

Introduction

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In contemporary culture, the Christian idea of incarnation stands in a curious twilight. On the one hand, many observers are ready to praise the Christian tradition for being an incarnational faith in which material existence is affirmed from beginning to end: the world of creation is material; God became flesh in Christ; Christian spirituality is sacramental, embedded in material signs; and Christians even expect a resurrection of the body. On the other hand, some of the same observers are critical of the traditional Christian claim that the divine Logos (the eternal Son, Word, or Wisdom of God) became blood and flesh in the life story of Jesus Christ. Is this not the arch-example of a Christian exceptionalism that leads to an ecclesial enclosure of the great Christian idea of God's ongoing incarnation? Why is Jesus not just one of a billion divine incarnations?

The intense symposium behind this volume did indeed start out making room for reflection on the concept of incarnation in its generic form by asking, "Is God incarnate in all that is?" But during our presentations and subsequent deliberations at the Copenhagen

meeting in Elsinore, it became clear that none of us found that a pan-incarnationalism was a workable model for a Christian theology today. We agreed that the focus of our attention should instead be on the relationship between the incarnation in Christ and wider concerns of a theology of creation. It is one thing to say that the incarnate Christ is present *in, with, and for* all created beings (in particular the victims of creation and creativity); it is quite another thing to say that God is incarnate *as* a terrorist attack, *as* a rape, or *as* a natural disaster. These prepositions (introduced into our discussions by Richard Bauckham) became important for opening up further reflections. Thus many of us wanted to say unreservedly that the incarnate Christ (the embodied Logos) was indeed present in all that is, including prior to the coming of Christ, and also in natural and cultural domains outside the scope of Christianity as a historical tradition.

In the heyday of liberal theology in the 1970s, a famous book was published called *The Myth of God Incarnate*. At that time, it was argued that the notion of incarnation was not necessary for expressing the Christian belief in the special God-awareness of Jesus; moreover, any claim of the uniqueness of Christ was seen as intolerable in a pluralistic and multireligious society.¹ Today, the pendulum has swung in favor of speaking of God's incarnation and embodiment. Similarly, there is also a greater sense of the principal differences between the world religions both in the cultural realm and in the life world of the religions themselves. Nowadays, it is believed that a genuine tolerance should tolerate religious specificity instead of seeking too-facile consensus positions. Some speak about a "deep pluralism," according to which religious thinkers and representatives

1. See, respectively, Maurice Wiles, "Christianity without Incarnation?" and John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977), 1–10 and 167–86.

should listen and learn from one another rather than seeking a neutral ground, or even prematurely proclaiming the ultimate identity of all religions.²

This volume does not address religious pluralism as such, but it certainly addresses the question of particularity and universality. The task has been to think *with* the wide scope of the Christian traditions in order to rethink Christology with a special concern for its universal claims and open horizons. What does the incarnation in Christ have to do with the world of star formations, animal suffering, and the restless productivity in nature, as we have come to know cosmic and biological evolution from the sciences? What does God's incarnation in Jesus have to do with the experiences of nameless men and women in the many cultures around the world? And in what sense are deep existential questions, ranging from sparks of joy to terrifying experiences of anxiety, connected to the Christian belief that God has *really* conjoined our material and spiritual conditions for life?

Three Scandals of Particularity

The Christian concept of incarnation has always been a contested area in Christian thought. Since antiquity the Christian view that God's own Word or Logos (the eternal Son) assumed "flesh" in Jesus of Nazareth and "lived among us" (John 1:14) has been seen as scandalous. While the Greeks found the idea of a deity dragged down to the mess of material existence repelling, Jews and Muslims have taken offense at the implication that the Lord of the universe identified with a human being, in particular a person dying on a cross.

2. See, for example, David Griffin, "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identitist, and Deep," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Griffin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 3–38. Otherwise, there is (as far as I can tell) no specific link between "deep pluralism" and "deep incarnation."

The scandal of particularity takes several forms. The first is what we may term the *scandal of materiality*—the scandal for Platonists and other dualists. The second is the *scandal of suffering*—the scandal for religious perfectionists who can't accept the idea that God is involved in the messy lives of human sinners and victims. A third form is the aforementioned *scandal of uniqueness*. All three seem to apply to Christian belief in the Son of God being born of a woman in a dirty manger, drinking and eating with unclean people and dying on a cross together with criminals.

