



Incarnation and Apocalyptic: Christology in the Context of Religious Pluralism

GEORGE RUPP

Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts

In the opening section of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin registers an organizing principle for his theology: “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” This correlation of our knowledge of God and of ourselves has shaped much of Reformed theology since the time of Calvin. But it is also an apt characterization of the structure of theological reflection across the spectrum of Christian confessions. The reason is Christological: for Christians, conceptions of God and the self are correlative because our reflections on the divine and the human are focused in the figure of Jesus Christ.

Insofar as Christian reflection on the divine and the human is Christologically focused, it may seem irreducibly particular. But this view overlooks the fact that the relationship between the figure of Jesus Christ on the one hand and conceptions of God and the self on the other allows movement in both directions. Accordingly, every Christology is either explicitly or at least implicitly also a theology and an anthropology. As a result, while Christological motifs interpret and express particular Christian traditions, they at the same time offer points of contact with the conceptions of the human and the ultimate developed in other traditions.

This dialectical relationship between interpretations of the figure of Jesus Christ and our conceptions of God and the self suggests a three-step approach to the topic of Christology in the context of religious pluralism: first, to explore the impact of Christological motifs on our awareness of ourselves; then, to illustrate the diverse interpretations of the relationship of the human to the divine that have emerged in Christian history and that characterize our own time; and finally, to consider similarities and differences between those understandings and views of the self and the ultimate articulated in other religious traditions.

I. THE IMPACT OF CHRISTOLOGICAL MOTIFS ON OUR SELF-AWARENESS

In art, liturgy, ethical precept, and theological interpretation, the figure of Jesus

Christ embodies a double awareness in our consciousness as Christians. In being confronted with that figure, we experience both grace and judgment. In the classic theological formula, we apprehend ourselves as *simul justus et peccator*—as at once justified and sinner.

In the figure of Jesus, we see ourselves judged in our hostility, our insecurity, our ignorance, our fear. This judgment is almost overwhelmingly acute when we face Jesus on the cross. Over and over again we hear in the biblical accounts and their echoes throughout Christian

traditions that he hangs there on the cross because of us. We opposed him because he threatened our prerogatives. We allowed those insecure in their authority to play on our ignorance as we joined the cry to crucify him. Even those few of us who tried to follow him in the end betrayed him in our uncertainty and fear.

Nor is this sense of judgment reflected only in the accounts of the crucifixion. It pervades the biblical narratives which lead inexorably to the cross. In these narratives, as in our own experience, we all too often are the ones who demean and criticize others. We are the ones who pronounce judgment and thereby stand with the Pharisees and scribes over against the publicans and sinners. We look on and grumble about those who fail to meet our standards. We compare ourselves favorably to those who know they fall short. So we become those who mistakenly think we need no healing. Because we are satisfied with what we have, we choose to play it safe with our talents. In our self-righteousness, we are not the ones who go away justified before God. Instead, in story after story and incident after incident, if we look and listen at all, we can only see and hear ourselves judged.

And yet somehow judgment is not the only or the last word. Even as we experience our responsibility—our guilt—in confronting the figure of the innocent victim on the cross, we also sense the attraction of that figure. Throughout the history of Christian thought and devotion, countless metaphors and analogies and even theories of atonement have sought to capture this sense of a movement beyond our guilt. The least elaborate phrase from biblical traditions on is the simple affirmation that he died for us. In that suffering death, we see the fullest, the most extreme, expression of the love he lived among us. And that love—which, following Jesus, we call divine—that divine love pursues all of us humans, even the least of us, even us here and now.

In this respect also, the cross etches in starkest form the truth that Jesus is portrayed as teaching and living throughout his ministry. Outcasts and tax collectors like Levi and Zacchaeus are called to join him, as are women reputed to be prostitutes like Mary Magdalene. The lost coin and the lost sheep are sought and found, to great rejoicing. The prodigal son is welcomed home with open arms. The laborers in the vineyard who worked only one hour are not distinguished from the others. People are rounded up in the streets to join the feast. The kingdom or rule or commonwealth of God is breaking in. It is open to all of us who do not close ourselves off in our own self-satisfaction. Indeed, it is a dynamic love that reaches out and includes all who are excluded from other communities. It brings in to the divine love feast with the world all who have been kept on the outside.

