, Welcome Recordings, 6 Upper Aston Hall Lane, Hawarden, Flintshire, Wales, 1998.

[2] The Gospel of John: 11.47-50. The King James version.

seven times perhaps? he replied 'seventy times seven', which is an oriental way of saying 'always'.[3] This is an impossible way to run any institution and it has never really been tried except by a few saints and Zen masters, as the following story illustrates:

> *'When Bankei held his seclusion weeks of meditation, pupils from many parts of Japan came to attend. During one of these gatherings a pupil was caught stealing. The matter was reported to Bankei with the request that the culprit be expelled. Bankei ignored the request. Later the pupil was caught in a similar act and again Bankei disregarded the matter. This angered the other pupils, who drew up a petition, asking for the dismissal of the thief, stating that otherwise they would leave in a body. When Bankei had read the petition he called everyone before him. "You are wise brothers", he told them, "you know what is right and what is wrong. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother does not even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if I do not? I am going to keep him here even if all the rest of you leave". A torrent of tears cleansed the face of the brother who had stolen. All desire to steal had vanished'.*

That is the authentic voice of the saint, but you don't make saints chief executive officers, even in churches. You manage by the logic of expedience, the logic that preserves the institution first and regards the plight of the individual, if it regards it at all, last. Caiaphas, as the author of the fourth gospel recognised, 'prophesied' that Jesus had to die by the logic of nation and temple, a logic that will always prevail in society, because who can object to the calculus of the happiness of the greatest number over the misery of the single individual? Well, Jesus apparently did, hence the paradox of any institution representing him or extending his presence in history.

The radical nature of the approach of Jesus came home to me with almost revelatory force when I read something that Hannah Arendt had said about her people, the Jews, and the fact that for centuries they had no place in the world. Speaking of the historic placelessness of the Jews, she said:'...the Jewish people are a classic example of a worldless people maintaining themselves throughout thousands of years...this worldlessness which the Jewish people suffered in being dispersed, and which - as with all people who are pariahs - generated a special warmth among those who belonged, changed when the state of Israel was founded'. It is obvious that the State of Israel, founded in response to two thousand years of persecution that shoved Jews out of the world, now follows the classic logic of expedience in organising its own affairs, the logic of Caiphas that sacrifices others for its own safety, the ethic that governs every nation, including our own. But something profound was lost when the Jewish people found a world, like the one the rest of us inhabit. Hannah Arendt goes on: 'Yes, one pays dearly for freedom. The specifically Jewish humanity signified by their wordlessness was something very beautiful...this standing outside all social connections, the complete open-mindedness and absence of prejudice that I experienced, especially with my mother, who also exercised it in relation to the whole Jewish community. Of course, a great deal was lost with the passing of all that. One pays for liberation'.[4]

I would like to suggest that this worldlessness or identification with the powerless is the key to the mystery of Jesus. It is captured in a short poem by Denise Levertov:

> 'Those who had brought this stranger
> home to their table don't recognise

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[3] The Gospel of Matthew 18.22.

[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, Penguin Books, New York, 2000, p.17

yet with whom they sit.
But she in the kitchen, absently
touching the wine jug she's to take in,
a young black servant intently
listening, swings round and sees the
light around him and is sure'.

The same radical identification with the outcast, those without place or world in the organised scheme of things, is expressed by Dominic Crossan in his version of the beatitudes:

'Only the destitute are innocent'
'Only those who have no bread have no fault'
'Only the wretched are guiltless'
'Only the despised are blameless'[5]

Everyone who is successful is complicit in the way the world works, the way of institutional power, the way that creates expendable people who may be sacrificed for the sake of the group. Occasionally, one who has previously belonged to such a centre of power is sacrificed by it or thrown aside, and a stunned disbelief is the usual reaction to the event. To find that you have become No One is devastating for the victim, for whom old friends and colleagues suddenly turn into strangers. You get something of the flavour of this process from that great movie with Al Pacino and Russell Crowe, *The Insider.* The character played by Russell Crowe, based on a true story, is persuaded to blow the whistle on corrupt Big Tobacco. He loses everything as a result, including his family and reputation. The brilliance of Crowe's understated performance is that, largely through subtle movements in his face and eyes, he suggests baffled helplessness at the way the organised world has suddenly turned against him, thrown him out and made him placeless, worldless, a man without significance.