Even if modern intellectuals affirm the great Christian idea that God is involved in and entangled with the messy life of material existence, they may react against the third scandal of particularity. The German Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) spoke of the “ugly great ditch” that he himself could not cross between Jesus as an admirable individual of the past and the metaphysical truths available to any epoch by virtue of their universal rationality: “Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”³ Even if the compass of what Lessing thought of as belonging to the repository of “necessary truths” has in the meantime been shrinking dramatically, his point with respect to history stands, insofar as all historical knowledge is approximate, highly selective, shrouded in ignorance and always under reconstruction. No theologian would therefore today argue that the inner relation between Jesus and God can be “evidenced” by historical methods. All historical reflection can do for us is make more or less plausible a picture of the religious assumptions on which Jesus led his life. Something like God's incarnational presence does not feature in historical descriptions. We are here, as rightly noticed by Lessing, dealing with another genus of knowledge than that

3. G. E. Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Theological Writings*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 53.

provided by historical scholarship about putative historical facts. As Søren Kierkegaard asked on the title page of his *Philosophical Fragments* from 1844, “Can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?”

The short answer is No. Accordingly, the fundamental question of Christology remains the following: What is the relation between the particular life story of Jesus and the universal questions of reality, from cosmos to human existence? It seems that positive answers to this question presuppose that God was indeed present in the life story of Jesus—present even to the point of an identity between Jesus and God’s eternal life. This is what comes to the fore in the strong statement about Jesus Christ in the Letter to the Colossians: “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9).

Beyond the Divide between the Particular and the Universal?

The authors of this volume generally find the dichotomy of universal versus particular unhelpful. Incarnation should neither be seen as a general rule nor as a pure exception. Accordingly, most of us follow other pathways for theological thinking. We take our point of departure in the particularity of the Jesus story (in this sense working “from below”) while seeing the story of the incarnation from cave to cross and resurrection as the story of God’s self-revelation (in this sense “from above”), indeed a divine self-identification that also involves an identification of genuine humanity. In Jesus Christ, the particular and the universal are consistently intertwined, so that we have constant movements between the two poles of the encompassing reality of Jesus Christ: the divine Logos and the world of flesh.

How Christ and world belong together, while also being different, is a question that is still with us today. In theological tradition, one

sometimes meets the simple answer that Christ is universal according to his divinity but particular according to his humanity. This interpretation of the “two natures” doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon from 451 had the advantage—or disadvantage!—that standard concepts of divinity and humanity were left unaltered as they came to Christianity from Greek antiquity, namely as two contrasting realities. God (and the eternal Son of God) is up there; we (and Jesus) are down here. In one rendering of this view, God indeed touched upon and momentarily entered the world of creation in Jesus, but God’s Logos did not conjoin with God’s world of creation at large. The personal union of Jesus Christ is a miraculous exception to the general rule that the infinite and unchangeable God is somewhere else, beyond time and space, while human beings are defined by their spatial and temporal confinements. (It goes without saying that classical Christology is much richer and subtler than this interpretation suggests.)

The liberal strand within Protestantism later came up with a different option. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) argued that God came to mind in the particular life story of Jesus. Jesus had a constant, full, and penetrating awareness of God. Accordingly, he was able to live a life in full congruence with the divine will and to spread his God-awareness among his followers. In this model, the existence of God in Jesus means the existence of a proper God-consciousness in Jesus.⁴ Accordingly, Jesus is Christ in the sense that he was an exemplary parable of who God is and what God wants to do for human beings. Observe that this more modest Christology presupposes that God is not really embodied. God remains outside the

4. As Schleiermacher put it in *The Christian Faith* (1830), § 94: “The Redeemer, then, is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him.” *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 385.

material world, though God may be said to be properly made known in the midst of creation through the particular God-awareness of Jesus.

A third view that is explored and critically discussed in this volume argues that the historical incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth should also inform what a Christian theology can say, and must say, about the presence of divine Logos in the world of creation before and after the advent of Christ. Logos Christology is here not only about a general presence of a nude deity (*logos asarkos*) in creation but about the presence of Christ as the embodied Logos (*logos ensarkos*) in the multifarious world of creation. This book includes several varieties for speaking about a cosmic Christ in this vein. Some go back to the resources of the biblical tradition, as shown by Gerald O'Collins and Bauckham; others to great patristic teachers of the church such as Athanasius and Maximus the Confessor, as shown by John Behr and Torstein Tollefsen.

