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The Incarnation and the Cosmic Christ

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Some of the most remarkable passages of christological reflection in the New Testament speak of the relevance of Jesus Christ not only to other humans, but also to the whole of the nonhuman creation (especially Col. 1:15-20; Eph. 1:9-10; cf. also 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:2-3; Rev. 3:14). How can we articulate such a relationship today? To put it another way, how should we relate the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ to the presence and activity of God throughout his creation? In approaching this question, we need first to examine the idea of the presence of God in creation and to distinguish the sense in which God is present in incarnation from other forms of divine presence.

Divine Presence—Metaphysical and Personal

For God to be present within his creation, he must relate to creatures who exist in both space and time. What is it about God that enables him to do so? Among the metaphysical attributes of God in

traditional theism, the most obviously relevant are omnipresence and eternity. These, like all the metaphysical attributes, are best understood as affirming that God is not limited as finite creatures are.¹ Creatures are limited by space and time; God is not. The implication is not that God is extended throughout space or throughout time, but that God is free to be present to his creatures anywhere and at any time.

Traditionally, the metaphysical attributes have been taken to exclude their opposites: God cannot be spatial, temporal, weak, passible, and so forth. But this interpretation of them seems itself to be a limit on God's freedom and is difficult to square with many of the claims of Scripture and tradition, not least incarnation. As Karl Barth put it, it makes God his own prisoner.² However, it is possible to interpret the metaphysical attributes as not necessarily excluding their opposites. God is not limited by space, as finite creatures are, but he can also be present in space. God is not limited by time, as finite creatures are, but he can also be present in time. The "also" in these statements is essential: God cannot abandon his transcendence of all creaturely limits, but he can *also* have a presence within such limits. This is what the traditional understanding of incarnation has, in effect, affirmed, though the doctrine of the two natures has perhaps tended to obscure it. But there is no need to limit this approach to the incarnation, in which God has a human life wholly within the limits of human existence. We may be able to say that in other ways, too, God enters into the finite existence of his creatures.

That God in himself is nonspatial and nontemporal has a very important implication for thinking about his presence within

1. Cf. Hans Küng's notion of "the dialectic of the attributes" in *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology*, trans. J. R. Stephenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 45–60.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), IV/1:187.

creation: it means that, whereas all relationships between creatures are mediated by space and time, God is unique in being able to relate immediately to his creatures. (This is what is expressed in the claim that “God is nearer to me than I am to myself.”) In this way, the metaphysical attributes seem to be preconditions for God’s presence within creation, but they do not themselves constitute it. Scripture and tradition do not only affirm that God is present *to* his creatures, but that he can be present *with* and *in* his creatures, suggesting something more like *participation* in their finite existence within time and space. God can and does take part in the spatiotemporal reality of his creation.

This means that to understand the divine presence in the world we must move beyond the metaphysical to the personal freedom of God and the personal attributes (the moral attributes) that characterize his “economic” acts and relationships. God’s presence in the world is not an undifferentiated and constant implication of his nature, as some forms (at least) of pantheism imply. It is personal presence.³ God makes himself present in the world in the freedom of his love (and, in a secondary sense, his wrath). This opens the way for understanding God’s presence not merely as universal, but also as historical and particular. There may be many different forms of God’s presence. They include theophany, vision, encounter, word of address, conversation, inspiration, empowerment, providential care, and sacrament, as well as incarnation. The last is of key significance, but God’s incarnation as Jesus Christ is not necessarily a template for other instances of God’s presence in the world. Rather than making incarnation a model for all forms of divine presence, we need to

3. On the characteristics of personal presence, there is a helpful brief treatment in Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 310–13. They include “an infinite variety of possibilities” (313).

develop a more differentiated understanding of the manifold ways in which God is present with and in this highly variegated creation.

The Uniqueness of Incarnation

The uniqueness of incarnation as a form of divine presence is perhaps most simply stated thus: in incarnation God is not present merely *with* or *in* one or more of his creatures, but *as* the particular human Jesus of Nazareth. To say that God is present in this way, *as* one of his creatures, would in any other instance be idolatry. To put the matter the other way around, incarnation means that Jesus *is* the human presence of the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity. This is the meaning of the hypostatic union, which, in the mainstream theological tradition of churches loyal to Chalcedon, has served to characterize the incarnation as unique. (The so-called Monophysite churches of the East also adhere to the hypostatic union, but the so-called Nestorian churches conceptualize the uniqueness of incarnation differently.)

