

Making Sense of the God-Man

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Is this an easy time to think of God? I think not. Our religious condition in Europe at the beginning of this Millennium is religiously fragmented and tentative. Call it postmodern culture, if you like that term: a collapse of the shared 'grand narratives' about God and history; a sense of cultural instability and rootlessness; a cultural desolation in which people seem unable to connect with the moral and religious communities that convey purpose and meaning.

In one of his essays, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber distinguishes between *epochs of habitation* in which human beings live securely in the world, knowing who they are and what their place in the scheme of things is, and *epochs of homelessness*, in which they have difficulty feeling at home, with an uncertain sense of their place and their purpose. We're now living, Buber suggests, in one of those epochs of cultural homelessness in which we have lost our religious bearings and our confidence about the human project. (How long will it last? Who knows, but an unstable culture can deconstruct very quickly and produce something more real.)

Buber tells a parable of a religious man who is so overwhelmed by the human desolation around him that he goes to the divine presence to pour out his grief about the state of things:

...a man inspired by God once went out from the creaturely realms into the vast waste. There he wandered till he came to the gates of the mystery. He knocked. From within came the cry: 'What do you want here?' He said, 'I have proclaimed your praise in the ears of mortals, but they were deaf to me. So I come to you that you yourself may hear and reply.' Turn back,' came the cry from within. 'here is no ear for you. I have sunk my hearing in the deafness of mortals.'

What is this evocative parable saying? Surely that the search to find God away from the creaturely realms, away from human beings, is misdirected, because God has chosen to sink his capacity to listen in the confused human world where people do not know how to listen (presumably neither to one another nor to God). God's ear is turned, not to those who think to escape from the human condition in order to gain privileged access to the divine – how could we ever do that? – but to the world of deaf mortals who cannot listen. True address from God, Buber goes on, 'directs man [back] to the place of lived speech, where the voices of the creatures grope past one another, and in their very missing of one another, succeed in reaching the eternal partner'.¹

If this parable is right, and it is a wonderfully haunting story, then communion with God does not bypass the uncertainties of the human (always postmodern?) community, because that is precisely where God's address and listening are focused:

God has concealed his attentive presence in the place of lived speech and that movement is the basis of our knowledge of God. We know God, not by projecting our ideas above and beyond us, but by learning to participate in God's self-giving movement among us. This is surely what Nicholas Lash is getting at when he says:

God is not a thing, an object over against us, silently lurking in the metaphysical undergrowth, passively awaiting the services of human exploration... God can only be known in that eternally still movement of utterance and love which he *is*; known *in* that movement, not by constructing representations of it, whether these be pictorial, narrative or metaphysical (which is not to discount the pedagogic usefulness of such devices). God is known by participating in that movement which he is. And it is this participation which constitutes the reality, the life and history, of everything that is.²

Let's think of Buber's Jewish parable in the light of Lash's Christian phrasing. God's 'attentive presence' might be what Christians mean by the Incarnation: God's Word spoken into the secularity of confused human words, the Word among the words that fail to reach the truth. And this is 'the movement which God is', on the basis of which we know God.

God's *attentive presence in the place of lived speech* – the 'movement that he is' – is his taking up a place among us in attentive love, through the union of his Word with Jesus of Nazareth. Christian faith goes on to say that when God does this, there is an accompanying divine action, the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's self-bestowing gift, which evokes from us a response to the communion God brings about through his Word, especially when we do not know how to speak properly (Rom 8.26). God's Word and Love come to dwell in the midst of human uncertainty about words and love: the postmodern world of cultural homelessness is precisely where God chooses to dwell.