In Jesus, we encounter one who placed himself alongside the expendable people of history and saw them not as expendable units in a larger structure, but as individuals with particular histories and uniqueness. That was why he was loved and surrounded by the people who had no place in the world; and it was why he was finally destroyed by the world. The term 'world' is interesting here. It is obvious that we are all, unlucky as well as lucky, living in the same world; but in the New Testament there is a use of the word that suggests another meaning than planet earth. The Gospel of John, in particular, has a strong sense of 'the world' as an organised structure of power and privilege that owes allegiance only to itself and even resists the approach of God: 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him'.[6] I shall come back to the implications of this understanding of Jesus as the one from outside who identifies himself with the worldless ones. Let me return now to Raymond Brown's wry acknowledgement that there is something odd about any organised system, any 'world', using that term in the way I have just defined, claiming to represent this man from the outside, this man without a place.

The paradox is that we have only heard of Jesus through an institution that has not experienced worldlessness for a very long time. This was the point Raymond Brown mused on in that lecture two years ago, but he did not offer any solution to the problem. The expendable man of Nazareth is now represented by an institution that follows the logic of all worldly institutions, the logic of expedience; but we would not even know about the paradox

[5] John Dominic Crossan, *The Essential Jesus*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1995, pp.26, 30, 51, 123.
[6] The Gospel of John 1.10-11.

if it weren't for the Church. There is something mysterious about this paradox, but it is also because part of the genius of power is to co-opt and therefore to neutralise its opponents. That is why Alasdair McIntrye said that 'All power tends to co-opt and absolute power co-opts absolutely'.[7]

A creepy example of this is provided by a Fourth Century historian, a courtier bishop called Eusebius, who wrote a sycophantic life of the Emperor Constantine. Constantine believed that his victory in 312 at Rome's Milvian Bridge over his imperial rival Maxentius had been obtained by Christ's power. The night before the battle he had a dream in which he saw the symbol of the cross with the motto underneath, *in hoc signo vinces*, in this sign conquer. He had the sign turned into a banner under which he fought the following day. It worked. He won the battle and converted to Christianity. His subsequent policy was to bind the Church to his empire with the closest possible ties and use it as a unifying factor. Inevitably, he involved himself with the internal affairs of the Church, including debates over abstruse items of Christian doctrine. One of the most far-reaching of his interventions concerned the dispute over the true nature of Christ, whether he was fully God from all eternity, as well as fully man. To resolve the dispute, Constantine summoned the bishops to Nicea in 325 and ordered them to sort out their theological differences. When the Council reached a successful conclusion, Constantine invited the bishops to an imperial banquet. Here's how Eusebius gushingly describes it:

> 'Detachments of the bodyguard and troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of them the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the Imperial apartments, in which some were the Emperor's companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought that a picture of Christ's kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality'.

Historians have traditionally seen this event as the final triumph of the Church and the beginning of its long dominance of European history. It established dogmatic Christianity in a long partnership with the world of political power that became known as Christendom, and only in our day is it in its final stages of dissolution. So glorious and powerful was the institution of Christendom that it was almost impossible to see through it to the man who stood behind it, the peasant from Galilee who had refused to cringe before the very power that crucified and was later officially to deify him. The fascinating thing about our day is that, as the political and theological structures of Christendom crash down before our eyes, we can see once again, through the rubble and dust of the centuries, a clearer picture of the prophet of Nazareth.

The way scholars have described that evolution from the man of Nazareth to the God-Man of Nicea is to talk about the movement from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith. This is only one way of talking about theological development in early Christianity, and there are those who would repudiate the distinction that is implied in that particular form of words. Nevertheless, the advantage of using it is that it captures the historic nature of the movement from Nazareth to Nicea, from the flesh and blood Jesus to the heavenly Christ of the Catholic centuries. One thing is certainly true: from the beginning there has been development and change in the understanding of Jesus and his meaning within the Christian community. As with all theological disputes, there is no absolutely incontrovertible way of resolving the one about the true nature of Jesus, later called the Christ. This is where theological constructs or myths are unlike Kuhnian paradigms. I pointed out in my first lecture this year that science has followed a developing path through the use of paradigms

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p.103.

that work till their 'use by date' and are gradually replaced in what Kuhn called a scientific revolution. Obviously, scientific paradigms are testable in a way that theological myths are not, but we can still make use of the Kuhnian insight as we struggle with its meaning and application to religion. And this is where I must show my own hand, by disclosing an operating principle that will govern what I am going to be saying in this lecture and those that follow.