One of the more recent proposals is found in the concept of deep incarnation, explored in quite a number of contributions to this volume. In this view, the Logos of God (the eternal Son) “became flesh” in Jesus, assumed a particular body and mind in him, and hereby also conjoined the material, living, and mental conditions of being a creature in any epoch. God thus became a human being (not only a man), a social being who lived with and for others in a sinful world (not an autistic individual), a living being vulnerable like sparrows and foxes (not just a member of *homo sapiens*), a material being made out of stardust and earth (not bringing with him a special heavenly flesh), thus susceptible to death and disintegration. Likewise, the divine Logos in Jesus assumed an ensouled human person with human mind, will, and passions (not an omniscient superhuman being). “Assumption” here means not only tolerating all of this but embracing it as part of the condition for being a creature in God’s own world of creation—despite all sin and evil. Incarnation

here means to understand human and creaturely conditions from an internal firsthand perspective, and not only from a lofty third-person perspective beyond the engagements, struggles, passions, and anxieties of being a human-in-the-world-with-others. Also, as a human being Jesus was living in front of God as a praying animal, sometimes unable to find ways into an unproblematic union with God the Father. *This* is how Jesus is described in the Gospels. Now, *if* Jesus is resurrected into God's eternal life, as Christians believe, they must also say: *Thus* is the God who was, and is, and will be forever. In other words, if Jesus is the character-description of who God is, then this is also how God is well before and after the years of the historical incarnation.

This is deep incarnation in its provisional form. But there are certainly alternative ways to describe what it means to say that God was in Jesus in a self-identifying way—also for God's relation to other creatures besides humans. Other contributors to this volume prefer to speak of Christ as being *related* to all other creatures, or to speak of Christ as having a saving *relevance* or *effect* on the nonhuman world. But what is common to all these proposals is that the classic christological question, *Who* is Jesus Christ? can't be answered apart from the less-discussed questions, *Where* is Christ in our world of creation? *What* is the scope of Christ? and *How* is Christ present for other creatures? Is Christ only active as the structuring or informational principle of cosmic evolution, or is Christ also passive—in the sense of suffering with and standing in for all creatures?

These are the issues discussed in this volume. I now invite the reader to go into the chapters of the book and follow the arguments of the individual authors. The articles are often cross-referenced, so a number of lineages between the contributors will soon emerge.

In order to assist the orientation, however, I will conclude this introduction by presenting a typology for different views of incarnation that was also offered to the participants of the Elsinore/Copenhagen symposium.

From Strict-Sense to Full-Scope Views of Incarnation: A Typology

The purpose of the final sections of this introduction is to provide a sketch of different aspects of the concept of incarnation relevant for classical, early modern, and contemporary theology. I'm well aware that no schema of this sort can do justice to the subtleties of christological reflection over many centuries. The purpose is only to offer a preliminary orientation and to clarify diverse approaches for thinking about the scope of Christ in relation to the world of creation. The categories used are meant to overlap (in the sense of a typology) rather than contrast (as in a taxonomy). Moving from strict-sense incarnation to what I call full scope-incarnation, for example, does not mean that the latter replaces the former, but serves to clarify the individual steps that different theologians want to go, or refuse to go.

The following typology presupposes that God is already immanently present in the world of creation as a whole. The typology here concerns only God's embodied presence as related to the Christian doctrine of incarnation. Also, the specific concept of incarnation in Christ presupposes that God is already provisionally known and experienced through other embodiments of a more transitory form. In the biblical traditions, one may think of theophanies (such as the burning bush in Exodus 3), divine indwellings of holy sites (stones, mountains, temples, etc.) and the people of God, divine commissions (of prophets), divine inspirations (such as dreams), miracles, and the exemplary lives of men and women.