Clearly, in all this, there are the outlines of a Trinitarian account of God, and it may be worth spelling that out. In the next sentence, I'm going to use the word 'unoriginate' to mean that God simply is, depending on nothing else to exist. Christian theology works with an understanding of God as the *unoriginate mystery of expressive self-bestowal* whose utterance into the world (Incarnation) and whose self-gift in love (outpouring of the Spirit) are inseparable from the way God is and the way the world is. You can see, I think, the Trinitarian shape of that description: in God's act of being, there is a richness and generativity which issues expressively (in a 'Word') and in an impulse of loving union (what we call the 'Spirit'). These movements of expressiveness and gift are integral to God and so we say that God is Trinitarian.

But these movements are also responsible for the world. The creation originates in that same movement of expressiveness and gift which arises in God: God's 'expressive self-bestowal' is integral to the way the world is. God utters his Word, and in that movement of self-expressiveness – by extension, as it were -- brings the creation into being as the sphere in which his Word will find a dwelling place. In that act of uttering his Word, the world is made to be (God creates the world *in* his Son)

and God sinks his self-expressiveness within the creation as a constitutive feature of the created order (so the world is never without the Word).

Creation and Incarnation belong together as two aspects of the one divine expressiveness: God ‘making the world be’ (creating) and God bringing about the deepest communication of himself within that world (becoming incarnate). The Incarnation might then be the most intense moment of God’s self-gift to the world in which a human person, Jesus of Nazareth, becomes the form of existence which the Word of God takes as his. And it is on the basis of this moment that we *know* God because this is the actuality of God moving towards us in unsurpassable self-gift.

A failure to see that the world is grounded in God’s constant self-gift leads, in our culture, to a deism in which God’s only relation to the world is in the first few milliseconds of the Big Bang. (Stephen Hawking’s talk of ‘finding the fingerprints of God’ at the beginning of things, as though God were more present ‘then’ than ‘now’, is well-intentioned but misguided.) God is not ‘outside’ the world, and the world is not ‘outside’ God, because God constantly makes the world be. Any suggestion of a distance between God and the world is inappropriate and signals an unchristian deism in which God is imagined occasionally to intervene in a world that functions quite satisfactorily independently of his action. Peter Geach’s little phrase is worth recalling: ‘God sustains the world as a singer sustains his song’.

This shapes how we speak of the Incarnation. It seems to me grossly misleading to think of the Incarnation as one of God’s ‘interventions’, albeit the most dramatic. There can be no question of a divine intervention because God is already ‘there’, making and sustaining a dependent creation, and so at a particular point in the history of that creation God can act to embed his Word within that world. If God can make the world be, then God can intensify his creative action in such a way that one of the creatures in the world (Jesus of Nazareth) is united with God’s Word and becomes the created form in which the divine radiance of the Word is known. This is not a proof of the Incarnation (how could it ever be ‘proved’?), but it is to say that Incarnation has to do with the kind of relation to the world which God has as creator.

I’ve found it helpful to go back to Thomas Aquinas’ view of the three ways in which God is present in Christ, and to use them as a way of understanding Christ as the Incarnate Son (*ST* 3a, 2,10, ad2). Aquinas thinks that God is present and active in Christ in three ways:

First of all, God is present in Christ by essence, power and presence, as in other creatures. This is Aquinas’ formula for how God is present in you as Creator: God’s direct action makes you be and sustains you in your human individuality. So too in Christ, there is full creatureliness: he is human with all that this entails: body, mind, soul, emotions, drives, sensitivity to pain and pleasure. And, like us, he is ‘subject to the fear of death’ (Heb 2.14) and to the experience of death because mortality is written into the script of being a human being. Gethsemane, the place of deepest prayer and deepest weakness, is no easy place in which to pray, but Jesus, like us, has to spend time in that garden.

But he is without sin because no part of him is turned away from God (sinning, far from being natural to us, is how we have learned to be closed to love and truth). Does saying this remove Jesus from the reality of human life? In spite of the temptation to involve him as an agent within the continuum of sinful humanity, I'm not sure he can really help me if he's as dislocated as I am. Only if he can love God with every part of his person, and thereby create a space in which feeble people like me can be helped, can I come to stand in the one place that can save me: *in him* and in the circle which his total love of God creates.