So we, like our forebears in the first century, are proffered an invitation to which we respond in one way or another. The invitation is extended. Member-

ship is open in the kingdom or commonwealth of God—in the divine-human body that is the Holy Spirit. But many of us, like almost all the contemporaries of Jesus, see that open invitation more as a threat than a promise. The open invitation makes no allowances for differential qualifications. The spendthrift young son is treated as well as the responsible older brother. Those who work only an hour in the vineyard receive no less than those who toiled all day. The temptation to resentment and self-righteousness is difficult to resist.

To succumb to this temptation was the response of those of us who opposed Jesus in the

first century; and it continues to be a standard response among us today. This response turns the promise of God into a threat to our security, our self-esteem, our self-satisfaction. As a result, it closes the open door to the feast of God. But in limiting the invitation, we exclude ourselves, not others. We who presume to be on the inside in the end find ourselves outside complaining about the lack of qualifications in those who are included.

To live out of our awareness of ourselves as *simul justus et peccator*—at once justified and sinner—is, then, an on-going challenge. In the love Jesus lived among us and expressed in his death at our hands, we are affirmed in our very unworthiness. The assurance that forgiveness and healing are offered allows us to own our neediness. We are delivered from the temptation to defensive self-righteousness that attacks others to avoid acknowledging our own sense of unworthiness. At the same time, we can identify with the whole creation in its brokenness and neediness. In this identification we are enabled in turn to accept and love others as we move toward the inclusive community that Jesus pointed to in speaking of the kingdom of God.

II. THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN IN CHRISTIAN REFLECTION

To our ears talk about the kingdom of God has a ring to it that is both familiar and at the same time somehow quaint. After all, kingship of a substantive sort—royalty that actually rules—is decidedly anachronistic in our times. And our contemporaries seem less and less to speak of or to the divine. So even though the phrase “kingdom of God” has a comfortably and comfortingly familiar sound, it does not directly and unambiguously express effective power impinging on us here and now.

But just this divine power in our midst is what talk about the kingdom of God expresses in the biblical accounts of the ministry of Jesus. God is not a deity ruling from afar. Nor is the divine domesticated in the worship of the temple. Instead, the kingdom of God is imminent, indeed is breaking in on every side, is even already in our midst. This divine rule or power is again and again depicted as utterly at odds with our ordinary expectations, as shattering the familiar and the comfortable, as inaugurating a new aeon in which established patterns are reversed.

There is an apocalyptic strain through much of this New Testament language. The new age stands utterly over against this fallen time and calls forth judgment on it. And yet the radically new is not distant or alien. Rather the God who was thought to be afar off has come near and is in the midst of the human right here. The future age is dawning right now.

In the classic formulations of orthodoxy, the Christian church resisted attempts to separate God from creation. Scandalous though it was to Greek sensibilities, the Council of Nicea affirmed that God was indeed directly implicated in the created order: the Christ who dwelt among us was God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the divine. God was not utterly transcendent and related to the world only at one remove through the Christ. Instead, God was affirmed to be directly and intimately involved with the created order even in its fallenness, to be incarnate even in human flesh.

In and through the at times unseemly political and ecclesiastical machinations that surrounded the Council of Nicea, this affirmation of God as directly and intimately involved with creation became a standard of orthodoxy. But we all know that standards of orthodoxy are

thought to be necessary only when there are live alternatives attracting interest and commitment. Consequently, we are not surprised that there were attractive competing positions in the fourth and fifth centuries—positions which can plausibly trace their lineage back to the Bible and which also certainly continue to have progeny in our own time.

