

**Incarnation and Evolution
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At a time when Christmas decorations – virtually all of them completely secular - seem to be part of the cityscape as soon as the festival of death that is Halloween is over, it is perhaps difficult to remember that Advent begins this coming Sunday. In communion with the universal Church across time and space we sing 'O come, O come Emmanuel' as our thoughts turn to the Incarnation, 'God with us', the central mystery of the Christian faith. In the words of the oldest Eucharistic liturgy still in use (the Liturgy of St James from the 4th-5th century Church of Jerusalem) -

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded:
for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.*

*King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture -
in the Body and the Blood.
He will give to all the faithful
his own Self for heavenly Food.*

*Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of Light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.*

*At his feet the six-winged Seraph;
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
alleluia, alleluia,
alleluia, Lord most high.*

Of course, we all know since the Enlightenment that the writers of these lines were primitives and hopelessly deluded, whereas a casual acquaintance with the wondrous explanatory powers of modern science and the deconstructive work of modern Biblical scholarship would have relieved them of their childish, fairy-tale beliefs. 'The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter', wrote Thomas Jefferson, as gleefully quoted in Richard Dawkins' famous book *The God Delusion*. The four canonical Gospels, writes Dawkins, 'all have the status of legends, as factually dubious as the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.' His claim, of course, is that religious faith cannot stand up to the scrutinizing gaze of the natural or historical sciences ; Christianity is predicated on notions that Dawkins and the other New

Atheists have declared anathema: the miraculous, and the possible existence of truth beyond scientific inquiry. As one of the discoverers of DNA, James Watson, put it in conversation with Dawkins on the puzzling continued existence of scientists who are committed Christians, 'occasionally I meet them, and I'm a bit embarrassed [laughs] because, you know, I can't believe anyone accepts truth by revelation' (quoted Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 125-126) Much the same line is taken by Sam Harris in a polemic available on his website (http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/the-strange-case-of-francis-collins) against Christian geneticist Francis Collins at the time of the latter's proposed nomination as director to the National Institutes of Health. At issue is Collins' alignment, together with the majority of Christians, with belief in 'a suite of canonical miracles, including the virgin birth and literal resurrection of Jesus Christ'. Addressing not only Francis Collins but also John Polkinghorne, NT Wright and Catholic biologist Kenneth Miller, Sam Harris dismisses out of hand the type of writing associated with attempts such as the one in which we are currently involved as a Church to stress the compatibility of science and Christian belief. His verdict on Polkinghorne, whose sincerity he does not question, is unequivocally damning:

'If one intended to embarrass the religious establishment with carefully constructed nonsense, this is exactly the sort of pseudo-science, pseudo-scholarship, and pseudo-reasoning one would employ.'

Polkinghorne and Collins simply have no grounds as scientists, argues Harris, for the persistence of their faith in the virgin birth and empty tomb. Having, like Dawkins, appealed to modern scholarship to undermine any appeals to Scriptural authority, Harris sets out a caricature of Collins' views:

1. Jesus Christ, a carpenter by trade, was born of a virgin, ritually murdered as a scapegoat for the collective sins of his species, and then resurrected from death after an interval of three days.
2. He promptly ascended, bodily, to "heaven"—where, for two millennia, he has eavesdropped upon (and, on occasion, even answered) the simultaneous prayers of billions of beleaguered human beings.
3. Not content to maintain this numinous arrangement indefinitely, this invisible carpenter will one day return to earth to judge humanity for its sexual indiscretions and skeptical doubts, at which time he will grant immortality to anyone who has had the good fortune to be convinced, on mother's knee, that this baffling litany of miracles is the most important series of truth-claims ever revealed about the cosmos.
4. Every other member of our species, past and present, from Cleopatra to Einstein, no matter what his or her terrestrial accomplishments, will be consigned to a far less desirable fate, best left unspecified.
5. In the meantime, God/Jesus may or may not intervene in our world, as He pleases, curing the occasional end-stage cancer (or not), answering an especially earnest prayer for guidance (or not), consoling the bereaved (or not), through His perfectly wise and loving agency.