Classical Views of Incarnation

I begin by delineating contours of standard meanings of incarnation from the patristic period onward:

A: Incarnation^{standard doctrinal meaning}

The eternal Word of God/Logos (the second person of the Trinity) “became flesh” (John 1:14) in Jesus of Nazareth for the purpose of the salvation of humanity. The assumption of the body and flesh of Jesus constituted the one person of Jesus Christ, who at once was fully divine as “the only Son” of the Father (John 1:18) and genuinely human (“tested as we are, yet without sin,” Heb. 4:15).

However, doctrinal developments are not always as clearly delineable as propounded in textbooks. In the early fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria saw the Logos as the principal agent of Christ, while the human body of Jesus (itself a part of macrocosm) was seen as the temple and instrument for the divine Word. Later in the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus (*Letter* 101) and the other Cappadocians argued that Jesus had to have a human soul and mind in order to save the fullness of humanity. The divine Logos did not replace the human soul and mind of Jesus (against Apollinarius).

In the Chalcedonian Creed (451), this personal union (*unio personalis*) was defined as consisting of *two natures*, one divine and one human, neither of them to be separated from one another or confused with one another. In the ecumenical Council of Constantinople (680–681), it was added that Jesus had not only a divine will but also a human will (*dyotheletism*) in order to account for his experiences of being genuinely tested. It was still the general understanding, however, that the divine Logos was the primary agent of Jesus. In consequence, it was often taught (in a view ascribed to Leontius of Byzantium) that the human nature of Jesus did not exist in itself (it

was “anhypostatic”), but had its genuine identity in the divine nature and will (where it was “enhypostatic”). This classical view may be delineated as follows:

A1: Incarnation *classical strict-sense*

For our salvation, the eternal Word of God/Logos assumed a human body and became flesh, “once and for all,” in the life story of Jesus of Nazareth.

This classical understanding of incarnation has always been meant to imply some notion of an antecedent *preexistence* of the incarnate Logos—minimally in terms of the preexistence of God’s eternal Logos (including the intention of the preincarnate Logos to become incarnate), maximally in terms of some personal preexistence of the union between Logos and Jesus. Likewise, all doctrinal traditions affirm some form of *postexistence* of the hypostatic union: The human body and soul of Christ are exalted together with the Logos through the resurrection. Accordingly, we need some amendments to the strict-sense view:

A2: Incarnation *classical extended sense:*

For our salvation, the eternal Word of God/Logos forever wanted to assume the body of Jesus of Nazareth and become flesh (John 1:14) in his life story. While the incarnation took place within God’s world of creation from his birth to his cross, there is a continuous story of incarnation within the life of God. From eternity the Logos was prepared to become incarnate, and from the moment of the resurrection the exalted body and soul of Jesus were assumed into God’s eternal life so that the humanity of Jesus was forever part of God’s own way of existence.

In this extended view, there is a two-way *assumptio carnis*: The divine Word assumes flesh (in incarnation) and God embraces the incarnate Word (in resurrection). The extended body of Christ, as so far expounded, focuses on the relation between Jesus and God. This

places the birth-seat of Christology in the relations between Jesus and his heavenly Father as well as in the relations between Jesus and God's Spirit on earth. Only much later, with the Chalcedonian Formula, was Christology defined by the internal being of Jesus Christ as composed of two distinct "natures" (the divine and the human) that operate in a perfect and preestablished communion in the one person of Jesus.

Yet since the concept of incarnation is intrinsically related to its soteriological purpose, the exalted body and soul of Christ cannot be seen apart from the members of the body of his church (consisting minimally of elected human beings, maximally of all human beings and the transformed cosmos). Accordingly, we need a further amendment to the classical concept of incarnation:

A3: Incarnation^{classical extended & inclusive sense:}

For our salvation, the eternal Word of God/Logos forever wanted to assume the body of Jesus of Nazareth and become flesh (John 1:14) in his unique life story. While the incarnation took place within God's world of creation from his birth to his cross, there is a continuous story of incarnation within the life of God. From eternity, the Logos was prepared to become incarnate, and from the moment of the resurrection the exalted body and soul of Jesus were assumed into God's eternal life, so that the humanity of Jesus was forever to be a part of God's own way of existence.

Yet since Jesus is the second Adam (Romans 5), his body is corporate (1 Corinthians 12), consisting of many members. The body of Christ thus comprises all those who are reconciled with God and connected to the divine Logos in the Spirit.