Whether there could in principle be other incarnations—whether God could be present in the world also as one or more other humans—is a puzzling question, to which we shall return. But entertaining the possibility of a plurality of incarnations⁴ is surely not a fruitful approach to interfaith dialogue, since claims to incarnation in this precise sense are not in fact made by other religions. The key human figures of the various faiths play a variety of religious roles, and the attempt to homogenize them, particularly in the very specifically Christian form of incarnation, can only distort those faiths. Conversely, there is no advantage in assimilating incarnation to the forms of divine presence recognized in other faiths.⁵ A

4. Multiple incarnations are proposed, e.g., by Raymundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 31–61.

particularly interesting case is the difference between the Christian understanding of incarnation and the Hindu notion of *avatars*. Though the latter is sometimes supposed to come very close to the Christian understanding of incarnation, the two are in fact decisively different. It is noteworthy that one scholar of Hinduism states the difference thus: “Where Hindus do think of the co-presence of divinity and humanity, they believe in God-in-man, not God-as-man.”⁶

In the theology of the modern period there has been a recurrent pattern of Christology, expressed in a variety of ways, that understands the presence of God in Jesus as different, not in kind, but in degree from God’s presence in other humans or even in the rest of reality. Jesus may be unique in the degree to which he embodies or responds to the divine presence (though this christological pattern itself presents no difficulty for claims that there are other equally or even more perfect instances of God’s presence in the life of a particular human), but he is not unique in the form of divine presence entailed. It is only in some such modern “degree Christologies” that the term *incarnation* (which derives, of course, from John 1:14) has acquired a wider application. God, in this usage, would be incarnate to different degrees in all humanity or in all reality. Jesus as a supreme instance of divine presence may then be seen as an especially clear revelation of the way in which God is generally present or as an encouragement to other people to seek a similarly perfect relationship

5. John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 415–22, is able to include Jesus in a general category of “saviour figures” only because he argues that “the difference between Jesus Christ and other human beings (including the founders of world religions) is not one of kind but of degree” (415).
6. Chakhravarthi Ram-Prasad, “Hindu Views of Jesus,” in *Jesus in the World’s Faiths: Leading Thinkers from Five Religions Reflect on His Meaning*, ed. Gregory A. Barker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 88. On *avatar* and incarnation, see also Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970); Martien E. Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor or Healer?* trans. Henry and Lucy Jansen (London: Equinox, 2007), 158–63.

with God. When incarnation here retains a quite strong meaning, the result can be that, as for some of the Anglican Modernists of the early twentieth century, the difference between divinity and humanity becomes a matter of degree (God is becoming human throughout the evolutionary process and human history).⁷ Generally, however, the use of the term *incarnation* in a broad sense, characterizing the general way in which God is present in the world, involves a considerable redefinition of the word. Thus John Macquarrie sees incarnation as “a process which began with the creation. . . . [I]t is the progressive presencing and self-manifestation of the Logos in the physical and historical world.”⁸

Special mention should be made here of “Spirit Christology,” since it is necessary to make a distinction. There are two importantly different forms of Spirit Christology. There are Trinitarian Spirit Christologies,⁹ which take for granted that Jesus is the eternal Son incarnate but stress the role of the Holy Spirit in the human relationship of the incarnate Son with his Father. This kind of Spirit Christology corrects the tendency of traditional incarnational Christology to neglect both the inner-Trinitarian role of the Spirit and the fact that the incarnate Son, as fully human, is related to the Father in a human way. However, other Spirit Christologies, such as that of Geoffrey Lampe,¹⁰ substitute the presence of the Spirit in Jesus for the hypostatic union. “Spirit” in this case is simply a term for the presence of God in creation, of which Jesus was a supreme instance. In every such degree Christology, the notion of incarnation loses

7. Arthur Michael Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple* (London: Longmans, 1960), 25 and 69–74.

8. Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ*, 392.