Probably the most potent and persistent of the alternatives in the history of Christian piety is the very one that the orthodox formulae of Nicea opposed. This alternative is common to all those positions which so emphasize the otherness of the divine that ordinary human life is utterly divorced from its ultimate destiny. God is affirmed as absolutely transcendent; and the aim of faith is salvation understood as deliverance from earthly trials to the beatific vision of God or to a heavenly existence completely discontinuous with life on earth.

In the first centuries of Christian history, the theological controversies that eventuated in the Nicean formulations provide one illustration of this preoccupation with the proper conception of the relationship of the ultimate to the earthly. Another extended illustration is the powerful ferment that is encompassed with the rubric of Gnosticism. Gnosticism in its many variations expressed an otherworldly orientation which both elicited opposition and attracted followers in Christian communities. In and through their elaborate cosmologies and Christologies, Gnostics agreed in envisioning salvation as the liberation of the spiritual element of the human. In Gnostic anthropology and soteriology, this spiritual element is located in the souls of certain select individuals and its salvation entails deliverance from the lower constituents of the human, not only from the carnal or material body but also from the soul. Such complete deliverance from this life is required because the spiritual element is a total stranger imprisoned in the intrinsically evil world of matter.

Theologians from Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus on have strongly resisted the influence of such Gnostic motifs in Christian thought and practice. But the pattern represented in even the most extreme Gnostic formulations is still a recurrent one in Christian piety. The believer is a stranger in an utterly fallen world; and salvation is release from this world—often through correct acknowledgement of the truths of faith—for existence in heaven with God.

This representation of salvation as individual existence in heaven is not, of course, the only pattern in Christian piety. Nor are the various patterns

mutually exclusive. In medieval piety, for example, confidence in a heavenly destiny for the faithful continued as a significant theme. But the affirmation of the incarnation also authorized very concrete and specific interest in the location of divine power in this world. As my colleague Margaret Miles argues persuasively in her *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), this emphatic interest in the particularity of incarnation informs and structures quite diverse expressions of medieval piety: enthusiastic attraction to miracles as sensible evidence of the irruption of the activity of God into particular human beings or places or objects worthy of veneration; excitement about pilgrimages, especially to the Holy Land; even the attention of theologians to carefully defining exactly how the divine is present in the material form of the eucharistic elements.

The great diversity in medieval piety illustrates the multiplicity of patterns of Christian reflection and action in even a nominally unified period. Similarly, in our own time multiple patterns that have dominated Christian traditions continue to be very much in evidence. In

particular, the representation of the goal of life as individual salvation in a heavenly or divine realm sharply contrasted to earthly existence in space and time continues to exercise a powerful hold on the religious imagination. But less traditional interpretations of humanity in relation to the ultimate conditions of human existence have become increasingly prevalent as well.

Such less traditional interpretations are continuous with patterns of the past. To note those continuities illuminates both the historical sources and the contemporary power of quite diverse positions. But despite undeniable continuities, there are also striking and significant shifts in interpretation. We see both the continuities and the systematic shifts if we look at contemporary variations on the themes of Gnostic otherworldliness and medieval incarnationalism.

In the case of the Gnostic pattern, definite continuities are evident in many of the forms of modern individualism. The true self is defined in sharp contrast to dynamics of ordinary life. This true self is a project to be achieved, not an historical given. Consequently, individuals must become free from their bondage to personal ties, social roles, and cultural expectations. Precisely in this liberation from the ordinary, the authentic person attains to self-conscious identity and individuality.

But despite this continuity in emphasis on the imperative to free the truly human from its imprisonment in the mundane, there is a decisive shift in many contemporary adaptations of this Gnostic pattern. The shift has to do with the ultimate goal or context for the human. That shift is most stark or dramatic in the explicitly atheistic forms of modern existentialism. In this case, the individual is portrayed as struggling in a hostile or at best indifferent universe to create whatever meaning or value is attainable. Thus atheistic existentialism affirms the highly individualistic conception of the self developed as the human correlate of an utterly transcendent heaven or God while at the same time repudiating as misguided or at least outdated every belief in the existence of such an ultimate.