Historicist Views of Incarnation

Let us move from here into modern discussions, defined as the forms of christological thinking that take their cue from early modern concepts of history as linear and spatiotemporally defined as well as

from an understanding of science as defined by its empirical method. This tendency can be found from the beginnings of the historical-critical method in the eighteenth century with Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) and others. It is exemplified by late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers such as Lessing, Schleiermacher, and Kierkegaard, and was ably conceptualized by Ernst Troeltsch at the beginning of the twentieth century. While eschewing metaphysics, historicism and empiricism have themselves defined a metaphysics according to which reality is that which is indexed in time and space. Under these conditions, the classical strict-sense view of incarnation is now pasted into the more confined historicist ontology. It may be rendered as follows:

B1: Incarnation modern^{historicist strict-sense}

A relatively new way of speaking of God and a new way of acting on God's behalf appears to have happened in the life story of Jesus of Nazareth. From a historical perspective, some distinctive features of the teachings and actions of Jesus may be identified. Such features may (or may not) afford a religious interpretation of Jesus as the Word of God.

In this historicist version of the classical strict-sense view, there is an unprecedented focus on the particularity of the person and ministry of the earthly Jesus. Jesus is seen as a historically contextualized individual, hence as a particular phenomenon in the flow of history. On this view, Jesus may still be seen as distinct from other savior-figures in his own immediate Jewish context as well as in the history of religions in general. But in the end, uniqueness can't feature in a historicist perspective, just as God and theoretical entities don't feature within experience. The historicist view of incarnation may nonetheless still be open to religious interpretations, as it were on top of the historicist framework.

B1.1: One of these interpretations is simply to *declare*, as a matter of faith, that even though Jesus from a historical perspective is only one among many, the particular Jesus story as narrated in the Gospels nonetheless offers the only available epistemic access to the reality of God for Christians as well as for all other human beings. Other religious relations to God are nothing but human guesswork, if not projections. From an external perspective, such insisting on the uniqueness of the Jesus-story (despite its historical dependence) may be seen as an ad hoc maneuver. Nonetheless, a full-blown doctrine of God (including the preexistence of Jesus qua Logos) may nonetheless be reconstructed as the a priori conditions (Immanuel Kant: *Möglichkeitsbedingungen*) that make possible what Christians a posteriori believe when they say that Jesus was God (e.g., Karl Barth).

B1.2: Another religious interpretation of the Jesus-story within the historicist view takes place by simply *bracketing* the question of the metaphysical whence and whither of Jesus in order to reconstruct, by means of sheer historical inquiry, the particular kind of message of God that Jesus is most likely to have taught and incorporated into his way of life.

This bracketing method can be followed by two forms of Christology. The first points to the final unavoidability of a definite religious choice. Even though the message of Jesus and his followers can be fully contextualized historically, his religious message may be translated to contemporary human interpreters (at least concerning his existential attitudes to reality). Confronted with his message, each human person must make his or her own decision: a decision of faith or rejection. In this model, Jesus may be said to be resurrected into his words, subsequently becoming incarnate in our present-day world as the divine Word wherever the message of Jesus is embraced in faith (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann).

The second form of bracketed Christology follows the historicist path to its logical conclusion by arguing that the life story of Jesus may be an admirable approximation to the reality of God, but Jesus stands on par with other great religious life stories by virtue of the historicist principle. Hence Jesus should be compared with, and complemented by, other approximations to ultimate reality (e.g., John Hick).

B1.3: Finally, the modern historicist sense of incarnation can be interpreted to *exclude* the notion of a God or divine Logos while seeing the teachings and actions of Jesus as one candidate among others for an advisable embodied lifestyle and existential orientation. “God” is here merely a symbol for natural or historical processes that are already well-established practices among us (e.g., Gordon Kaufman).

A Contemporary Model of Incarnation

The aforementioned historicist approaches to Christology appear to be brute, contrived, or bleak. But what if that which emerged with Jesus (the kingdom of God) cannot be identified by the sheer existence of Jesus as an *individual being* from a remote past? What if the life of Jesus is to be understood rather by the *constitutive relations* between Jesus and God, and between Jesus and the wider cosmos? The Gospels’ picture of the earthly Jesus cannot easily be accommodated within a historicist construal of “the historical Jesus”; the metaphysics of historicism does not permit the possibility of Jesus having constitutive relations to his heavenly Father, just as historicism does not allow an individual to be internally related to the rest of history.

