



Incarnation and Parousia¹ – Ultimate “I,” Ultimate “Thou”

WHEN THE Latin church father Tertullian (160?-230?) struggled to define the Trinity, he simply tried to explain three definitive roles for the one, unique divine Personality we know as Jesus Christ. All the properties and prerogatives ascribed to deity rightfully belong to him in the fullest and most unique sense. Christ declared that he is the “I AM”² – YHWH, ultimate Being. He alone is the Creator of all that is – not as an agent of someone else’s purpose but solely by his own purpose.

In the historical beginning Jesus Christ acted as Creator to bring the universe into being. “He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth” (Psalm 33:9).³ As the non-commandable Creator, he brought forth commandable creatures. Thus emerged the hierarchical or vertical order of transcendent Creator and of subordinate creature under law. Any departure from this vertical relationship was evil.

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However, the vertical order was only the historical beginning of God’s purpose to bring into being the human “self.” For by its very nature the “self” can only be a self with an “other.” Furthermore, if that “self” is to fully realize selfhood, it requires a fully equal, not a subordinate, “other.” Therefore, Christ, the non-commandable Creator, acted in history to embrace his own commandable Creation. Without the loss of any of his virtues, attributes or prerogatives, his incarnational entry⁴ “made room for” and involved his acceptance of commandable time and space. Likewise, the incarnation involved his acceptance of matter and energy, of living form and substance, of conscious and unconscious mankind as his own reality. In the words of the Council of Chakedon, Jesus Christ was both “truly God” and “truly man” in one Person.⁵ By this means Christ recapitulated the entire history of the universe and took the “entropic”⁶ universe to its inevitable death.

A New Creation

At his resurrection Christ did not come forth as the pre-incarnate God. He did not come forth as man the animal. Neither did he rise dualistically as both God and man. Rather, by his resurrection Christ came forth as a New Creation — the transcendent,⁷ eternally living, creative *Human Self* (“Spirit”; cf. 1 Corinthians

15:45; 2 Corinthians 3:17). In the resurrection Christ is the true historical Adam, the “Son of Man” (Son of the Earth).⁸ The Adam of the Genesis story is but the mythical anticipation of this mighty incarnational truth. Now Jesus transcends even the image of God (*imago dei*). As the early church father St. Basil of Caesarea (300?-379?) long ago declared, “Christ is . . . the model of what it means to be human, the mirror in which I see reflected my own true face, and the incarnation . . . is at the same time the ‘birthday’ of the human race.”⁹

This incarnational human reality requires an equal or horizontal “other.” That is, Christ needed a friend whom he could look in the eye and walk and talk with as an equal. As Jesus said to his disciples, “Henceforth I call you not servants . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15).

The implications for humanity in this statement are almost beyond belief. The transcendent humanity of Christ requires a comparable “other.” Such an “other” must be capable of the same options, choices, relationships, true selfhood and therefore genuine being by which he characterizes himself. By his resurrection Jesus has assured us that he is our ultimate “Other.” By the same token he has assured us that we are to be his ultimate “other.” It follows that we are to be fully and freely “others” to each other — horizontal “others” looking upon each other as equals with acceptance and good will.

Therefore, the resurrection of Christ is a foretaste and anticipation of the resurrection of mankind to full humanity. In this new, horizontal, relational order of the “I and thou,” any departure from horizontal relationships is evil. That is why Jesus himself repeatedly declared that sin really exists only in light of the incarnation:

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. — John 15:22.

If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin. — John 15:24.

If you were blind, you would have no guilt. — John 9:41.

That is why Paul later said, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23) — for faith is the non-commandable expression of relational selves. Faith does not and cannot exist as an expression of the commandable, vertical order.

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The Paradox of This Transitional Age

While it is true, as Richard Rhem says, that the “incarnation embraces every moment of the history of the universe,”¹⁰ from a historical perspective mankind (male and female) lives in an age between the old vertical order of transcendent Creator/subordinate creature and the new horizontal order of transcendently relational “I and thou”¹¹ human selves. In this transitional age, as commandable creatures we sin if we depart from the vertical order of law. In this transitional age, as non-commandable selves we also sin if we depart from the horizontal relational order of the “I and thou.”

Inevitably, there is a fierce tension between the demands of the vertical order of law and the invitation to the horizontal order of the true human self. The path of history is lined with unnumbered attempts to resolve this tension by collapsing all reality into a monism¹² of one unified whole. Thus, efforts have been made to declare that the universe and all mankind are transcendently divine, as in

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Gnosticism and the New Age movement. Other efforts have been made to abandon transcendency and declare that all mankind is destined to decay and death in an animalized or demonized universe. Still other efforts have been made to mediate transcendency to the creature through postulating such avenues as “self-evidency,” “unconscious divinity,” “divine immanence,” “intangible dimensions,” and “nirvana” (nothingness).^{13,14} Unfortunately, all these efforts represent a denial, deception or imprisonment¹⁵ of the true human self and thus are destined to fail. All of these efforts are ultimately against Christ and his incarnational reality. They all are anti-human and anti-Christ. They all are consciously or unconsciously intent on driving the “death cultures” of mankind to the inevitable suicidal collapse of the present world order politically, economically, socially and culturally. That evil intent is now being disclosed to history and to all mankind. “Nothing is covered that will not be revealed” (Matthew 10:26).

