

ARTHUR PEACOCKE 'God and the New Biology'—an elucidation

Key Words: evolution, immanence, incarnation, transcendence.

I was appreciative of the Editor devoting valuable space in the last issue of S & CB (Vol. 1(2)) to two contributions discussing that collection of articles and essays of mine published over the period 1972 to 1985 that appeared in 1986 as *God and the New Biology* (henceforth, GNB). I am also grateful to him for affording me the opportunity of dispelling some misapprehensions about my position on a number of issues that might arise in the light of some of the comments made by Dr. McGrath.

The various chapters of GNB were originally directed towards particular milieu and were brought together in only a loose framework and such coherence as it has is based on an agenda set by biology rather than by systematic theology. Although it represents my thinking over those years on various aspects of the consequences for theology of developments in the 'new biology', it does not and could not represent most of my reflections on the central affirmations of the Christian faith (our concept of God and of his attributes, God as Trinity, God's interaction with the world, the Incarnation—to mention but a few).¹

I respond to the second essay by Dr. McGrath principally to seek to correct misunderstandings of my position on certain key issues that his article could propagate. He first considers my supposed understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation as manifest in GNB. It is only fair to point out that, apart from an historical account in Chap. 5 of the positive reaction to evolutionary ideas of theologians who emphasised that doctrine, a position with which I am much in sympathy, I refer to it directly in GNB in only three other places, as the index shows. In the first (p. 101), I seek to spell out its implications for our attitude to the natural world and, in the second (p. 124), its significance for our understanding of the role of matter in the sacraments. Only in the third (p. 132), the very last paragraph of the book, do I briefly hint that the affirmation that 'the Word was made flesh' might be fruitfully related to our understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent and to the implicit paradox that this understanding involves. For an overt account of my way of trying to express that mystery of the relation of Jesus to God, referred to as the doctrine of the Incarnation by

¹ An exercise I am attempting in a new work entitled *Theology for a Scientific Age*, the first parts of which should appear in 1990 (Blackwells, Oxford).

succeeding centuries, a reader would have to go to Chapter 6, entitled 'Evolved Man and God Incarnate', of my 1978 Bampton Lectures,² and my thinking has not stood still since then.³

In that book (CWS) I pointed out (p. 227 ff.) that the 'great debate' that was launched by the publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate* and the subsequent ripostes it evoked was defective in not being based on any prior agreement concerning how God is to be thought of as acting in the world, of how we might conceive of God's presence in creation and so how communication might occur between the creator and that part of it that is self-conscious, ourselves. It is on such questions that developments in biology (and indeed also in cosmology and physics) bear acutely. In the course of assessing the theological implications of these developments one is bound to re-consider such widely employed terms as 'transcendence' and 'immanence' for two modes in which God has frequently been conceived as related to the world. However, Dr. McGrath finds in this necessity of mine to use such terms, in company with most authors writing on such matters, a crypto-Hegelianism of which I can only assure him and other readers I am entirely innocent. These terms are widely used in modern discussions concerning God's relation to the world and the apparent paradox of asserting that both are applicable in any talk of God's relation to the world can surely continue without making us all Hegelians? No doubt, Hegel and his successors wrestled with the problem using these terms but we do not have to share either his or their formulations and presuppositions when we do so. Why should Dr. McGrath impose on the rest of us his own pre-suppositions that the use of these terms in any discussion of the Incarnation precludes any belief in the historical specificity and ontological character of the Word being 'made flesh' in Jesus?

For, any use that I, or any one else, might make of the terms 'transcendence' and 'immanence' in trying to cast light on the mystery of the Incarnation need not, and in my case does not, discount in any way the challenge of history that is constituted by the Word-becoming-flesh. That challenge I regard as of crucial significance for the inter-relation of God, humanity and nature. All models of God's relation to the world, notably the biblical ones, that depict God as like a personal agent in relation to the world cannot avoid having implications for how we conceive of the relation between God's transcendence over and immanence in the world. So that, pace Dr. McGrath, I do not see any necessity for engaging with 'Hegelian pre-suppositions' in his (Hegel's) doctrine of the incarnation when employing the terms 'transcendence' and 'immanence' as part of the general coinage of such debate.