9. E.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1990), 73–94.

10. Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit: The Bampton Lectures, 1976* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977). A rather similar approach was taken by Norman Hook, *Christ in the Twentieth Century: A Spirit Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), a book to which, surprisingly, Lampe does not refer.

the specific meaning it has in the mainstream Christian tradition: the presence of God, not merely *in*, but *as* the human person Jesus.

To claim that incarnation is a unique form of divine presence, realized only in Jesus, is not to claim that it is *unrelated* to other forms of divine presence. For example, the Greek Fathers and the Orthodox tradition even speak of the “divinization” (*theosis*) of humans as something that is enabled by the incarnation, but this human participation in the divine life is not equated with the incarnation itself, and the difference resides not in the degree of divine presence but in the difference in kind that the hypostatic union represents.

If degree Christology is considered “low” by contrast with incarnational Christology in the traditional sense, characterized as “high,” then, in accordance with a common view of the early development of Christology from low to high, one might expect the earliest Christology or Christologies to have been forms of degree Christology. But, even within the historical account of christological development given by this common view, this is not the case. It is quite clear that from the beginning Jesus was distinguished from other godly people primarily by a *unique function* that he fulfilled on God’s behalf (as Messiah, Savior, Lord). Even if purely functional, this is a difference of kind, not degree. In my own revisionist account of early christological development,¹¹ I have argued that the form of Christology fundamental to all the New Testament texts is a “Christology of divine identity” in which Jesus was seen as belonging to the unique identity of the God of Israel. In Jewish theology, certain divine functions (notably the creation of all things and sovereignty over all things) belonged inalienably to God. When Jesus was believed (as he was, unquestionably, from a very early date) to be seated beside God on the throne of the universe, uniquely

11. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

participating in the unique divine sovereignty over all things, he was much more than a human Messiah. He shared the unique divine identity. This alone accounts for the worship of Jesus by Jewish Christians who had no intention of departing from the Jewish monotheism that understood worship as appropriate only for the one God. Then the notion of personal preexistence, again attributed uniquely among humans to Jesus at an early stage of christological development, enabled the way Jesus participated in the unique divine identity to be conceptualized as incarnation.

The Incarnation as God's Loving Self-Identification with All People

God is not incarnate *in* all other reality, but he is incarnate *for* all other reality. At this point I shall confine the discussion to humans, postponing until later the more difficult question of the relevance of Jesus to the nonhuman creation. God's incarnate presence as Jesus of Nazareth can be understood as both revelatory and salvific, though the two are very closely connected.

Revelation in the biblical tradition requires that God give himself an identity in this world by which he may be known.¹² Only in this way can the infinite God be identified. In the Hebrew Bible, by electing the patriarchs he becomes known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and by choosing Israel as his own people he becomes known as Israel's God. At the same time, he gives to his people a personal name (YHWH) by which he can be identified and invoked. He gives himself a localized presence in the temple, where he is accessible to those who know him by name. In this self-identification of God as Israel's God he, in a sense, *particularizes* himself and does so by *identifying with* a worldly reality. Of course, he remains the

12. For a fuller exposition of the ideas in this section, see Richard Bauckham, "Jesus the Revelation of God," in *Divine Revelation*, ed. Paul Avis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 174–200.

universal God, and his association of himself with Israel is not exclusive or exhaustive. But he gives himself the particular identity as YHWH, Israel's God, not only in order to be known to Israel but also in order to be known to all the nations. His particular identity has universal relevance. The nations are to come to know him as Israel's God in order to know him also as their own God.

Incarnation involves a more radical particularization of God as well as a step from identifying *with* a worldly reality (Israel) to identifying *as* a worldly reality (Jesus). God gives himself the identity of the human Jesus and thereby also the Trinitarian identity entailed in being the God of Jesus: he is the Father of Jesus Christ, the Son incarnate as Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. God gives himself a new name—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—by which he may be known. But once again this particularization of God has universal relevance. God becomes incarnate as one human in order to be known to all humans.