How many scientific laws would be violated by such a scheme? One is tempted to say "all of them." And yet, judging from the way that journals like *Nature* have treated Collins, one can only conclude that there is nothing in the scientific worldview, or in the intellectual rigor and self-criticism that gave rise to it, that casts these convictions in an unfavorable light.

It is clear that the 'violation' of 'scientific laws' is what has triggered Harris's reaction to all this. The basic claim of the New Atheists is that science, and particularly evolutionary biology (in an 'unsteered' version), provides a far better and more solid explanatory

framework than any kind of religious belief for understanding the world around us.

How should the Church respond to this, particularly as regards the central issue of the Incarnation? In what follows, my hope is to give a brief overview and assessment of the basic options and to provide some clues as to why I consider that traditional belief in the virgin birth and the miraculous in general can and still should be defended as an integral part of Christian faith.

Here I would like to identify at least three unsatisfactory responses which I fear have become all too common in modern theology.

1. Intellectual repression of the questions. This response basically consists of concocting a set of doctrinal statements, often based on contestable principles of Biblical hermeneutics and dealing with issues that are not central to Christian faith, and forcing people to conform to them without discussion as a matter of coercive discipline. It should be obvious that this is not a constructive way in which to engage with important questions. It is often alleged that the Catholic Magisterium behaves in this fashion, and it has to be said that there have certainly been spectacular occasions on which repressive tactics have been employed in precisely this fashion (the trials of Galileo being the most obvious). However, in defence of the Magisterium, two things need to be said. Firstly intellectual repression definitely does *not* characterize a post-Vatican II approach to science, as will be obvious to anyone familiar with the writings of, for example, Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna. Secondly, the Magisterium makes no bones about its role as a teaching authority, unlike many ecclesial bodies which could be mentioned which claim to believe *so/a scriptura* but operate in identical fashion within their own contexts.

2. The second approach is simply to ignore the scientific challenge altogether by refusing to engage it. This tactic effectively says 'this is our story, and we're sticking to it, but we're not going to explain it to anyone who doesn't understand the linguistic codes of our story'. As long as we stick within the Church's narrative, everything makes sense : as for the question of whether that narrative is credible for people outside it, or how it arose in the first place we just aren't going to go there. For any 'theology nerds' out there, this is particularly popular within 'post-liberal' theological circles associated with the Yale School and now Duke University (George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas are perhaps the most well-known examples of this tendency). It should be admitted that this approach can be extremely productive when it comes to nurturing those who already have a faith commitment, but it has its limitations when confronted with folks who, like Dawkins and Harris, call into question the rational justification for believing in the first place. To take a concrete example, postliberal and similar approaches may be quite successful when talking in Church about the implications for the Christian life of Mary's example in saying 'yes' to the Angel Gabriel and the attitude of trust in God's purposes that implies. However postliberalism runs into a wall when faced with someone who says that the Gospel account is a legend, there are no such things as angels, that the virgin birth is scientifically impossible and that God has no purposes because God does not exist.

3. A third approach, on which I would like to spend a little time as it is extremely fashionable in more liberal/progressive circles, both Protestant and Catholic, is revisionism. This line sees – not incorrectly – that there is a credibility problem with traditional Christianity which is leading to the institutional decline of the Church. However – and this is far more questionable – revisionism sees the answer as re-defining the tenets of Christian faith in ways which are more palatable to contemporary tastes. It was the famous German New Testament scholar Rudolf

Bultmann who produced the classic statement of the programme of 'demythologization' back in the 1940s: *It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.* In short, demythologization consists of the effort to identify within the Bible those features derived from an outdated worldview and discard them so that an existential, eternal message (*kerygma*) can emerge for contemporary listeners. In the case of the virgin birth, Bultmann's view was that the idea had been taken over by early Christians from the surrounding pagan cultures:

'the mythological conception of a divine son begotten by some deity – an idea which not merely Greek tradition knows, but which is also current in the Babylonian and especially the Egyptian king-legend – was evidently taken over by Jewish Hellenism in Egypt and transferred to the devout men of the Old Testament. Hence, it is no wonder that early in Hellenistic Christianity **the legend springs up that Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1 :20) or by the "power of the Most High" (Lk. 1:35) and was born of a virgin.**' (*Theology of the New Testament*, 131)