Since there is no way we can get in touch with the metaphysical or supernatural realm that is on the other side of the claims made about Jesus, I believe that we should use these claims to define and characterise the way we live in this world and not as descriptions of another world beyond this one that we can have no direct knowledge of, including certain knowledge that it exists. What I want to offer as a programme of action is theological pragmatism as opposed to theological positivism. Theological positivism claims that, through revelation, we are given true and saving information about that reality we call the supernatural or heaven or the divine realm or the other world. The 'truth' bit does not particularly bother me. If you tell me that you know that there is another heavenly reality beyond this one and that you know something about what goes on there, I hope I will have the grace to listen politely and not intrude upon convictions that are clearly important to you. If you tell me that unless I also hold these views I cannot be 'saved' and that something awful and eternal will happen to me after death, I will be less inclined to listen graciously. Moreover, I will detect in your theology not just your private opinion about unknowable matters, but a kind of religious abuse, a power-play, that is clearly designed to pressurise me into re-arranging my mental furniture so that it can accommodate the essential items you insist on installing there. To use Tillich's language, if you insist that the myth of the Incarnation has to be understood in its literal or unbroken sense, then you are in danger of excluding me from its values altogether, because I am unable to submit to your particular version of it, which goes something like this: There is a god who is in some sense a discrete and definable being from whom we have been alienated by sin, original as well as actual, thereby creating a state of hostile separation between us. A long line of ambassadors from God, sent to make peace, have been systematically rejected and many of them killed. Finally God sends his only son to reconcile the world to himself. And he sends him to an unknown family in a nowhere town, where he is born of a woman without the sexual intervention of a human male. The salvation of the world depends upon its hearing about this event and coming to acknowledge the divine status of the child born in such remote anonymity.

Used as myth, metaphor or poetry, this beautiful story can be interpreted in several meaningful ways; taken literally, it is not just far-fetched, it is morally arbitrary. If God is able to pull off such an extraordinary miracle, and some others recorded as backup to the claim, why does he not exert his power in a more morally obvious way to alter the evil balance of power in the world? If God does choose to intervene and has the power to, why intervene in this way rather than in some more obvious way? I have been preaching long enough to know that highly sophisticated answers can be given to some of these questions, but all of them beg the question of the literalness of the myth, and thereby deprive it of its poetic power. No matter how subtle the new theological justifications of the myth are, they are inevitably confronted by the frankly and unavoidably mythological and pre-scientific language of the story. In a pre-quantum, flat-earth universe the literal details of the myth would be easier to accept, because in the ancient world there was an acceptance of constant traffic between the divine and the human spheres.

Let me repeat myself: since I do not want to interfere in the devices people use to express their religious longings and convictions, I would not want to try to shift someone from a literalistic to a metaphorical understanding of the Incarnation, or from the unbroken to the broken myth. My resistance to literalists is roused on two grounds. The first is when

proponents of the unbroken myth say theirs is the only true way to hold it; secondly, and more importantly, I resist when I am told that holding the unbroken myth is not only 'true' but 'saving', that it must be held to avoid damnation. Humans do all sorts of things with language, with words, including the language of religion. I simply want to make space in Christianity for another way of using the traditional language. Let me spend what is left of my time this evening to sketch in what that use might be.