God's presence in incarnation is salvific because in this way God is *with* all people. As God incarnate, Jesus is "God with us" (Immanuel), a phrase that has rich resonances from occasions throughout the Hebrew Bible when God promises to be *with* his people (e.g., Exod. 3:12; 33:14; Ps. 23:4; Isa. 41:10). This is God's presence in intimate, loving, and salvific relationship. The incarnation makes God present for all people in the most radically self-involving way: *as* a human being *with* other human beings.

Jesus, as fully human, enjoys genetic continuity with the whole human race and shares all sorts of features of the common life of humanity. But incarnation is more than that; it is the personal and intentional presence of God. It is God's unique act of loving solidarity with all people. The category of loving identification with others is very useful at this point. This is the kind of love that is not only benevolent toward the other but enters empathetically into the

other's experience and may even share the material circumstances of the other. It is the most radical kind of being *with*. Not only is God's act of incarnation itself an expression of this kind of love, but also it is an essential feature of incarnation that Jesus practices this kind of love for others throughout his life and ministry up to and including the cross. From his baptism to the cross, there is a process of self-identification with humanity not merely as such, but in the concrete varieties of the human condition, especially in the most needy of conditions, and finally in the extreme degradation and abandonment of death on a Roman cross. This practice of self-identifying love is the way Jesus brings the love of God into the lives of others, including even the most godless and the most godforsaken.

Thus we should not suppose that the incarnation somehow automatically or by some quasi-physical process affects other human beings. God's love must reach people in a personal way, and its expression in the personal love of Jesus for others enables that in the most fully embodied way. Of course, during his lifetime Jesus' loving identification could in practice only be with those he personally encountered, but in principle it was an open identification with any and all. Paul, who never knew the earthly Jesus, can even say that the Son of God "loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20), as though Jesus had Paul in mind on his way to Golgotha. Through his resurrection and the presence of his Spirit, Jesus' loving identification with others becomes available to all. It is an identification that is open for all and effective for all who accept it by identifying themselves with Jesus. Thus God's incarnate presence as Jesus enables God's presence—not *as*, but *with* and *in* the community of Christian believers.

The Incarnation and the Nonhuman Creation

As Niels Gregersen¹³ and Elizabeth Johnson,¹⁴ among others,¹⁵ have rightly insisted, the incarnation makes the incarnate One integrally part not only of the human race, but also of the whole of this material reality—not only animals (with whom Jesus shares genetic continuity) but also plants and inanimate nature. This is wholly coherent with the biblical view that redemption is as wide as creation, that it does not abstract humans from their intrinsic and reciprocal connections with the rest of creation, and that it will involve the renewal of the whole creation through participation in the eternal life of God.¹⁶ The problem is how to conceptualize the effect of the incarnation in the nonhuman creation. By analogy with the human creation, we should surely expect this to be a matter of God's loving personal presence with and in his nonhuman creatures, but with the difference that it is not in their nature to respond to God's love in a self-conscious way.

Difficult as the “cosmic Christ” passages in the New Testament are, what they evidently intend to say is that the preexistent One who was active in the creation of all things and remains active in the sustaining of all things in life and order is the same One who became incarnate as Jesus. Some recent scholars¹⁷ have strongly questioned

13. Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog* 40 (2001): 192–207.

14. Elizabeth Johnson, “Deep Christology,” in *From Logos to Christos: Essays in Christology in Honour of Joanne McWilliam*, ed. Ellen M. Leonard and Kate Merriman (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2009).

15. Moltmann's account of the relationship of Jesus Christ to the nonhuman creation does not stress incarnation, but focuses on the cross and the resurrection: *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 193–95 and 252–56.

