

*On "Immanence" as an Analogical Concept and the Incarnation*

On my view, "immanence" is and must be an analogical concept, first of all, because there is an immanence of all things in God as well as an immanence of God in all things—just as "transcendence," also, is an analogical concept in that there is a transcendence by all things of God even as there is a transcendence by God of all things.

But "immanence" is an analogical concept, secondly, because, although all things are immanent in God in the same sense, God is immanent in all things in different senses, depending upon the differences between the things themselves. Thus God is immanent in nonliving things otherwise than God is immanent in living things, even as God is immanent in sentient things otherwise than God is immanent in understanding things.

More than this, there are differences (if also similarities) between the ways in which God is immanent in understanding things themselves. Basically, there are two types of such differences: (1) those that follow from the distinction between implicit and explicit *levels* of understanding existence; and (2) those that follow from the distinction between authentic and inauthentic *modes* of such understanding. God is immanent in implicit understanding of existence otherwise than in explicit understanding; and God is immanent in authentic understanding of existence otherwise than in inauthentic understanding. For these reasons, also, then, "immanence" can only be an analogical concept.

The question, however, is whether recognizing that "immanence" is thus analogical is of help in formulating the meaning of *the* incarnation in its uniqueness. The answer I would argue for is that it is—for the following reasons, or, better, in the following way.

*The* incarnation may be said to be unique in both of two different respects: (1) in respect of its being something the whole meaning or purpose of which is to mediate, or to be the means of, the universal actualization of *authentic* human existence—and thus of its belonging to the level of *explicit* understanding; and (2) in respect of its being, on this level, *decisive* with respect to everything else belonging to this level. Thus, although *the* incarnation has to do with the mode of God's immanence distinctive of the authentic mode of human understanding, it

has to do with such immanence, not by actualizing it itself, but by being the *means* through which it can be actualized by others, and, more exactly, the *primal* such means, which is to say, the explicit primal authorizing *source* of its actualization.

If “incarnation” in general or as such, then, is the immanence of God in *explicit* understanding, “*the* incarnation” is the *decisive* immanence of God in explicit understanding. Thus it is inadequate and misleading to say, simply, that *the* incarnation is the “fullest” incarnation of God, in the sense that it is God’s fullest immanence in human existence. So far as the incarnation may thus be spoken about in comparative (including superlative) terms, it is the fullest immanence of God in *explicit human understanding*.

Accordingly, the problem of an “*a priori* christology” that would formulate the possibility of *the* incarnation is to explicate the necessary conditions of the possibility of *this* kind of divine immanence in human existence. Such conditions include: (1) the universal immanence of God in *implicit* human understanding; (2) the particular immanence of God in *explicit* human understanding insofar as it is true; and (3) the at least implicit acknowledgement of some such particular immanence as *decisive* for human existence. By contrast, the task of an *a posteriori* christology that would explicate the Christian witness of faith that it is *Jesus* who is *the* incarnation is to show that just these three conditions are in fact met because God is God, human beings are human beings, and Jesus is Jesus.

12 June 1975; rev. 16 September 2009