In thinking of the humanness of Christ, it's more to the point to see his humanity as characterised, not by the messiness that is mine, but by a deep simplicity and innocence which I, as a complex person, find disturbingly problematic because I do not know what it feels like to love God, as he does, in a complete way. I'm too complex for my own good; he is simple enough to save me.

Now, if there is full creaturely reality in Christ, then we have no difficulty in coping with the restricted intellectual horizon within which he acts. Christ thinks within the worldview of a first century Palestinian Jew, within the cultural categories available to him: he doesn't know, for example, where Glasgow is, or that the earth moves round the sun, or what the theory of relativity means. So when modern New Testament exegesis shows us a Jesus embedded in a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances who thought and acted in ways directly relevant to his culture and context, this is not a threat to believing in the Incarnation. It's precisely what Incarnation means: God's Word is embedded in the particularity which characterises time and space (a human being can only be *in one place and in one time*).

Secondly, God is present in Christ by sanctifying grace, as in the saints. This is how Aquinas refers to God's unitive presence in the mind and heart: by grace, by the gifts of the Spirit, God comes to dwell in the most intimate core of the human heart and turn a person lovingly to respond to his love. God does this in holy men and women (and surely to a lesser degree in all men and women) and, through his presence by love and grace in the mind and heart of Jesus, so anoints him with grace that his Spirit-filled heart becomes the source of the world's salvation. (Devotion to the Heart of Christ – ignored too much nowadays – is a way of signalling that we are saved by Christ's human love for us.) Graces of union, prophecy, understanding, insight and love are so radiant in his heart that he becomes the channel by which God's grace flows to human beings.

It's important to see that the limited horizon of his worldview is not an obstacle to the depth of Jesus' union with God, brought about by grace in his heart. Think, for example, of Thérèse of Lisieux: she frames her religious ideas in the categories available to her in 19th century, petit-bourgeois French piety, but this doesn't obstruct her grasp of God and of who she is in relation to God. Even more so with Jesus: while thinking in the conceptual terms available to him (Son of Man, Messiah, Lord, master-builder of God's Temple, etc.), his grasp of God's purpose is so deep that he understands that the world's sins will be atoned by his self-gift in death.

Jesus knows God so intimately that no part of his identity stands outside that knowledge: under grace, he is the supreme 'knower' of God, and the first and best

interpreter of himself. In passing, let me say that I have little time for versions of the historical Jesus as a Liberal Protestant teacher wandering round Galilee saying, ‘I wonder who I am and what I’m supposed to be doing, but in the meantime, here’s a timeless ethic to be going on with’. Or with more recent pictures of him as a subversive egalitarian whose death is caused by his ‘having done the wrong thing (caused a commotion) in the wrong place (the Temple) at the wrong time (just before Passover)’.³ Jesus knows God and in knowing God knows himself to be inseparable from how God’s love heals the world.

Thirdly, God is present in Christ by personal union: this is Aquinas’ formula for the unique union of God’s Word with Jesus, the Incarnation of the Word among us as Emmanuel, God with us. In this union, the humanity of Jesus loses none of its characteristics, but becomes the created form that radiates the divine Son. When we see Jesus, we see the Son who belongs to the mystery of God, the self-expressive Word that God utters as the depth of his self-giving, ‘the glory of God in the face of Christ’ (2 Cor 4.6). And we cannot separate the human person Jesus from the divine Word with which he is united. There is the full operation of human subjecthood (mind, will, bodiliness) in union with the personhood of the divine Word.

If, in this next section, I’m a little technical, it’s because I think that these are the ideas which make the idea of Incarnation intelligible. (Again, this isn’t a proof, but something like this needs to be true if we’re not to be talking nonsense.) The important point is that there is no conflict between the radical historical contingency of Jesus of Nazareth and the action of the divine Word because there is no conflict between creaturely causality – thinking and acting as a first century Jew – and divine causality – the Word in its divine action.