Perhaps the most well-known contemporary proponent of this kind of approach is Marcus Borg, who terms it 'historical-metaphorical'. In *The Heart of Christianity*, Borg sets out the case for changing what he regards as an 'unpersuasive' earlier image of Jesus. The earlier image

'emphasizes the miraculous, especially the virgin birth and physical bodily resurrection. It also emphasizes that Jesus is the only way of salvation, and that Christianity is therefore the only true religion. [...] This image of Jesus no longer works for millions of people, both within and outside the church. For these millions, its literalism and exclusivity are not only unpersuasive, but a barrier to being Christian' (83/4)

Both the attraction and the Achilles heel of this line are evident from this quotation. The promise is that by revising the standard Christian narrative, barriers to faith will be removed, leading to a revival of the Church. In itself, the aim is naturally a good one. The problem is theological method. Gone is the idea that we should, like the first disciples, try to ascertain the truth by an open-minded assessment of the phenomena surrounding Jesus's life, death and Resurrection, however improbable they may appear to a post-Enlightenment mindset. What is driving Borg's inquiry is apologetics, 'what works' for millions of people who are operating with a rationalist paradigm that is not above challenge. The historical scholarship involved is not neutral, as it takes for granted the pseudo-scientific, reductive dogma that the miraculous is suspect by definition. What seems not to be contemplated by Borg and others is the notion that science itself may evolve quite differently in the future in a non-materialist direction (as Jean Staune suggested in his presentation to us earlier this year).

Although Bultmann's demythologizing work had already begun in the 1930s (the first assessment of the Gospels as 'evangelical myths' having been made by Friedrich David Strauss a century earlier), it seems that efforts to re-interpret traditional Incarnational theology really took off in the 1960s, out of a concern that the Church needed to take drastic measures in order to bridge the growing gap between itself and secular culture. Since then, the view of Jesus as the Word of God Incarnate, sent by the Father and born of the Virgin Mary, has been up for serious revision from 'liberal/progressive' theologians, including some major names. It is variously seen as

mythological, patriarchal, a devaluation of Jesus's humanity and negative towards human sexuality (a major theme of the 1960s!) in its insistence on the virginal conception. The Incarnation in general is even sometimes regarded as offensive to human beings in suggesting that we need a Redeemer (Diarmuid O'Murchu) rather than simply an evolutionary breakthrough of ethical consciousness.

On the specific question of the Virginal conception, this leads to some sophisticated intellectual gymnastics. It is for example argued that the reason why the Creed contains a reference to being born of a virgin is that the Church Fathers were combatting the Gnostics who saw matter as evil. To be true to their intentions, what we need to do is actually to reverse the Creed's formulation: 'If we wished to bring out this intention [i.e. full humanity] of the nativity story today, we should have to stress the *non*-virginal character of Christ's birth [...] **according to today's understanding of things**, talk about Christ's 'virgin birth' through Mary dangerously narrows down his humanity, if the virgin birth is taken to mean that a supernatural-human process takes the place of a human-natural one.' (Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*).

To clear up any misunderstanding, let me make it plain what is and what is not at stake in the debate about the Virgin Birth. It has rightly been stressed that the Incarnation does not strictly depend on it, since it is wholly possible that God could have chosen some other method for Jesus to be born without original sin (in effect, an Immaculate Conception by human parents, which is what the Catholic Church of course claims in the case Mary). This would however have been just as miraculous and dependent on the intervention of the Holy Spirit as what we find in Matthew and Luke. What is at stake is the authority of the Gospels. The problem with a symbolic reading of the Virgin Birth in terms of a myth to underscore Jesus's special status is quite simple – Luke's Gospel presents itself as authentic history preserved by oral transmission.

'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they have been handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.'