16. I have expounded this theme in Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), ch. 5.

17. Gordon D. Fee, “St Paul and the Incarnation: A Reassessment of the Data,” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 72–79; Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 595–630;

the prevalent view that these passages identify the preexistent Christ with the Jewish figure of personified Wisdom, even if some language has been borrowed from traditional descriptions of Wisdom. Rather, in the Pauline passages and Hebrews, the dominant image is of the lordship of the preexistent Christ over and in creation, understood as a precondition of the lordship of the risen and exalted Christ over all things. Certainly, we should not read into these texts the idea of a pervading principle of rationality and order.¹⁸ Interestingly, Athanasius, who in his *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* develops at length the idea of the cosmic role of the Word in creation and providence (and regards it as of considerable importance for understanding the incarnation), avoids any notion of an impersonal principle of rationality and order, speaking throughout of the personal agency of the Word. For Athanasius, the important point is the appropriateness of the fact that the world's redeemer is the one who created and sustains and governs it. The emphasis on the cosmic role of the Word also outlaws any idea that the incarnation is the entry into creation of one previously absent. Nor is it a more concentrated form of the same sort of presence. It is a new kind of presence.

The most easily intelligible way to understand the cosmic effect of the incarnation would be to focus on the healing of the human relationship to the nonhuman creation that should result from the redemptive transformation of humans. Certainly Romans 8:19–23

Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

18. The extent to which Platonic-Stoic cosmology lies in the background of Col. 1:15–20 is debatable; cf. Vicky S. Balabanski, "Hellenistic Cosmology and the Letter to the Colossians: Towards an Ecological Hermeneutic," in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate, and Francesca Stavropoulou (London: T&T Clark [Continuum], 2010), 94–107. However, I think the language is appropriated to express a Christology framed in terms of biblical notions of creation and redemption rather than with a view to identifying Christ with a cosmological principle of immanent divine reason.

indicates that the creation awaits the full salvation of humans in order to obtain its own liberation from bondage.¹⁹ Humans, we might say, who experience God's loving solidarity with them in Christ should also share in God's loving solidarity with others, both human and nonhuman. This kind of transformation of the way humans relate to other creatures is surely *at least* what the cosmic effects of the incarnation entail, but it is doubtful that it adequately represents what the biblical texts—enigmatically and imaginatively—seem to evoke. There are, of course, hermeneutical difficulties in moving from the Bible's "mythological" or, as it may be preferable to say, "imaginative" view of the cosmos to a contemporary scientific view. But the passages about the "cosmic Christ" seem to require us to think of the effect of the incarnation on "all things" in wider terms than simply as mediated by redeemed human beings.²⁰ The question of how to envisage the relationship between the incarnate and exalted Christ and the creation as a whole has not often been addressed at any length in the history of Christian theology. One answer that has had some currency in the tradition will provide at least a starting point for further exploration.

Jesus Christ as Microcosm of Creation?

One way in which Christ has been understood as related to the whole of creation, precisely in his humanity, employs the idea of the human as microcosm, a small-scale version of the whole cosmos. This idea was popular in late antiquity,²¹ and was influentially formulated for

19. In *Bible and Ecology*, 92–102, I have argued that this passage does not depict the effect of the fall on the nonhuman creation but rather alludes to passages in the Prophets that depict nature devastated as a result of human sin. See also Jonathan Moo, "Romans 8.19–22 and Isaiah's Cosmic Covenant," *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008): 74–89.

20. Cf. David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 89–96.

21. It first appears clearly in Aristotle, *Physics* 252b:26–29 (8.2).

the Western Christian tradition by Gregory the Great. He divided creation into four levels of being, in all of which humans share:

Stones exist but are not alive; trees exist and are alive but have no feeling; brute animals exist, they are alive and have feeling, but they have no understanding. Finally angels exist. They are alive, possess feeling and understanding. Human beings have something in common with every creature. They share existence with stones, like trees they are alive, like animals, they feel, and like the angels, they have understanding. If human beings, then, have something in common with every creature, in some sense human beings are every creature.²²

Gregory himself did not put this idea to christological use, but one later theologian who explicitly borrowed it for such a purpose was the great Franciscan theologian Bonaventura. Connecting the transfiguration of Jesus with Wisd. of Sol. 16:25, which refers to the transfiguration of all things, Bonaventura writes:

Christ, as a human being, shares with all creatures; “Indeed, he possesses being with rocks, lives among the plants, senses with animals, and understands with angels.” Since Christ, as a human being, has something from all of creation, and was transfigured, all is said to be transfigured in him.²³

Maximus the Confessor, in this respect the most influential theologian in the Eastern Christian tradition, has a more complex understanding of the human as microcosm. The whole of reality, he explains, is categorized by five divisions:²⁴ (1) between uncreated and created being; (2) within created being, between what is perceived

22. Gregory the Great, “Hom. in Evang. 29,” in *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 227. Gregory is explaining Mark 16:15: “Preach the gospel to every creature” (KJV).