This is because the divine Word and the human person are not like different chess pieces, only one of which can occupy a particular square on the board. Why? Simply because God is not a competing thing among other things on the board of creation whose action conflicts with those things. God does not become a part of anything, and so the divinity of Christ is not a part of him that is fused with another (human) part to make a hybrid composite.

God and the world are not two entities on the same plane: this seems to me the key to it. God can unite his action to the creature he sustains without destroying the autonomy of that creature’s operations: this is true of us, and so within God’s action of making me be, I can do various things. Analogously, God can unite his Word to the creature Jesus of Nazareth, without destroying the operations of Jesus’ humanity. The implication of this is that you can have the full operation of Jesus’ human nature and this is not to be opposed to the activity of the divine Son/Word who is united with him. ‘Divine’ and ‘human’ in Christ do not conflict because God and the creation do not conflict but exist in a relation in which each has its own proper reality.

Now, we normally distinguish things in a *contrastive* way: if Jack is standing here, Bob is not. But we have to keep reminding ourselves that God is not the Z at the end of a sequence of things in the world distinguished contrastively with one another. The problem is that our language of difference (if A does something, B doesn’t) normally treats of things in a contrastive way, and so when we come to think of the

difference between God and the world, we unreflectively oppose them or contrast them or treat them as being conflictual.

We're always tempted to set divine action in direct competition with the action of a creature. How easy it is to think that 'the more divine' Christ is, 'the less human' he is, or 'the more human', 'the less divine', as though divinity and humanity were the two scales on a balance. But God and humanity are not contraries in the way things in the world are 'contraries' of one another. That's the point of the phrases in the Definition at the Council of Chalcedon: the natures in Christ are 'without confusion, without division, without change, without separation'. Robert Sokolowski puts this well:

God does not destroy the natural necessities of things he becomes involved with, even in the intimate union of the incarnation. What is according to nature, and what reason can disclose in nature, retains its integrity before the Christian God. ... We must think of God as the one who can let natural necessity be maintained and let reason be left intact: that is, God is not himself a competing part of nature or a part of the world. If the incarnation could not take place without a truncation of human nature, it would mean that God was one of the natures in the world that somehow was defined by not being the other natures; it would mean that his presence in one or these other natures, human natures, would involve a conflict and a need to exclude some part of what he is united with. Either God would only seem to have become man, or he would have become a new kind of being in the world.⁴

The point then is that the third mode of God's presence in Christ is not in conflict with what is brought about by the other two modes: the presence of the Word does not undermine the human reality that is there, nor does it interfere with the action of grace in the mind of Christ. Instead, the humanity of Christ is *anointed with the fullness of the Spirit* and *united with God's expression of his being that we call God's Word*.

To use the phrase we borrowed earlier from Buber: God's attentive presence in the place of lived speech is the Word of God coming to share in the homelessness which characterises the creation ('Foxes have holes and the birds of the air nests but...'), coming to share in the restrictions of human life ('like us in all things'), engaging the horizon of death that marks all of us ('subject to the fear of death'). In this movement ('the eternally still movement of utterance and love which God is') we see God's deepest engagement with the physical, the personal, the spiritual and the mortal features of creation so that no part of the creation may be untouched by the fullness of God's self-gift. If the Word of God becomes flesh, with all that this means, we need look no further to know God.

¹ M.Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Beacon Press, 1947), p.15

² N.Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.86. Lash is taking us back to a key insight of Athanasius and the great Patristic tradition: all knowledge of God is a participation in the divine life.

³ Geza Vermes reviewing E.P.Sanders, 'The Historical Figure of Jesus', *Times Literary Supplement* (March 25, 1994), p.4

⁴ R.Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp.35-6

⁵ N.Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.86. Lash is taking us back to a key insight of Athanasius and the great Patristic tradition: all knowledge of God is a participation in the divine life.