Luke's work is therefore in a completely different category from the first two chapters of Genesis (let us leave aside the vexed question of the historicity of chapter 3 for the moment), whose truth may well be the truth of inspired myth, especially as they deal with cosmic events before the arrival of human beings. Here a case can indeed be made for a responsible demythologization or, to put it differently, the kind of spiritual reading that the Church has always done. However, if we say that Luke's clear claim to historicity is unreliable, then that is a statement of momentous consequences. As Keith Ward tellingly remarks in an excellent essay on the Virgin Birth dating from 1987, if Luke is not credible with regard to the birth narratives, what about the rest? How does the Church go about discerning which parts can be trusted and which cannot, especially in the absence of a Magisterium authorized to adjudicate (sometimes when reading contemporary theology, one has the impression that the Jesus Seminar are being treated as the new Magisterium)? It seems obvious that once it is considered legitimate to pick and choose from the New Testament at random in order to justify theological positions, theology will consider itself at liberty to redefine not only the birth of Jesus, but the whole

theology of the Incarnation. For example, we find theologians (such as Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp in *The Predicament of Belief*) who are prepared to reject the notion of a pre-incarnate Logos, ignoring the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, while still wishing to appeal to the same Gospel for other purposes. Or writers who build a whole theology on the basis of the self-emptying of Christ in Philippians 2 while ignoring that the same passage goes on to talk about Christ's exaltation in glory. In terms of theological method, it is difficult to understand the coherence of such ad hoc interpretations.

So, having outlined what seem to be theological dead-ends as far as contemporary apologetics and the response to the New Atheist challenge are concerned, what options do we have? Here I would like to advocate an approach which takes the scientific challenge with seriousness and is unafraid to dialogue with the New Atheism; this line acknowledges what is scientifically and historically *proven* but which holds its nerve when it comes to making the case for Christian orthodoxy.

What can legitimately be conceded to the revisionists, IMHO, is that no Christology is going to work in the modern world which does not take seriously the fact that Christ's human nature resulted from an evolutionary process, being the culmination of 13.7 billion years of cosmic history. If, as historic orthodoxy claims, Christ truly assumed our humanity, then he was subject to the normal developmental constraints of all of us. According to traditional Christian doctrine, Jesus inherited no chromosomes from an earthly father, meaning that God effectively had free rein over that information pattern, but he certainly had 23 from Mary. He lived his earthly life with *inherited* DNA on his mother's side that surely shaped him in profound ways (we now know from contemporary genetics), and an evolved brain. Clearly, this genetic transmission means that God's choice of the woman who would bear Jesus was absolutely critical - a subject to which we will return in two weeks' time.

Nonetheless, conceding that the Incarnation inevitably involves an interaction with evolutionary history does not necessarily have to be a problem. We can surely think of Christ BOTH as radically unique (in his divine nature) and, with Irenaeus of Lyons, as the RECAPITULATION of the whole evolutionary process, fulfilling it and setting it back on its right track. Paul's words in Galatians 4:4 perhaps give an indication of how we might think about this fruitfully:

'But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman,'
Jesus is both *sent* by God and *born* of a woman.

Putting this in contemporary terms, one might conceptualize things this way: although the Triune God endowed the creation with its autonomy and allowed it to develop with considerable freedom, God drew it forward ('steered' it) throughout with the ultimate aim of making creatures in God's own image which would be capable of communion with Him. Because the Incarnation involved the Word becoming *flesh*, the union of the human and the divine, its conditions of possibility were tied up with evolutionary biology, not least because in his life on earth, Christ would have to deal with the limitations of a human brain. We have already discussed the idea that the mind is not necessarily synonymous with the brain, but it certainly interacts with it in profound ways. If Christ was really to be the HEAD of all creation he could not (almost certainly) be born as an australopithecus, given the limits that this would have inevitably have imposed on his spirituality. Likewise, thinking here from the perspective of cultural evolution, the 'fullness of time' meant that human religious development had to reach a certain point before the Messiah could come, because he would have to work within a religious tradition that he LEARNED (the Gospel of Luke clearly states that he 'grew in wisdom'). When this point in world history had been reached, God's Son was *sent*. This implies God's direct, in other words miraculous, action.

When it comes to miracles, a constructive response to the New Atheism bites the bullet in admitting that the Virgin Birth and Resurrection as affirmed by the historic creeds are indeed cases of Divine Action, which is precisely why they carry weight. Here it needs to be shown that, while the miraculous (or the supernatural) may be outside the remit of scientific inquiry, it is not contrary to reason to believe in its possibility.