For these concepts, and others resulting from attempts to resolve the

² *Creation and the World of Science* Clarendon Press, Oxford, (1979)—henceforth, CWS.

³ Q.v., n.1. and an article (Chap. 2) on 'The Challenge of Science to Theology and the Church', in *The New Faith-Science Debate*, ed. John Mangum (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, and WCC, Geneva (1989)—henceforth CSTC.

apparent paradox between them, might well be related creatively to the central Christian affirmation that 'the Word was made flesh'. This seems to me to be a useful line to pursue in view of the implications for our concept of personal agency of the current understanding of the human person as a psychosomatic unity and of the role of top-down causation in complex systems. These latter, in affecting how we might view the self-transcendence of a person over the body in which he or she is immanent, alter the character of the model of God as personal agent in the world and so of how we might conceive of the Incarnation. So an entirely new discussion, owing nothing directly to Hegel, of the use of 'transcendence' and of 'immanence' in relation to the doctrine of the Incarnation becomes imperative. But none of this could be discussed in GNB in which this doctrine was not a major focus though it plays a larger part in work in preparation for publication.¹

Another of the classical 'heads' of doctrine on which Dr. McGrath focuses in his article is the 'Work of Jesus'. This is, in fact, only glancingly, and certainly not systematically, referred to in parts of GNB. Nevertheless it is true that, for reasons that would appear to readers of other publications of mine,⁴ I find that the classical theories of the atonement, based on Augustinian premises are inadequate to our present perceptions.

The last section of Dr. McGrath's review-essay is concerned with 'The Basis of the Incarnation', a doctrine whose foundations, he suggests, I have eroded in GNB by not stressing its rooting it in the resurrection. But this is entirely to misrepresent my position. As I have pointed out, in GNB I discussed the incarnation directly in only three brief paragraphs and could not—it was not the aim of the volume—attempt to describe its 'basis'. This I, too, certainly locate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as is made quite clear in earlier works of mine.⁵ I am afraid Dr. McGrath has fallen into the well known trap that comes from not following the cardinal rules⁶ of reviewing, namely, of asking: (i) what a book aims to do; (ii) whether the aim was worth having; and (iii) whether the aim has been achieved. A study of the basis of the incarnation was not one of the aims of GNB, which were set out in its Introduction. As for the doctrine itself, surely anyone who does believe that the 'Word was made flesh' in Jesus the Christ has to consider today what models and images can explicate the relation between the continuities the human Jesus has 'in the flesh' with the rest of the living world and the discontinuity implicit in his life, death and resurrection. The reality that is the Word-made-flesh is (and here I agree with what Dr. McGrath seems to be getting at) genuinely new ontologically and necessitates in our thought about it the new irreducible concept of 'incarnation'—a concept, it is worth adding, that like many terms of Christian doctrine is not directly 'biblical', but taken to be implicit in the New Testament.

4 In *Science and the Christian Experiment* Oxford University Press, London, (1971), Chap. 6 (henceforth SCE); CWS Chap. 6: CSTC, pp. 19 ff. and in a forthcoming contribution to a of essays honouring Peter Baelz.

5 SCE, pp. 160 (N.B., misprint, l. 26, for 'indication' read 'vindication'), 167–8 and 221ff.

6 A formulation of Professor Basil Mitchell.

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Indeed this is the very kind of development of new concepts, images, metaphors and models that is continually required to draw out the significance for us today in our thought world of the initial and continuing experience in the church of Jesus the Christ. To do this we cannot but employ our current best insights into nature and humanity that the sciences (including the 'new biology') are providing. I readily accept the unfinished character of much in GNB and in all such exercises, but one can but try in faithfulness to the revelation that is in Christ Jesus.

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