Contemporary Christian theology and piety only infrequently identify with this existentialist denial of the existence of God—although there are major post-Enlightenment theologians who have argued that the divine is not a being

and that, therefore, to speak of the existence of God is conceptually indefensible. But even apart from this contention, post-Enlightenment theology and piety still exemplify a decisive shift from the Gnostic pattern. As in atheistic existentialism so in post-Enlightenment Christian commitment, there are powerful currents that run counter to the other-worldly tendencies of much traditional piety. In contrast to the Gnostic motif of spiritual escape from matter and its counterpart in Christian piety of individual salvation in heaven, these currents are programmatically this-worldly in orientation even when they are highly individualistic. Consequently the goal of the religious life becomes authenticity here and now in response to an ever-present divine invitation or obedience in this life to the call of God to faithful discipleship. In short, the Gnostic pattern continues to be evident in a strongly individualistic emphasis, but its characteristic otherworldliness with reference to either a heavenly realm or the divine is strikingly absent.

Like the Gnostic pattern, the orientation of medieval incarnationalism also continues to be represented even as it is very significantly changed. The insistence in the incarnational pattern

that divine power is effective in this world is also present in much contemporary Christian commitment. But along with continuity in this commitment, there is a very significant shift in the location of the divine power.

The fate of the category of miracle in the modern period may serve to epitomize the change. While for medieval piety the category of miracle referred to specific sensible evidence of the activity of God in particular persons or places or objects, for contemporary faith the term more characteristically has far greater generality of reference. God is affirmed as the sustaining power of the universe and is praised for the beauty, regularity, and dependability of the cosmos. Even the most secular of our contemporaries may be heard to exclaim, "Why, it's a miracle!" But whether secular or religious, fewer and fewer of us insist that a sense of wonder at the marvelous and unexpected outcome of a situation requires belief in a special irruption of the activity of God into the natural order of the universe. Instead, if the sustaining and providential activity of God is affirmed, it is construed as operative in and through natural regularities. In this instance, too, there is, then, a pronounced shift away from the traditional pattern of central concern with an otherworldly realm or being. But in contrast to the tendency of existentialism and its Christian counterparts, the pattern in this case emphasizes inclusion and sustenance rather than individual identity over against an alien world.

In effect, contemporary variations on the themes of Gnostic otherworldliness and medieval incarnationalism illustrate two different approaches to appropriating Christian commitments in the face of the collapse for many people of more traditional representations of the goal of life as salvation in a heavenly or divine realm set over against earthly existence. Each approach continues definite motifs or tendencies from those more traditional representations. In its strongly individualistic orientation and its emphasis on defining the self over against a sharply delineated other, contemporary adaptations of the Gnostic pattern continue what have become characteristically Protestant tendencies. Similarly, in strongly affirming the presence of the ultimate in even physical life, adaptations

of the incarnational pattern exemplify the sacramental motifs most fully expressed in Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions.

Despite this significant difference in historical antecedents and in the dominant emphasis of contemporary formulations, the two approaches nonetheless have much in common precisely because both are attempts to appropriate Christian commitments without orienting life to the goal of salvation in a heavenly or divine realm set over against earthly existence. Viewed as responses to the same challenge—namely, the collapse of this traditional religious orientation—the opposed tendencies of the two approaches may be seen to be complementary. The incarnational motif contributes an appreciation of every point and moment of ordinary life as embodying the ultimate and exhibiting the divine glory here and now. Standing in potentially complementary tension with this affirmation are contemporary variants of the Gnostic pattern which resist every unqualified domestication of the divine but also avoid a retreat into otherworldliness.