This is where something can and should be said by theology in response to the New Atheism. 18th century Scottish philosopher and arch-skeptic David Hume, to which Richard Dawkins regularly appeals, is often thought to have dismissed belief in miracles with a famous argument:

'A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.'

However, as a piece of logic, this is vulnerable to critique on at least two grounds. Firstly, as theoretical physicist Ard Louis (one of the contributors to the 'Test of Faith') points out: Hume's argument has often been criticized for being self-referential. He at first presupposes that no reasonable person can believe that the laws of nature can be violated, and then concludes that miracles cannot occur because he defines them as violations of the laws of nature.' Secondly, and here I again turn to Keith Ward, Hume forgets that the laws of nature are *descriptive* of what has been observed, not *prescriptive* of what may be observed in the future. They cannot be prescriptive because the future is not determined by the past, because our knowledge of the universe is not exhaustive, and because by definition, 'laws' deal with situations that are repeatable. They cannot handle 'singularities', unique events such as Christ's Resurrection. Because of this, 'miracles' do not necessarily 'violate' natural laws since there is no guarantee that they are fixed in the first place. Furthermore, if one posits that the regularities in nature were 'fixed' by an intelligent source, that source could logically also be capable of changing them.

There is no point in pretending that Christian theology can adopt the position that God never intervenes in the world. This is a fashionable position which is sometimes taken on the grounds that if God did intervene on some occasions but not others, that would make Him guilty for not having intervened in Auschwitz, for example. However, as soon as we talk about Christ's Resurrection (or even about creation in the first place), we are positing a God who acts; it is not intellectually coherent to treat this as an exception (*pace* Tony Jones). Indeed, as Keith Ward again points out, it is equally dubious to say that God can intervene in our thoughts but not in the material realm. This is untenable given that everything we know about the brain indicates that while we are in the body, thoughts are correlated with electrical brain activity, which is physical.

In his recent book on the Gospel Infancy Narratives, which I highly recommend, Pope Benedict XVI forms an alliance with Reformed theologian Karl Barth in putting things this way:

'Is what we profess in the Creed true, then? - "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God ...[who] by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary"?

The answer is an unequivocal yes. Karl Barth pointed out that there are two moments in the story of Jesus when God intervenes directly in the material world: the virgin birth and the resurrection from the tomb, in which Jesus did not remain, nor see corruption. These two moments are a scandal to the modern spirit. God is

"allowed" to act in ideas and thoughts, in the spiritual domain - but not in the material. That is shocking. He does not belong there. But that is precisely the point: God is God and he does not operate merely on the level of ideas. In that sense, what is at stake in both of these moments is God's very godhead. The question that they raise is: does matter also belong to him?

Naturally we may not ascribe to God anything nonsensical or irrational, or anything that contradicts his creation. But here we are not dealing with the irrational or contradictory, but precisely with the positive - with God's creative power, embracing the whole of being. In that sense these two moments - the virgin birth and the real resurrection from the tomb - are the cornerstones of faith. If God does not also have power over matter, then he simply is not God. But he does have this power, and through the conception and resurrection of Jesus Christ he has ushered in a new creation. So as the Creator he is also our Redeemer. Hence the conception and birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary is a fundamental element of our faith and a radiant sign of hope.'

So why does so much contemporary theology, not to mention those who have left the Church altogether, resist the idea of a God who acts. Could it perhaps be that this is not ultimately an intellectual question, but one which concerns the attitude of the heart. Could it be that all the argument about historical scholarship and scientific proof is ultimately a smokescreen for deeper issues of convenience and control. There is, after all, something unsettling about the idea of 'God with us' ; it is telling that in chapter 8 of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus demonstrates his spiritual authority by healing two demon-possessed men in the land of the Gerasenes, the Evangelist notes that the whole town 'pleaded with him to leave their region'. We're in control here, after all, and the last thing that our human pride wants is for that to be disturbed. If we do not want to admit that God acted 2000 years ago, still less do we want to admit that God might and does act and speak today, not only as Saviour, but as our coming Judge. Let us recall the words of the hymn with which we began :

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded:
for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.*