23. Bonaventura, “Sermones dominicales 9.12,” in *The Sunday Sermons of St. Bonaventure*, Bonaventure Texts in Translation Series 12, trans. Timothy J. Johnson, ed. Robert J. Karris (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2008), 217.

24. As Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 72, points out, he adapts this pattern from Gregory of Nyssa.

by the mind and what is perceived by the senses; (3) within the sensible realm, between heaven and earth; (4) within earth, between paradise and the inhabited world; (5) within humanity, between male and female. Unlike Gregory's scheme, this one does not attempt to show how humans embody the levels of sensible being below them (stones, plants, and animals). Its concern is rather to show that the human, as it ascends the ladder of being to unity in love with God, straddles each division of being, uniting the extremities in each case. Indeed, humans were created for this role, "as a kind of natural bond mediating between the universal poles through their proper parts, and leading into unity in itself those things that are naturally set apart from one another by a great interval."²⁵ Humanity failed to fulfill this God-given task of unifying the cosmos, but Christ was incarnate in human nature in order to do so.²⁶ We should note that, in Maximus's cosmology, the preincarnate Logos is already intrinsically connected with every kind of creature and every individual creature by their created *logoi*. But it is only through incarnation as a human being that the Logos can "recapitulate" the whole cosmos in himself, bringing it into unity with itself and into union with God.

Is the notion of the human as microcosm still viable in the twenty-first century in the light of evolutionary science?²⁷ In fact, a remarkably close equivalent has been proposed on the basis of emergence theory, which is a way of conceptualizing the appearance of novelty in the evolutionary process that many have found

25. Maximus, *Ambigua* 41, trans. Louth, *Maximus*, 157.

26. Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102–3.

27. Another modern idea that looks like a version of the old "humanity as microcosm" notion is that in humanity nature becomes conscious of itself (e.g., Karl Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 5:169). A "nature" that can be conscious of itself is no more than an abstraction. Cf. also Ilia Delio (echoing Teilhard de Chardin), in *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011): "We are evolution become conscious of itself."

especially congenial to the task of relating science and Christian theology.²⁸ Emergence theory, while not necessarily committed to any particular explanation of evolutionary development, proposes that at certain points new functions and properties arise that are not reducible to earlier functions and properties. The emergent level of life is dependent on the older, with the laws that govern it, but also has its own laws that structure it and cannot be simply deduced from the former. Emergence, in this sense, points to real innovation that entails discontinuity as well as continuity in the evolutionary process. Particularly important for reflection on Christology is that emergence theory understands evolution to have produced a hierarchy of levels of being in which the higher levels do not supersede or even merely rest upon the lower levels but incorporate them. The higher level has a feedback effect on the lower levels that it encloses.²⁹ (The use of the term *hierarchy*, along with talk of *higher* and *lower* levels, is not evaluative as such. It merely indicates that the levels are successive—each building on the earlier—and cumulative in that each incorporates the preceding levels.)

This is how Arthur Peacocke, in a way that closely parallels the pattern of thought we have observed in Gregory the Great and Bonaventura, proposes that we understand the humanity of Jesus Christ:

Human beings can be regarded as consisting of and operating at various levels (the physical, biological, behavioural), which are the foci of the different sciences; these levels emerge into that of human culture and its

28. E.g., Arthur Peacocke, *God and the New Biology* (London: Dent, 1986), 50–55; Peacocke, *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 12–16; Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Emergence: What is at Stake for Religious Reflection?” in *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*, ed. Philip Clayton and Paul Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 279–302.