Positions which seek to actualize this potential complementarity aim at a fusion of motifs not unlike the marriage of apocalyptic and incarnational themes in the early church. The God who was thought to be afar off has come near and is here among us. The future age is dawning right now. And yet God is not completely at home in our world. Instead, God is also the utter

otherness that calls and challenges us in our provincialism and self-righteousness, that unsettles us from our comfortable exclusions of others, that moves us toward the all-inclusive community which alone embodies and expresses the divine, the Holy Spirit.

III. INCARNATION AND APOCALYPTIC IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

As in traditional Christianity, so in other religious communities, among the most potent and persistent of tendencies especially in popular piety is an emphasis on the otherness of the ultimate and a correlative understanding of the goal of the religious life as deliverance from the deficiencies endemic to earthly existence. In short, orientation to a transcendent realm pictured as starkly over against this world is prevalent in an impressive range of religious traditions.

The widespread presence of a strongly otherworldly orientation across religious traditions for at least two thousand years scarcely requires detailed documentation. In Hindu theology and piety, there is a pervasive concern with attaining release (*moksha*) from the recurrent cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) that defines historical life. Despite radical criticism of the prevailing Hindu views on such issues as the status of the self, the dominant tendency in Theravada Buddhism is similarly an orientation toward attaining freedom from *samsara*. In Mahayana Buddhism, the pattern is more complex both because of the contention that the goal of life or the ultimate (*nirvana*) and ordinary historical existence (*samsara*) are one and the same and because of Taoist and other East Asian influences. But there are still widespread and influential Mahayana Buddhist interpretations of the goal of the religious life as deliverance from this defiled world through rebirth in a pure land or the Western paradise, to use imagery common to the numerous schools of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.

Even in traditions with strong reasons for resisting this tendency, interpretations of the goal of the religious life as deliverance from earthly existence emerge again and again. For example, in the case of Islam, despite a thoroughgoing concern to shape the whole of the life of Muslim communities, there is nonetheless a pervasive emphasis on this life as only the preparation for an eternal destiny in heaven or hell. Or in the case of Taoism, a programmatic philosophical rejection of every form of dualism still allows and even encourages a popular preoccupation with immortality as a transformed although still physical existence in one or another paradise.

This concern for attaining salvation in another realm is, of course, no more the only or exclusive pattern in other religious traditions than it is in Christianity. Indeed, in a number of other traditions, this otherworldly orientation is self-consciously juxtaposed or even opposed to a quite different pattern. In general terms, this alternative pattern is a mystically attained and/or philosophically argued monism in which the self and the ultimate are in intimate communion or even completely merged into an undifferentiated unity. Vedantic Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, Taoist wisdom, and some forms of Sufi mysticism exemplify this pattern. In each case, the apparent dualism of popular piety directed toward salvation or release from this life is vigorously resisted. Instead, the whole of reality is suffused with or construed as integral to the ultimate.

At first glance, this alternative pattern seems to break fundamentally with the otherworldly tendency also evident in the same traditions. But on closer review, this initial

impression is misleading. In actuality, each instance of the monistic pattern also represents a certain disengagement from the exigencies of this life. This disengagement is most dramatic in the Vedantic Hindu relegation of phenomenal life to the status of illusion (*maya*). But it is evident in less dramatic forms as well. In the attainment of the Taoist sage or the Sufi mystic, there is a distancing of the self from ordinary historical life. And even in and through the insistence of Zen that the enlightened one returns to the marketplace, insight offers deliverance from entanglements in that arena. In short, orientation to a single unified reality need not entail engagement with the concerns of ordinary historical life.

Yet despite the patterns of preoccupation with attaining release from this world on the one hand and mystical or philosophical orientation to an undifferentiated whole of reality on the other, the same traditions also have resources for decisively shaping this historical life in its particularity. Hindu traditions structure Indian existence in its entirety and celebrate contributions from all stations and stages of life. In its insistence that ultimate reality is precisely this historical realm, Buddhist insight not only offers deliverance from worldly entanglements but also attains the vision to behold the ultimate in every detail of lived experience. Similarly, the Taoist sense of unity with the natural order in turn shapes every human activity. In the case of Islam, otherworldly expectations and mystic rapture still allow powerful affirmation of the religious significance of ordering the corporate life of the obedient community here and now.