From this perspective, the real problem with historicism is not its bracketing or exclusion of a noetic or divine realm that is supposed

to exist alongside the time-space continuum. Rather, the real poverty of historicism consists in the meagerness of its description of what is going on within time and space and in its negligence of the way in which all things are interconnected. Not only are the connections between Jesus and God severed, but also the constitutive relations between Jesus and the world of creation. But what if that which emerged in the Jesus story was about a personal identity defined by its biological and social relations to other creatures within God's continuous creation? In the light of evolutionary theory, all human beings share a common genetic heritage, and in the light of the biological and social sciences, a wide spectrum of human relations comes forth also in the lives of individuals who always live in extensive social relations. In this light, even the resources of the natural sciences transcend the historicist framework. After all, the natural sciences do not just collect information about particulars but aim to produce theories about how nature works and how things are intrinsically interconnected. All such relations, for example in quantum mechanics, go far beyond the assumption of a simple localization as in a historicist or purely empiricist metaphysics.

What follows is one way of explicating the Jesus story within such a larger framework. The following example of a broad-scale Christology presupposes the classic strict-sense view of incarnation (A1) while also being informed by contemporary historical scholarship (B1):

C1: Incarnation *socially extended body*:

Just as every human being is more than him- or herself by embodying shared genetic and cultural resources, so also Jesus embodied more than his own self. Accordingly, his identity is to be described as defined by his relations to God and lived out in his particular relations to his fellow creatures.

Jesus lived through the common conditions of the human race, yet managed to cope with them in new and unprecedented ways. He overcame the particular problems of genetic-cultural exclusion within his own Jewish setting, and he confronted the general problems of human coexistence: the combination of intra-group nicety with extra-group nastiness. He thus took the role of the outcast and homeless in a world dominated by an intra-group mentality and aggressive identity formation. The distinctive features of the teachings and actions of Jesus (as intimated in historical scholarship) should be seen in this wider biosocial perspective.

Accordingly, early Christians interpreted Jesus as the second Adam (Romans 5), the second Moses, the second Job, and the Suffering Servant. Likewise, he was seen as the only true image of God, since his relation to God was constitutive for his teachings as well as for his way of life. In that sense, Jesus was the “only Son of God” all the way from his relations to the heavenly Father into his relations with fellow creatures.

The question is now whether the body of Christ comprises more than his fellow human beings. This point, so essential to the concept of deep incarnation, presupposes that human existence, both in its genetic and social aspects, cannot be divorced from the biological conditions that human beings share with other living beings. This goes for physical processes, such as energy transaction and information transfer (including the need to supply resources from outside the local body of Jesus), as well as for biological processes of growth and decay, and the implied vulnerabilities that go along with them. Here we approach the reasons for speaking, if only tentatively, of the world as included in the body of Christ.

C2: Incarnation *full-scale extended body:*

Incarnation signifies the coming-into-flesh of God’s eternal Logos. In and through the process of incarnation, God the creator and the world of the flesh are conjoined in such depth that God links up with all vulnerable creatures, with the sparrows in their flight as well as in their fall (cf. Matt. 10:29) and with the grass that comes into being one day and ceases to exist the next day.

In Christ, God enters into the biological tissue of creation in order to share the fate of biological existence. In the incarnate One, God becomes Jesus, and in him God becomes human, sharing (by implication) the life conditions of foxes and sparrows, grass and trees, soil and moisture. The most high (the eternal thought and power of God) and the very lowest (the flesh that comes into being and decays) are united in the process of incarnation.

Above, I ended the classic description of the body of Christ (A2–3: Incarnation *classic extended & inclusive sense*) with a reference to “all those who are reconciled with God and connected to the divine Logos in the Spirit.” The soteriological question is now, Who are they? Only a few elect ones? All human beings? All sensitive beings? Or the transformed cosmos in its entirety? There is no consensus in contemporary Christian theology on this issue. Several theological options are at work on the basis of the aforementioned matrix of classic Christian doctrines.