29. For extensive discussion of the idea of emergence, see the essays collected in *The Re-Emergence*, ed. Clayton and Davies; and in *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, ed. Nancey Murphy and William R. Stoeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

products. . . . Jesus the Christ throws new light on the deeper meaning of the multiple levels of the created world, since these levels were present in him and most of them came into existence through evolution well before the species, *Homo sapiens*, to which he himself belonged. Thus the significance and potentiality of all levels of creation may be said to have been unfolded in Jesus the Christ.³⁰

Conor Cunningham has explicitly connected this kind of emergence theory with the patristic talk of “recapitulation” and the human as “microcosm,” though with reference to human nature rather than explicitly to Christology.³¹

Peacocke does not, in this context, specify the levels of being,³² though elsewhere he takes over Ledyard Stebbins’s definition of eight levels of biological complexity, of which humans form the last.³³ John Maynard Smith and Eörs Szathmáry have argued for a different list of eight “major transitions,” in which humans are again the product of the last. Their criteria for such transitions were aggregation (the successive incorporation of smaller units into larger wholes) and changes in the way information is stored and transmitted.³⁴ Harold Morowitz covers the same ground in seventeen “steps” in emergent evolution.³⁵ Clearly, defining an emergent level of evolution is not straightforward, and some of these theories are more concerned than others with the means by which such transitions are made. For

30. Peacocke, *All That Is*, 39–40; see also Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, 125–27.

31. Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 161, 163, 216, 242, 375.

32. In *All That Is*, 13, he lists “organelle, cell, multi-cellular organism, ecosystem, etc.”

33. Peacocke, *God and the New Biology*, 144–45, drawing on G. Ledyard Stebbins, *The Basis of Progressive Evolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

34. Lucio Vinicius, *Modular Evolution: How Natural Selection Produces Biological Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27–32, drawing on John Maynard Smith and Eörs Szathmáry, *The Major Transitions in Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

35. Harold J. Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 3. Morowitz enumerates twenty-eight steps that go all the way from the Big Bang to “the emergence of the spirit” in humans. But in our present context, we are concerned only with his seventeen steps from the beginning of life on earth to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*.

our present purposes—that is, to determine whether the theory of emergence provides a viable scientific equivalent to the traditional idea of the human as microcosm—it does not matter that some transitions have occurred many times in the history of nature (this belongs to the phenomenon of convergence)³⁶ while others have occurred only once. What matters is whether levels can be distinguished that both adequately cover the diversity of living things produced by evolution and also form a single sequence of successive stages. Only if this is the case could one argue that all the levels of life are present in humans and thereby, as Peacocke claims, in Jesus Christ.

Jacob Klapwijk, in his Christian philosophy of emergent evolution (which is scientifically well-informed),³⁷ is not concerned with Christology (which is beyond the scope of his “empirical philosophy”), but he is very concerned to argue that humans stand at the highest level of “a hierarchy of transcending totality structures,” in which each emergent mode of being transforms and integrates the preceding. He proposes five organizational levels of nature, which represent not just a quantitative increase of complexity³⁸ but qualitative advance from one ontological level to another. They are: (1) physical; (2) biotic; (3) vegetative (characterized by the ability to develop specialized body forms that is common to plants and animals); (4) sensitive (characterized by sensory perception and inner experience, which are common to animals and humans); and (5) mental (this labels the uniqueness of humans as self-conscious and spiritual persons). It is crucial to this scheme that each successive level

36. David L. Hull, “Progress in Ideas of Progress,” in *Evolutionary Progress*, ed. Matthew H. Nitecki (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 33–34.

37. Jacob Klapwijk, *Purpose in the Living World? Creation and Emergent Evolution*, ed. and trans. Harry Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

38. “Higher levels are often more complex, but this is largely the case because they have the lower echelons as their indispensable infrastructure” (Klapwijk, *Purpose in the Living World?* 114).

shares the distinctive properties of the preceding level(s) while also having its own properties that are novel and irreducible. It is easy to see that, in this scheme, humans participate in all the preceding levels of being, and that the scheme is remarkably similar to the one we observed in Gregory the Great and Bonaventura. (Klapwijk does not indicate any awareness of this similarity.)