In this transitional age we are necessarily confronted by incompatible orders — the vertical order of Creator/creature and the horizontal order of human selves. We cannot deny or destroy this paradox. Neither can we unilaterally resolve this paradox. However, we can do two things:

1. We can live with this paradox in the “now.” So the writer of the Epistle of Diognetus says:

Though the Christians are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior is more like transients. They take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them any foreign country is a homeland. And any homeland is a foreign country.¹⁶

As Richard John Neuhaus declared, “As it was for them, so it is with us; for they were, and we are, alien citizens.”¹⁷ We are now alien but faithful stewards of the present order.

2. Nevertheless, by non-commandable faith in the transcendent humanity disclosed in the Incarnate One, we can discern that we are moving toward a “not yet.” We are moving to that transcendent order in which all human selves can and will be truly and fully free. That new, transformative order is about to

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be disclosed, for the Incarnate One is soon to appear (Parousia¹⁸ = Second Coming).

The curtain that now conceals the Christ and all those who have preceded us in history — the curtain that hides each of us from his or her true self and from all others; the curtain between the present commandable order and the future non-commandable, truly creative, fully relational human order — is about to be lifted. But Parousia is not a command performance. It is a free, decisional, non-commandable performance. With great expectation and exultation, let us then anticipate the visible and glorious return of the Incarnate One to this world to fully and eternally disclose the transcendent relationship of the ultimate “I,” ultimate “thou.”

— THE EDITOR AND MARY NOLAN LANDRY

Endnotes

1. The Greek word *parousia*, translated, means both “presence” and “coming.”
2. See John 6:35, cf. vv. 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 18, 23, 28; 9:5, 39; 10:7, cf. v. 9; 10:11, cf. v. 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, cf. v. 5; 18:6, cf. vv. 8, 37; Revelation 1:8, cf. vv. 11, 17, 21:6, 22:13; 1:18; cf. Exodus 3:14.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.
4. *Addendum Note*: Subsequent to his incarnational entry, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection involved confronting, overcoming and ultimately terminating and transcending the hierarchical (vertical) attributes of command, possession and power necessarily used by uncreated, self-existent divinity to initiate, advance and administer the proleptic (anticipatory) first or old Creation and old covenant. The new Creation and new covenant of the incarnational God of created, co-existent, free and equitable “human” (horizontal) relationality (John 15:15) is developed in later *Outlook* publications. See especially “The Most Painful Difficulty,” *Outlook* (September/October 2004); “The Divine Predicament,” *Outlook* (January/February 2005); “The Divine Resolution V: Creation and Apocalyptic,” *Outlook* (November/December 2005); “The Divine Resolution VII: Parousias,” *Outlook* (February 2006); “Atonement VII: Transformation,” *Outlook* (September 2006); “The Gospel for the Postmodern World III: The ‘Other Side’ of God,” *Outlook* (January 2008).
5. See Oskar Skarsaune, *Incarnation: Myth or Fact?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), p. 122.

6. The observable universe is thermodynamically moving from greater to lesser energy, from greater to lesser order, from lesser to greater disorder. Therefore, we say that the universe is “entropic.” Metaphorically, it is “moving downhill.” For example, the radiance of the sun will ultimately be extinguished. The earth itself is the final product of stellar combustion. Because the earth depends upon the sun for its energy and order, the earth left to itself will ultimately become a cold, dark, lifeless and alien planet.
7. In the resurrection/Parousia (Second Coming), transcendence no longer implies vertical domination of the Creator over man the creature. Rather, transcendence implies a mutual “I and thou” human creativity that is the ongoing precondition for all other reality. See Stephen E. Erickson, *Human Presence: At the Boundaries of Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).
8. The word “Man” is derived from the Hebrew *adamah*, meaning “earthly.” See Nancy Roth, *A New Christian Yoga* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989), pp. 11, 12.
9. Quoted in A. Peacocke and G. Gillet, *Persons and Personality: A Contemporary Inquiry*, Ian Ramsay Centre Publication, no. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 202.
10. Richard A. Rhem, “Sleeping through a Revolution,” *Perspectives* 6, no. 4 (April 1991): 8-14.
11. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1923) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958).
12. “Monism” is the view that the world (reality) is conceived as a single unified whole.
13. See M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (Sydney, Australia: Century Hutchinson, 1978). This treatise contends that all mankind is unconsciously divine and therefore unconsciously presumably possesses omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. In this view mankind simply needs “a slight Parousaic hit in the head” to awaken him to self-evident reality. Unfortunately, such an “awakening” would leave mankind no option but to engage in eternal physical, mental or emotional self-abuse. This is a “road” wisely left wholly untraveled.
14. See Jerry H. Gill, *Mediated Transcendence: A Postmodern Reflection* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989).
15. See Jan Fennema, “An Encounter between Science and Religion: Preliminary Observations,” in Jan Fennema and Iain Paul, eds., *Science and Religion: One World — Changing Perspectives on Reality* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), p. 14.
16. Quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” *Concordia Journal* 17, no. 3 (July 1991): 285, 295.
17. *Ibid.*
18. See note 1.

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