C3.1: Incarnation^{*narrow-scope inclusive sense:*}

The extended body of Christ consists of a particular group of elect human beings only—those who are elected by God and will persevere in faith.

“Church” here refers either to the elect community in contrast to those living outside the body of Christ or to the community of those that already have been redeemed while others will follow. Three reasons can be given for the narrow-scope view: (1) Scriptural passages speak most often about the community of believers as opposed to this world (“world” here understood in its negative sense). (2) The very concept of a body seems to suggest some sort of organic unity, be it in terms of concrete biological bodies or in terms of social bodies. By comparison, the cosmos at large does not seem to make up such an organic whole; galaxies, supernovas, and black holes exemplify striving forces rather than anything like a body or community. (3) As human beings, we can only speak from a

human vantage point, which relies on a first-person perspective, be it in terms of an “I” or a “we.” Therefore, we are not entitled to project soteriological models into a cosmic framework (Kant & his followers).

Against these critical points, however, it could be argued that the basic motivation for speaking about ultimate fulfillment is Christ as the realization in material time-space of the loving and relational nature of God. If God is genuinely revealed in the strict-sense incarnation, neither the epistemic confines of human imagination (Kant) nor standard concepts of what it means to be a body (common sense constructs) can overrule the universal scope of the divine Logos assuming flesh. Moreover, when speaking about “the body of Christ,” reference is made to the inclusive nature of Christ more than to the intrinsic properties of human, animal, and other organismic bodies. Finally, apart from central scriptural indications of the universal scope of divine love, it is also, from an experiential point of view, hard to imagine a fulfillment of human life apart from the community of those allegedly standing outside the community of the church: the “unredeemed” parents, spouses, children, and friends (Schleiermacher’s argument for *apokatastasis*). This leads us to the following view:

C3.2: Incarnation^{*broad-scope inclusive sense*}:

The extended body of Christ consists of all human beings, since God in Christ has elected all human beings “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). Consequently, some are already believers and participate in the body of Christ, while others will participate at a later stage, be it in this life or in a life to come.

“Church” here refers to the deep community in the body of Christ between all human beings: brothers and sisters, contemporary believers and contemporary nonbelievers, friends and foes, Christians

and non-Christians. Obviously, this view of the church presupposes an eschatological view of humanity. The full inclusiveness of the body of Christ may already be realized in the life of God, but it has not yet transpired in the world of humanity at large.

The problem for this view is how human beings can come to flourish in a life to come without some form of embodiment and without a sustained relation to a material world that continues to harbor, facilitate, and energize the life of humanity (cf. 1 Corinthians 15). So we end up with a full-scope view of salvation that corresponds to the full extensiveness of the body of Christ:

C3.3: Incarnation^{full-scope inclusive sense:}

The extended body of Christ comprises the life of all creatures, including their cosmic nexuses, insofar as “the fullness of deity” was pleased to dwell in Christ (Col. 2:9) and “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” (Col. 1:20)

What we here see is a full-scope soteriological view of incarnation *and* the world of creation. There is a match between God having the pleasure of dwelling unreservedly in Christ (*strict-sense incarnation*) and God having the pleasure of reconciling all things to himself in Christ (*full-scope inclusive incarnation*). The common link may consist in a theology of the overflow from the fullness of divine love into “all flesh,” when God’s Spirit will be poured out (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21) so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). The second movement (from the incarnation of the divine Word to the world at large) may be said to follow organically from the first movement (from God the Word becoming incarnate flesh).

There is thus a high degree of congruence, or “natural fit,” between the notion of deep incarnation and a soteriological universalism. There is, however, no strict logical implication that leads from deep incarnation to universalism, since it would be

possible to embrace deep incarnation without embracing universalism. Other concerns might have to be taken into account. Some might want to construe the conditions for salvation in such a manner that an inclusion into the body of Christ presupposes a conscious response, and even a positive embrace, by agents of free will. They would argue that free will is actually not exercised by all creatures, but only by humans, and that the human will has the capacity to embrace as well as to resist God's invitation. In response one might point to the principle of Thomas Aquinas that what is received will always be received according to the mode of the recipient: *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* (*Summa Theologiae*, I q.75 a.5 resp.). Obviously, being assumed by God and participating in divine life means something different for a sparrow, a bonobo, and for a human being.