Such resources from the Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Islamic communities are further enriched from traditions like Judaism and Confucianism which have characteristically had a strongly ethical and this-worldly orientation. The

prophetic strain in Jewish traditions with its emphasis on living out the covenant with God in concrete social forms is impressive in this connection. So too is the Confucian insistence that the way of heaven is intrinsically concerned with proper and respectful relations among human beings.

The double challenge confronting all these traditions is precisely the one also facing Christian faith today. It is to repudiate every form of Gnosticism and to affirm this world—not just this or that miracle, as in medieval piety, but this world as a whole for what it can be—while at the same time maintaining a sense of profound tension between the ultimate that is emerging and the actual as it is. The challenge is, in short, to live out the union of incarnation and apocalyptic.

Each of the various religious traditions offers ample illustration of family resemblances to the two partners of this union. In a general sense, all those emphases on the disjunction between this world and the ultimate exemplify the tension that characterizes the apocalyptic motif. As for the incarnational motif, the situation is more complex because central Christian traditions—orthodox Christological formulations and medieval piety, to note the two instances already discussed—resist generalization of a category that is construed as irreducibly particular. But insofar as the conception of incarnation is taken to refer to the fundamental affirmation that the ultimate is intimately involved with the world, this motif is present across an impressive range of traditions both in representations of an order that God creates and redeems and also in holistic ontologies that include all of reality in the ultimate.

Because the various religious traditions offer instances of the apocalyptic and

incarnational motifs in this generalized sense, they also provide the resources for developing an integrated position that unites the two tendencies. This position maintains a continuing tension between affirmation of the ultimate in this world on the one hand and criticism directed toward reshaping historical life on the other. The result is not only to affirm this world in general but also to stand critically over against all those specific institutional forces that resist the realization of the ultimate in concrete historical forms.

The critical dimension of positions that express both the apocalyptic and the incarnational motifs is not infrequently directed against religious ideas and institutions. Indeed, the tendencies opposed are the prevailing ones across religious traditions: an otherworldly orientation that disengages from historical life; piety that seeks the irruption of the divine only in this or that arbitrary event or individual; apprehension of reality as a single undifferentiated unity which in effect legitimates every extant historical arrangement; interpretation of religious symbolism so as to reinforce the provincialism and self-righteousness that exclude others. But this resistance within religious communities to views prevalent across traditions is in turn significant for the patterns of collaboration among those communities.

Collaboration among religious communities typically does not attend directly to opposed tendencies either among the traditions or within each of them. Instead, such collaboration focuses on an issue or concern that is a shared one despite differences in orientation and commitment. Global threats like nuclear war or world hunger are the most dramatic instances of issues that elicit shared concern and allow a common stance across religious traditions. But even

when collaboration on such global issues deliberately avoids consideration of differences within and among traditions, its stance is often one of criticism over against the broader society. Thus the development of common positions on global issues in effect participates in resisting the tendencies across religious traditions toward otherworldliness and the uncritical legitimation of existing historical arrangements. Put positively, such collaboration expresses the development of this-worldly and critical tendencies across religious traditions. It is eloquent if often silent testimony to the marriage of the apocalyptic and incarnational motifs.

This marriage of apocalyptic and incarnational motifs in a variety of traditions is certainly significant for a consideration of Christology in the context of religious pluralism. It indicates that in other traditions, too, the ultimate may be apprehended as intimately involved with but not completely at home in this world, as integrally united with the human even, or especially, in its suffering action toward a finally all-inclusive community. This shared apprehension of the human and the ultimate constitutes substantial common ground from which to resist the socially uncritical and otherworldly tendencies prevalent in both Christian and other religious traditions. Thus for this approach to Christology, the context of religious pluralism offers not only a host of new positions but also the prospect of allies in other traditions who share a common commitment to inclusive community.