

What Is "Incarnation"?

1. For Christians, Jesus is understood to be *the* act of God, and so the event through which God's salvation is decisively revealed. Thus the significance of Jesus for Christians is that it is by reason of their encounter with him through the church's witness that they have become certain of the grace of God. Conversely, the only thing that Christians mean by "Jesus" when they assert that he is the Christ—in this or any other functionally equivalent formulation—is the event that thus authorizes their certainty of God's grace.

2. Thus Jesus is not "the founder of the Christian religion," in the sense of the one *with* whom Christians believe in God—that being, rather, the proper role of the apostles as the first Christians, upon whose faith and witness those of all other Christians necessarily depend; rather, Jesus is the one decisively *through* whom Christians believe in God, the one who is the decisive re-presentation of God's own gift and demand to us.

3. "Incarnation" is one way, although not the only way, of saying this—of saying, in effect, that Jesus is the explicit primal source (more, exactly, the explicit primal *ontic* source) of the peculiar certainty constituting Christian existence (immediate experience of Jesus as such being the explicit primal *noetic* source of this certainty). Insofar as the *myth* of incarnation involves distinctions between the Father who sends the Son and the Son who is obedient to the Father's sending, and so on, it represents the explicit primal source of Christian authority as though it were itself but one Christian authority among others, even if the highest. At the same time, the purpose of the *doctrine* of the incarnation (specifically, of the *homoousion*) is to remove this implication of the myth by making clear the difference in principle between all who are sons (= children) of God *by adoption* and him who alone is the Son of God *by nature*. This becomes intelligible as and when one reflects on the interdependence of the explicit and implicit primal sources of authority, or of decisive and original revelation. For it is only in the light of the *explicit* source of authority, or *decisive* revelation, that the content of the *implicit* source of authority, or of *original* revelation, is made known (as true as it is and must be that, in the orders both of being and of experiencing, the

direction is reversed). Thus, as certain as it is that God as God ever was, is, and will be the gift and demand of existence in and for freedom, of faith working through love; and as certain as it is that this gift and demand are the gift and demand of human existence as such, at least implicitly present in all human experience whatsoever, to be certain of this as Christians are certain of it presupposes specifically Christian experience of Jesus as the explicit primal ontic source of all religious authority or the decisive revelation of God. One way, although, again, not the only way, of making the assertion about Jesus that such experience of him at least implies is to speak of "incarnation."

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