Klapwijk is aware that his “fivefold division is in all probability far too simple a representation of the topic.”³⁹ For our purposes, this is not a problem if it means simply that the levels need to be further subdivided. (For example, the fivefold scheme certainly does not do justice to the development of consciousness in animals prior to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*.) But it would be a serious problem if the notion of a single sequence of levels could not be maintained. The question that has to be asked is, Might there not be other modes of being that emerge in parallel with those that form this scheme’s sequence, rather than as additional stages within the sequence? For example, the vegetative level is defined by properties common to plants and animals, though the latter also have novel properties that put them on the sensitive level. But suppose the development of photosynthesis—the clearest defining characteristic of the plant kingdom, a property that animals do not have—were considered a transition to a new level of being, as Klapwijk admits might be the case.⁴⁰ In this case, the hierarchy of being would branch. Crucially for our purposes, even if humans were still considered to constitute a higher ontological level than plants, they could no longer be regarded as subsuming in themselves the defining properties of each lower level. This would require some modification of Klapwijk’s philosophy, but it would be fatal for any attempt to find in emergence theory a scientific equivalent to the idea of humans as microcosm.⁴¹

39. Klapwijk, *Purpose in the Living World?* 259.

40. Klapwijk, *Purpose in the Living World?* 262.

Supposing, however, that it were successfully argued that a “branching” development, such as photosynthesis, did not constitute the emergence of a truly new ontological level of being, the same problem would still arise in a different form. In what sense would Jesus Christ, by virtue of his human nature, participate in the life of, for example, trees? The commonality—in Klapwijk’s scheme, the vegetative level of being—is quite minimal. He shares none of the characteristics that are distinctive of trees as trees: photosynthesis, rootedness in the earth, wood. Conversely, they share nothing truly characteristic of human nature. The commonality, while it may constitute an ontological level, is surely altogether too general to make the incarnation as such a participation in the life of trees. The same observation could surely be made in countless other instances, not only among members of the plant kingdom. The problem always existed in the idea of the human as microcosm but was not perceived. This was partly because the vast diversity of living creatures (not to mention inanimate things) was not appreciated before modern times, and partly because of a tendency in the past to understand other creatures in human categories.

It does not help to put the matter in terms of evolutionary ancestry rather than ontological levels of being.⁴² To find the point of connection between the human and the tree requires going back aeons in the process of evolution, and from this point of connection both lines of development, that which led to humans and that which led to trees, continued. Viewed in light of the concrete realities of

41. Dieter Wandschneider argues that there is a progression from plants to herbivores because, although the latter do not photosynthesize, they depend on plants for food, and so “what has been attained at one level is . . . indirectly available at the following level.” Dieter Wandschneider, “On the Problem of Direction and Goal in Biological Evolution,” in *Darwinism and Philosophy*, ed. Vittorio Hösle and Christian Illies (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 199–200. However, this is a different sort of argument from one that relies on emergence theory.

42. Cf. Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea*, 375.

humans and trees, the connection is a remote one. The human does not “recapitulate” the development of trees.

Incarnation in Ecological Perspective

The failure of the line of thought attempted in the last section is connected with the fact that it conceives the natural world too exclusively in terms of the development of kingdoms and species across time. It neglects the interrelatedness of kingdoms and species in ecosystems and, ultimately, the whole ecosystem that comprises the whole of creation on this planet at any one time or period. In order to be related to all other species, humans do not need somehow and uniquely to sum up all other created natures in their own nature. Humans are a part of the interdependent web of life (and even of inanimate nature), and human history, though sometimes misunderstood as a process of growing independence from the rest of the natural world, has actually increased the scope and complexity of human interconnectedness with the whole of the natural world on earth. Such interconnectedness also extends backward through the history of nature, as the human use of fossil fuels illustrates.

There is something of a parallel in this respect between the human and the cosmic aspects of incarnation. The taking of human nature by the eternal Son of God constitutes a fundamental level of commonality with other humans that is essential to participation in the human world. But it is also no more than the basis for the lived life of Jesus, his participation in human society, his manifold relationships with other humans, and what becomes, through his resurrection, his universal relatedness to all humanity. Similarly, it is important that he shares physicality with all creatures in this world, biotic life with all living creatures, and so forth, but this is no more than his essential point of entry into the dynamic web of relationships that constitute the cosmos. It is not only his physical solidarity with all