In recent years I have become fascinated by the theme of the hidden God and the unknown Christ. Encounters with the unknown Christ are surprisingly frequent in the New Testament. In the resurrection stories we have several accounts of Christ appearing to uncomprehending disciples, who think he is an interesting stranger, such as on the Road to Emmaus in Luke or on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in John. And there are occasions in the teaching of Jesus when the same point is made. The most dramatic version of this is found in the great parable of judgement in Matthew 25. At the end of history people are separated into two groups, both of whom are surprised by the verdict that is delivered about them. On the one side are those who thought they were paid up believers in Christ, who find themselves excluded because they have not served him. When they express their puzzlement at this perverse judgement, by reciting creeds and rehearsing their membership in various organisations for the defence of the faith, they are told that because they have not clothed the naked, fed the hungry, visited prisoners or given cold water to the thirsty, they are not on the side of Christ. But the surprise of the pious is as nothing compared to the surprise of the other group. They have had little or no time for religion in their lives. They think it makes too many unverifiable claims and is responsible for too much hatred. They themselves don't really know what to believe, except that cruelty and indifference are curses upon the world. So they don't make many claims for themselves, but they volunteer a couple of times a month to feed the homeless, and some of them write to black prisoners on Death Row in the Christian State of Texas. They are as suspicious of politicians as they are of clergy, but they keep up the pressure on parliament to do something for the people who are not doing as well out of the economic system as they are. They don't much like the way the Church has turned the compassionate anger of the young prophet of Nazareth into dogma, but they admire the man himself and sometimes wonder if they haven't rubbed up against him at the odd demo against Third World Debt and the Arms Trade.

I used to try tried to place myself prudently on both sides of this judgement divide. I was theologically conservative and socially radical. I remember trying to get the slogan 'incense and drains' accepted as a motto for the Catholic Renewal movement, because I thought both worship and decent housing were important for people. Theologically, I was pretty intense in those days and now I think I know why. In the late Sixties I emerged from a period of radical doubt about the whole Christian doctrinal system, and I fell into a very common trap: I reacted against my own uncertainties by attacking doubt and uncertainty in others. A closet sceptic, I condemned in others what I was too afraid to look at in myself. My first book was an attack on the kind of theology I myself now write. All along, I can now see, I was my own enemy, the opponent of the other self within I could not live with, the person who doubted that theological propositions actually represented metaphysical realities, actually described the situation in the heavenly realm. My anxieties about all of this caused me to engage in a classic projective identification and condemn in others what I secretly believed in my own heart. It is one of the deepest ironies of my life that I have ended up the kind of bishop in my sixties that I attacked when I was a priest in my thirties. 'The whirligig of time brings in its revenges', as Mr Shakespeare well knew. As another poet put it, I have ended up where I started, but now I think I know the place for the first time.

I am telling you all this because I think a liberating truth underlies it. I have come to believe passionately that we can treat a belief as 'a habit of action' rather than as an accurate representation of metaphysical reality, to quote Charles Sanders Peirce.[8]

People who adopt a pragmatic approach to Christianity, because they are agnostic about the reality status of theological statements, ask themselves what action this or that belief commits them to, not whether it accurately represents the home life of God. This is what William James called establishing 'the cash value' of religious beliefs. And it brings us back to the parable of judgement in Matthew 25 and all those other stories of the unfound Christ, such as the story of the fourth wise man who did not make it to Bethlehem on time, because he went to the aid of a poor widow. Each time he thought he was getting close to the Christ child, another unfortunate person would demand his assistance. Worn out with all his wandering and care of the suffering, he discovers that he has been in Bethlehem, worshipping the Christ child, all the time.

To demythologise the myth of the incarnation is not to dilute it, but to charge it with a profound and daunting ethical meaning. It calls us to a recognition that God is now to be found in the human, especially among the worldless, the disregarded ones, such as the Holy Family and the poor who welcomed them. To claim belief in the Incarnation is to commit ourselves to a radical commitment to the meaning of God not in verbal propositions, but in human lives, their joys and sorrows. If our talk does not serve this end, does not have a radical ethical imperative, then the Word that was made flesh in Jesus is simply made word again in the Church.

It is a chastening experience to realise that you have largely given your life to talking *about* Jesus, weaving words round the mystery of his meaning, rather than trying to walk in his footsteps. 'Poor little talkative Christianity' said E M Forster and, my God, he was right. And it is not just the boring talk, though there's been an ocean of that, it is the cruel talk, the judgement talk, the superior talk, the dismissive talk, the 'I have the truth and you don't' talk that is so crucifying. Crucifying, yes. I know it's a bit late to have made the discovery, but isn't it time we dismantled all the calvaries our words have built for Christ and simply tried to follow him, preferably in silence?

[8] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* Penguin, London, 1999, pp.xxii-xxiii.

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Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH
Tel: 020 7831 0575 Fax: 020 7831 5208
e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk