

THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE

From N. F. Gier, *God, Reason, and the Evangelicals*
(University Press of America, 1987), chapter 3.

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First presented as the Presidential Address at the Northwest
Conference on Philosophy
Eastern Washington State University, November 3, 1984

I am God and not man.

Hosea 11:9

For neither is God in human form, nor is the human body God-like.

Philo of Alexandria

Jesus Christ is at once complete in Godhead and complete in
manhood,
truly God and truly man, consisting of a reasonable soul and body.

Council of Chalcedon

God cannot be the form of a body.

Thomas Aquinas

Is it possible to conceive of a more foolish contradiction
than of wanting to prove...that a definite individual man is God?

Søren Kierkegaard

If any man says that he understands the relation of deity to humanity
in Christ,
he only makes it clear that he does not understand at all what is
meant by an incarnation.

--William Temple

Neither the intense christological debates of the centuries leading up
to the Council of Chalcedon,
nor the renewed christological debates of the 19th and 20th
Centuries,
have succeeded in squaring the circle by making intelligible the claim
that one who
was genuinely and unambiguously a man was also genuinely and
unambiguously God.

John Hick

"There is no use trying," said Alice, "one cannot believe impossible
things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.

"When I was your age, I always did for half an a hour a day.

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before
breakfast."

Lewis Carroll

There are few Christians who would deny that their religious faith and life go far beyond theory and the limits of reason. In Christian theology there has always been a fine but well-respected line between legitimate apologetics and the necessary protection of Christian mysteries. Contrary to many commentators, Donald Bloesch has maintained that the Council of Chalcedon did not intellectualize the faith, but "actually succeeded in safeguarding the fundamental mystery and paradox of the faith." Later on Bloesch calls the Incarnation an "absolute paradox" not "palatable to reason."⁽¹⁾ I believe that Bloesch is correct, and I shall interpret his "absolute paradox" to mean that neither the truth of the man-God nor the lesser claim that it is coherent is demonstrable.

Bloesch and many other Christian theologians must be praised for respecting the all-important distinction between faith and reason. Because of the limits of the philosophical method, philosophers must also acknowledge mysteries which reason will never be able to fathom. But why should anyone add unnecessary paradoxes to a universe that already confronts us with so many unresolved puzzles? I contend that the Christian doctrine of Incarnation is one of these unnecessary mysteries; and there is a growing consensus among Christian liberals, attested by the book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, that the doctrine should be radically reinterpreted.

A. The Incarnation and the "Hebraic" Principle

One of the fundamental axioms of the Judeo-Christian tradition is what I call the "Hebraic" principle, based on the greatest discovery of the ancient Hebrews, namely, the transcendence of God. The priestly writers of the Sixth Century B.C.E. not only

overcame the primitive anthropomorphisms of earlier Hebrew writers, but also made a clean break with other Near Eastern views in which, for example, gods battled with sea dragons or mated with humans. This of course thoroughly confused the distinction between the divine and the nondivine.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition it was only the Sadducees who remained true to the Hebraic principle. Along with the Pharisees, the Sadducees rejected the Christian idea of Incarnation (to them a pagan mixing of the human and divine), but the Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, also eschewed the resurrection of the body and eternal life. I contend that the concept of human immortality is just as much a confusion of deity and humanity as the Incarnation. Two of the greatest mistakes of religious thinking--the humanization of God and the divinization of human beings--have their source in a rejection of the Hebraic principle.

Granting the truth of the Hebraic principle is not the same as saying that it has been properly applied in the classical theism of the western religions. Some of the traditional attributes of God, especially immutability and atemporality, make the deity so different from the world that any intelligible relationship between God and the world appears impossible. For example, Augustine's theory of divine time as the copresence of past, present, and future is nothing like the temporal succession we ourselves experience. On the other hand, process theology preserves a qualitative distinction between God and the world, while at the same time making sense of divine immanence and avoiding the extremes of the *via negativa*. Process metaphysics, with its affirmation of internal relations and spatial inclusion, is ideal for incarnational religions, while substance metaphysics is totally unsuitable. Externally related self-identical things cannot be immanent in one another. Even if

process Christians were interested in the literal man-God, they know full well that they could not make the idea intelligible even within their process categories.

In their firm rejection of divine incarnation and other anthropomorphic impositions on the divine nature, Muslims honor the Hebraic principle with one exception: their belief in human immortality. Many eastern views, however, openly celebrate the collapse of this principle. With their pantheism and absolute monism, the Vedantists claim that there is no qualitative distinction between Brahman and Atman; reality is an absolute unity without remainder. On the other hand, the Sankhya-Yoga dualism maintains a strict distinction between spiritual reality (purusha) and material reality (prakriti). If Vishnu's incarnation as Krishna is seen in terms of this dualistic metaphysics, then the problems I find with Christian incarnationism also obtain in Hindu evangelicalism. The notion of Vishnu becoming flesh was just as scandalous to some Hindus as a divine man was to Jews. Otherwise, Krishna would not have had to say that "fools scorn me" in the "human form that I have assumed" (Bhagavad-gita 9:11).

In his forceful response to the liberal Christians of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, evangelical Michael Green unwittingly confirms the logic of the Hebraic principle. In arguing that New Testament writers believed that Jesus was God, but that no Jew except an insane one would make such a claim, Green cites Old Testament passages which clearly indicate that the terms "redeemer" and "judge" referred exclusively to Yahweh.(2) Green is obviously correct: the Hebraic principle separates cleanly the functions and attributes of God from those of creatures. In short, the principle rigorously requires that God be God and humans be human. John Calvin expressed the Hebraic principle in his famous motto *finitum non capax infiniti*, but he did not

acknowledge, as far as I am aware, the implications that this had for the alleged man-God Jesus. In contrast, Søren Kierkegaard reformulated Calvin's maxim as an infinite qualitative difference between humans and God and declared that the Incarnation was indeed an absurdity.

Of all the progressive theologians urging a reformulation of this doctrine, it is Don Cupitt who sees the problem most clearly in terms of the Hebraic principle. Cupitt shows that Jesus had such an unequivocal understanding of this axiom that it would have been inconceivable for him to declare himself God. Cupitt states: "Christianity's proper subtlety and freedom depended upon Jesus' ironical perception of disjunction between the things of God and the things of men, a disjunction particularly enforced in the parables....What matters in Jesus' message is his sense of the abrupt juxtaposition of two opposed orders of things....The essential thing is that the two contrasting orders must collide. But the doctrine of the Incarnation unified things which Jesus had kept in ironic contrast with each other...."(3)

If it is true that the priestly writers of the Old Testament demythologized Near Eastern creation myths which consistently confused the divine and the nondivine, then one can legitimately contend that the Christian incarnationists have reintroduced mythology to their own religious tradition. The authors of *The Truth of God Incarnate* score some debating points on the loose use of the term "myth" by John Hick and his colleagues, but there can be no denial of the fact that some type of mythology is involved in a literal incarnation. Jesus' disciples and the early church violated the Hebraic principle by taking the person of Jesus as the message, thereby displacing the transcendent Yahweh in favor of a mythical man-God redeemer.

Donald Bloesch carefully explains that the deity of Christ is not to be construed as a theophany, "the visible appearance of God in human form," but as "deity... hidden in his humanity."(4) In the same paragraph Bloesch clearly sees the dangers of mythology: "If there could be a direct recognition of Jesus as God, this would then make Jesus a mythological being...." But Carl Henry reaffirms the idea of direct revelation, mediated by Christ the Logos, even though he has just acknowledged Pannenberg's charge that it would be "Gnostic" to do so.(5)

John Hick proposes another reason why God would continue with the indirect revelation of the Old Testament and not switch to a divine man: the protection of human freedom. As Hick states: "The self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ...is a veiled revelation which achieves its purpose only when men penetrate the divine incognito by an uncompelled response of self-commitment and trust...."(6) My sympathies of course lie with Cupitt and Hick: the best way to avoid the dangers of mythology is to reject the Incarnation altogether. The doctrine is an unnecessary stumbling block; it does not have any support in the Old Testament and has shaky New Testament foundations; the doctrine violates the Hebraic principle, the seminal discovery of Hebrew theology; and, as a result, the unavoidable conclusion is that orthodox Christianity is just another religion which perpetuates the pagan confusion between the divine and the creaturely.

B. Logic and the Incarnation

At this point some may say that I have already granted too much. Quite apart from theological principles and what the Bible might say, there is still this basic

objection: the idea of a man-God is a straightforward logical contradiction. The participants on both sides in the contemporary debate agree that this is the question that must be first addressed. As Maurice Wiles states: "If it could be shown that the doctrine was strictly nonsensical, the basic issue in the debate would have been settled at a stroke--and we could either pack up and go home or move on to the work of reconstruction."(7) One evangelical admits that the doctrine is a paradox, but he admonishes any thinker who dares to conclude that it is thereby nonsense. Two liberals, Maurice Wiles and Michael Goulder, reject such glib solutions (Goulder calls it "mystification") and challenge their critics to clearly confront the logical coherence problem. Nevertheless, Goulder proposes that the Incarnation is "not an apparent contradiction but apparent nonsense as opposed to transparent nonsense."(8) In the same vein, Wiles warns us that "it is much harder to plot the border-line between sense and nonsense in talking about the mystery of God."(9)

I have already mentioned the limits which philosophical theologians place on themselves; and I have duly repeated my respect for mysteries which reason cannot fathom. These concessions notwithstanding, I find Goulder and Wiles' position just as confusing as the evangelicals'. I agree with John Hick that the concept of a man-God is logically parallel to a square circle, and I submit that the burden of proof is on the incarnationists to demonstrate why the two concepts are not logically analogous. Liberals like Gould and Wiles and the evangelicals are being unnecessarily agnostic about the conceptual data that we have to address this problem.

Let us assume that the medieval theologians were correct that God shares, in an eminent way, at least three attributes with finite beings: God is a supreme unity; God is a supreme truth; and God has supreme value. Again following traditional methods,

we can also establish a modest list of divine attributes which contrast with those of finite beings. Following Dun Scotus' Law of Disjunction, we can say that God is infinite but we are finite; that God is necessary but we are contingent; that God is uncaused and we are caused; and that God is immortal but we are mortal.

Using the last pair of attributes, I offer the following syllogisms:

All humans are mortal.

Jesus was human (According to Christian doctrine).

Hence, Jesus was mortal.

God is not mortal.

Jesus was mortal (According to the syllogism above).

Hence, Jesus was not God.

These simple logical exercises show that there is an irresolvable logical contradiction in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Evangelical Ronald Nash gives a rousing defense for the law of contradiction and cites the following example: "It is impossible...that Socrates could be both man and non-man."(10) I challenge Nash to show why his example is not exactly parallel to "It is impossible that Jesus could be both human and nonhuman."

With regard to the syllogisms above, some critics might object to the truth of the premise "all humans are mortal." There is a common understanding, based in part on phrases from some of the Christian creeds, that human beings have some sort of natural or essential immortality. I contend that Christian theology should not, and

biblical scholarship cannot, support such a view. A close study of the biblical words for "soul" (nephesh and psyche) will reveal a soul which is thoroughly mortal and corruptible. Furthermore, animals also have nephesh and psyche: in the Old Testament animals were created with the same infusion of God's breath as human beings . Therefore, being "ensouled" is not unique to human beings in the biblical view. What makes humans special is their creation in the image of God, and as I understand Christian doctrine, it takes a special act of God to restore that tarnished image and transform the mortal soul into something fit for the divine presence. The Bible teaches a "bestowed" immortality not a natural immortality. The concept of a disembodied, immaterial, and naturally immortal soul is of Greek and/or Indian derivation; it is definitely not a Hebrew idea.

Others might object to the first premise on other grounds. These critics might introduce the possibility that modern medical science--by, for example, unlocking the secret of the aging process--could prolong human life indefinitely. But such a feat would not change basic human mortality. As one of my bright freshman students once said: "The guy could still be run over by a truck!" The student's point is a good one: just because we have extended human life indefinitely does not mean that we have made it indestructible or incorruptible. Stunning biological advancements might make it possible for humans to have everlasting life, but all the other limitations of our finitude would remain, including sinning boldly every day of such a life.

The predicate immortality means birthlessness, deathlessness, and incorruptibility, and such a predicate is not attributable to human beings except by divine fiat, and only then at the cost of their basic humanity. John Hick puts the point

well: "When we try to contemplate the contradictory notion of immortalized mortals, our thoughts turn away from what we know as human existence to something for which we are more inclined to invoke the notion of angels."(11) Hick's last point was confirmed long ago by Jesus himself: "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mk. 12:25). Even Jesus realized that immortality was not a human predicate. God cannot immortalize a human being without changing that being into something ontologically different. Paul's "new beings in Christ" would not be human beings as we now know them.

In his response to *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Michael Green gives the impression that the doctrines of Resurrection and Incarnation are conceptually similar: "Who are we to determine the impossibility of God becoming one of us, or of rising from the dead?...There is no a priori reason why we should conclude that it is impossible and therefore did not happen."(12) Evangelical Stephen T. Davis invites a similar comparison along different lines. He admits that some people might find his belief in a literal Incarnation just as preposterous as the notion that huge ape-like creatures inhabit wilderness areas of the American Northwest.(13) Such creatures are at least physically possible, whereas the man-God is not even logically possible.

Green is correct about the Resurrection, but wrong about the Incarnation. The skeptic's problem with the Resurrection is that it is physically impossible, i.e., it goes against known laws of nature. There is, however, no logical constraint against it. If God is omnipotent and the structure of the universe allows it, God could intervene and suspend the laws of nature. Alternatively, it is logically possible that another universe would have different physical laws such that bodily resurrection would be a natural occurrence. By contrast the Incarnation, assuming that the Hebraic principle

is true, involves a logical impossibility, not a physical impossibility. Our physical laws would not apply to every possible universe, but every possible universe must follow the laws of logic.

Evangelical Paul Helm has composed a pair of syllogisms that are quite similar to those above. They are as follows:

Jesus was a man.

No man is identical with God.

Therefore, Jesus is not identical with God?

Jesus is God.

No man is identical with God.

Therefore, Jesus is not a man?

Helm uses question marks because he believes that there is something wrong with these arguments. He does not articulate his reasons for hesitating, and only observes that the bishops at Chalcedon wanted to safeguard "the mystery of the Incarnation from palpable self-contradiction" and wished "to preserve both lines of biblical evidence in his syllogisms from too hasty logical treatment."⁽¹⁴⁾ In response evangelical Mark M. Hanna believes that the main problem with Helm's formulations is a basic ambiguity about Jesus' humanity. Hanna contends that the premise of the first syllogism is true only if we understand that Jesus is not "in the category of 'man the creature.'"⁽¹⁵⁾

Gordon Clark makes Hanna's point more explicitly: "...Christ was not a human person. He was a divine person who took upon himself a human nature."(16). This of course solves none of the problems, because Clark does not tell us how this is possible. Furthermore, Clark proves that neither he nor Hanna can speak unambiguously of Jesus' humanity. If Jesus was not only tempted, but could have fallen into temptation, as I understand Christian tradition, then he must have been truly human, viz., a member of the category of "man the creature." But if Jesus is in a different category, let us say of "divine or uncreaturely men," then the Chalcedonian axiom "complete in manhood" and "truly man" would not be fulfilled. I believe that it is safe to say that most attempts to reconcile the logical problems of the Incarnation end up alienating Jesus from his humanity.

If one takes the "is" in "Jesus is God" as the "is of identity" (this is certainly clear in Helm's syllogisms), then Don Cupitt has shown that all sorts of absurdities can be imputed to the doctrine of the Incarnation. With an example like "Venus is the morning star," one can see that the "is of identity" indicates that the subject and predicate are two ways of designating the same individual. This means that if Jesus was a Jew, then God was a Jew; it means that if Jesus had parents, then God must have parents; and it must also imply that if Jesus prayed to God, then God prayed to himself. This of course is a beautiful *reductio ad absurdum* argument against this particular formulation of the Incarnation.

Cupitt backs off from this argument because he believes that Christian thinkers could not possibly have meant to use the "is of identity."(17) Cupitt is not correct on this point, because early Catholic theologians committed themselves to the *communicatio idiomatum*, which means that "we can predicate of the one person

what is rooted in either nature." It appears that the *communicatio idiomatum* is also behind the doctrine of *theotokos*, that Mary was literally the Mother of God.(18). But even these theologians realized that apparent absurdities, such as *Deus creatura est* and *homo eternus est*, follow from this doctrine. The language of identity also creates tension between the Incarnation and the Trinity. The three persons of the Godhead cannot be absolutely identical because trinitarian social relations would not be intelligible.

In his response to the Christian liberals, Michael Green ends up equivocating about the ontology of the Incarnation. He declares that "it would be ridiculous to imagine that Jesus is God tout simple," but he nevertheless argues elsewhere that Jesus is fully identical with the Old Testament God. Green says that Jesus "is identified with God Almighty"; that Jesus and Yahweh have the same names; and that Jesus is metaphysically one with God.(19) Almost in the same breath, however, Green subtly switches to the "is of predication" by affirming a growing consensus about the Christology of the Book of John. Green believes that it is significant that John does not use the definite article *ho* before *theos* in the first verse. Green believes that this indicates "that Jesus shared the very nature of God, but did not exhaustively embody him."(20)

By proposing that Jesus was divine but not fully identical with God, Green seems to stray from the orthodox formula that Jesus was fully God and fully human. Again it looks as if only the "is of identity" (with its absurd implications) can express this orthodox creed, while the "is of predication" will lead Christians into the heresy of subordinationism. Furthermore, many subordinationist formulations still confuse human and divine predicates. The only view free from logical problems is

"adoptionism," the view held by many early Christians that Jesus was a man chosen by God to be a unique Son of God, an obedient servant "even unto death."

C. Stephen T. Davis and the Incarnation

I have heard it said that the Christian man-God could be conceived as similar to a cube-sphere, i.e., a figure with a spherical top and a cube bottom. There are immediate problems with this as an appropriate analogy. As it is neither cube nor sphere, but only partly cube and partly sphere, the figure is not analogous to Jesus Christ as "complete in Godhead and complete in manhood." While the creeds have the incarnate Logos as "genuinely and unambiguously a man and genuinely and unambiguously God,"(21) this hybrid form is essentially ambiguous.

The bishops at Chalcedon declared that the two natures exist in Christ "without confusion...without division, without separation." In contrast the qualities of the cube-sphere are divided and separated. There is yet a further problem with this solution. Whereas we have no problem adding cube-like characteristics to the bottom of the sphere, it is impossible to conceive of adding creaturely properties to a being which is already and continues to be omnipotent, omniscience, necessary, etc. Either the being has these divine attributes or it has the finite properties of humans.

In his recent book *Logic and the Nature of God*, Stephen T. Davis has chapters on the Incarnation and the Trinity. Using the techniques of analytic philosophy, Davis performs some careful housecleaning before offering his solution to the problem. I am afraid, however, that he later uses the same philosophical tools to

undermine the concept of God. First, Davis proposes that the Incarnation could mean that Christ had all the essential properties of God and all the essential properties of a human being. Davis' initial language may help us rephrase the Incarnation so that we can use the "is of predication" without falling into subordinationism. Jesus is God because he has all the essential attributes of God, but is not identical with God because he also has all essential human qualities. Second, Davis lists two sets of four attributes which have commonly been held to be essential attributes of God and of human beings: viz., omniscience, omnipotence, necessity, and creator for God; and nonomniscience, nonomnipotence, contingency, and noncreator for humans. Third, Davis concedes that if these corresponding lists are correct, then Hick is right in his claim that the man-God is logically analogous to a square circle. It is impossible for Christ to have simultaneously all the essential properties of both God and human beings.

One's initial impression is that Hick and his liberal colleagues have won another victory. However, Davis is not finished but I am afraid his solution is far from orthodox. His proposal is essentially this: although eternally coexistent with God the Father, the Second Person of the Trinity voluntarily and temporarily lays aside those divine attributes logically inconsistent with human attributes and becomes the earthly person Jesus of Nazareth. In the Ascension the Second Person takes back those divine attributes not present during Jesus' earthly ministry. Davis' final definition of the Incarnation is the following: "Jesus Christ has certain essential properties of God and certain essential properties of man; his divine properties and his human properties are consistent; the divine properties are sufficient to make him truly God and the human properties are sufficient to make him truly man."(22)

In addition to claiming that his definition of the Incarnation is logically possible, Davis also maintains that it is theologically orthodox. Davis makes much of the phrase "truly God and truly man" in the Chalcedonian creed; and although he quotes it, he neglects to acknowledge the phrase "complete in Godhead and complete in manhood." This is the main part of the sentence to which "truly God and truly man" stands in apposition. Davis attempts to argue that God can lack certain divine properties and still be truly God. But this essential sentence from the creed makes it clear that "complete in Godhead" is the meaning of "truly God." Therefore, the correct interpretation of Chalcedon must be Davis' first formulation: "Jesus Christ has all the essential properties of God and all the essential properties of man." (My emphasis added.)

You will recall that Davis admits that this orthodox expression of the Incarnation is self-contradictory. I can see no way in which we can grant that Davis' Christology "falls within the boundaries marked out by Chalcedon...."(23) Davis' philosophical arguments focus on omniscience, and he claims that the Christian God's knowledge must be a contingent rather than a necessary property. The classical Christian theologians would certainly have been shocked at such a suggestion. The traditional view has always been that all of God's properties are necessary properties. This is the basic insight on which Thomas Aquinas declared that God's existence was identical with the divine essence.

Cupitt summarizes the medieval position aptly: "Since the divine attributes belong to God not contingently but analytically necessarily, it is logically impossible for the deity to doff one like a superfluous piece of clothing."(24) Furthermore, Anselm of Canterbury could not have accepted such a being as God, for one could

conceive of a greater being, viz., one whose knowledge was perfect and necessary to its being. Davis challenges the implication above that essential predication has always been normative for orthodox theology. He admits that Aquinas and others held that all of God's properties are necessary, but he doubts if Augustine, Luther, Calvin, or Barth agreed with such a doctrine. I have no great expertise in historical theology, but Calvin certainly appears to be supporting essential predication in the following comment on Romans 1:20: "The divinity cannot exist except accompanied with all the attributes of God, since they are all included under the idea."(25) Bruce Demarest claims that Calvin, like Aquinas, believed in the "indivisibility of the divine existence and essence." Paul Tillich also supports essential predication.(26)

Davis argues that the doctrine of essential predication has serious problems. Using his own example, Aquinas' God would have the property of knowing Davis' youngest sister's middle name. If all of God's properties are essential, then that means that Davis' youngest sister is a necessary being, which of course is absurd. If Davis is correct in this argument (I believe that he is), then it seems that the best alternative is the process view that God comes to know future contingents as they are actualized and not from eternity. Similarly, if God's freedom to create is to be preserved in the traditional view, then the divine property of creator must also be accidental as well. Furthermore, the attribute of redeemer must be contingent if Christians are to remain orthodox in believing that Adam freely chose to sin. As Barth so brilliantly pointed out, if the Second Person of the Trinity is eternally a redeemer then that must mean that Adam had no choice but to fall.

The foregoing considerations compel me to reaffirm my preference for a general process view of God. Both Whitehead and Hartshorne have argued that, in order for

God to relate to and know the world, contingencies must be added to the divine nature. For Hartshorne this means that the divine nature is dipolar: God has a relative as well as an absolute nature. Furthermore, Hartshorne is confident that he has answered the Anselmian objection that the process deity could not possibly be God. Since his God includes the values of the world as well as divine values, Hartshorne declares that the process God is indeed the greatest being that can be conceived. Not all philosophers and theologians have been persuaded by this argument, and process theology is still criticized for demoting God to something less than the fullness of the divine. The same criticism must be leveled at Davis, but with an important difference. Whitehead and Hartshorne reject divine immutability on philosophical and logical grounds, even though process Christians have later exploited this for theological reasons. More important for our purposes, Whitehead and Hartshorne preserve God's omniscience. Some contend, and I agree with them, that their arguments against divine foreknowledge have made omniscience a coherent concept for the first time in theological history.

If the critics are right that the process deity is not God, then Davis' contingently omniscient being is even less so. In his "Introduction" Davis complains about "too much surgery on the Christian view of God," but his revisions seem to be a flagrant example of this. Davis is right that most Christian theologians and laypersons do not speak in terms of necessary and accidental divine properties. But with regard to God's knowledge, I believe that all of them would agree that God must know all there is to know. This is "necessary" omniscience without the absurdities of essential predication. In insisting that God's ignorance of future contingents does not compromise divine omniscience, the process theologians can still claim that God

knows all that there is to know. Davis' position is more radical and unorthodox: Jesus was "plainly" not omniscient but can still somehow claim the title "God."

Davis' reasons for rejecting necessary omniscience are quite different from the process theologians' arguments against the classical attributes. If Davis had, by a pretheological and strictly philosophical analysis of God, arrived at sufficient reasons to challenge omniscience as a necessary attribute, then we would have been obliged to consider his proposal on its philosophical merits. Davis, however, obviously does not begin in such a pretheological framework. Rather, his theological presuppositions are clear: he personally believes that Jesus was God and his reading of the New Testament has convinced him that Jesus was not omniscient. Ironically, these passages (Mk. 5:30; 13:32) are those typically chosen by either skeptics or liberal Christians for their arguments that the early Church had simply deified a brilliant Jewish prophet. The *prima facie* import of these passages is that Jesus was fully human, not that he was a divine being who had momentarily put aside omniscience. Furthermore, conservative Christians can point to many other passages which indicate that Jesus was omniscient. They would also claim that his foreknowledge was something other than the inspired prophecy Davis suggests it was.

What I am claiming is that Davis' method is fundamentally suspect. Davis' argument can be summarized in the following syllogism:

According to some New Testament passages Jesus was not omniscient.

Jesus was God.

Therefore, God (as Jesus) was not omniscient.

This is perhaps an acceptable method for doing empirical biblical theology (which, I believe, is doomed to failure because of textual inconsistencies), but it is definitely not a method suitable for the "analytic philosophy of religion" Davis claims to be doing. It does not seem to be a proper approach for Christian dogmatics either.

From the start Davis redefines a basic article of faith from the standpoint of logical coherence, not Christian faith itself. Davis has reason leading faith rather than faith leading reason. The result is that Davis is so committed to the intelligibility of the Incarnation that he resorts to major ad hoc tampering with the concept of God. Is the doctrine of Incarnation so important for Christians that they should give up the traditional doctrine of God for it? I should think not. Sacrificing necessary attributes is far too high a price to pay in order that a divine-human life on earth can be made intelligible.

One is not initially aware of the radical extent to which Davis actually wants to revise the concept of God. Recall that in the Incarnation Jesus will have only those divine and human attributes which are consistent. This means that besides omniscience, at least the other three divine attributes Davis mentions--omnipotence, necessity, and being a creator--will also be declared accidental and therefore absent during the Second Person's time on earth. Jesus of course is mortal so the divine attribute of immortality will also have to be voluntarily set aside.

What is left of God's nature that is not inconsistent with the humanity of Christ? One immediately thinks of the divine attributes we share with God by virtue of being created in the divine image; but rationality and conscience, the traditional contents of the *imago dei*, are found in all human beings. Sinlessness is a property allegedly

shared by nonfallen angels, Adam and Eve before the Fall, Jesus, and God. Davis does claim Jesus as God could forgive sins, and this again seems to be inconsistent with Jesus as human. The scribes who criticized Jesus' healing of the paralytic in Mark 2 were assuming the Hebraic principle when they declared that only God can forgive sins.

Davis has paid a high price to get God and Jesus together without contradiction, but this sacrifice is all in vain: there is virtually nothing left of the deity of Christ. Davis certainly complies with Bloesch's insistence that the Incarnation not be viewed as a theophany, but in Davis' Jesus there is very little "deity...hidden in his humanity." When dealing with the Incarnation classical theologians have generally erred on the side of Jesus' humanity, but Davis joins radical kenotic theologians in erring on the side of Jesus' divinity. Augustine has Jesus "holding fast to his own divinity,"(27) as the creeds demand, but Davis has the Second Person throwing off divinity in order to conform to the law of contradiction. Taking the Incarnation literally, and especially trying to make it logically coherent, has led to a veritable theological disaster. Davis is not a creationist nor a detailed inerrantist, but he is an evangelical rationalist when it comes to the faith-reason question and the coherence of the Incarnation.

D. Incarnation and Kenosis

Davis' claim that his defense of the Incarnation remains within the framework of Chalcedon is puzzling in light of the fact that earlier in his discussion he admits that his formulation is not "classical" but "kenotic." Kenotic Christologies have always been declared heretical, and it was the 19th Century before some minor theologians

felt they could freely discuss the possibility that God gave up some divine attributes in the Incarnation. The word "kenotic" comes from the Greek kenosis and the following hymn from Phillipians is the textual basis for this subordinationist Christology: "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied (echense) himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (2:7). Donald Bloesch claims that an acceptable interpretation of kenosis must be found because it is "solidly biblical," but he warns against two heresies which we have just identified: "If the divine attributes were renounced by Christ when he became man,...it is difficult to see how he can still be regarded as God [my critique of Davis]. If the humiliated One is not the very same as the Exalted One, then Jesus becomes little more than a demigod who lives on earth."(28)

Michael Green also turns to a kenotic Christology similar to Davis' as this citation indicates: "It means that Jesus had always been one with God; that he voluntarily laid aside those aspects of his deity that would have been impossible to combine with sharing our human conditions..."(29) Green concludes this particular discussion with a warning to liberal scholars who claim that the earliest strata of the New Testament do not support the full deity of Jesus. This comment is absolutely baffling in light of the concession Green has made in the passage just quoted. Green's ad hoc tampering with the doctrine of the Incarnation--that Jesus "voluntarily laid aside" certain aspects of his deity--reveals that Green does not have a clear understanding of the divine nature. Like Davis, Green somehow assumes that the divine attributes are accidental and can be jettisoned so that God could become a human being.

In recent years the most radical kenotic Christology has been the "death-of-God" theology of Thomas Altizer. Altizer argues, not very successfully I must stress, that the real meaning of Christianity is found in the total self-emptying of God in the Incarnation. According to Altizer, the transcendent God of the Hebrew Bible pours out his divinity into the world so that not only is Jesus divine but "every human hand and face" is as well. Altizer fully embraces an Hegelian dialectical method, so it is difficult to tell whether the Incarnation involves the complete humanization of God or the complete divinization of the world. Although I believe that Altizer would opt for the latter, I would argue that he is actually doing the former. In any event, Altizer believes that the Incarnation is so important that it is indeed worth sacrificing the traditional concept of God for it. Kenotic Christologies do not have to be as radical as Altizer's in order to skew the original intentions of the early fathers. Altizer's view, to my knowledge, is the only one which eliminates the transcendent divine, although we have seen that Davis comes very close to this for Jesus' life on earth.

Other kenotic Christologies speak of the coincidence of a God of glory and a God of humble subservience; or they alternatively propose an omniscient Jesus together with an ignorant Jesus unsure of his destiny. All sorts of problems immediately appear. First, there is a confusion of predicates just as severe as in the orthodox formulations. Only Davis, who denies to Jesus all divine predicates inconsistent with human ones, escapes this charge. Second, the unity of the nature of the Second Person seems to be directly compromised: are there two consciousnesses in Jesus Christ and perhaps even two wills? The latter was declared heretical centuries ago.

The arguments of this chapter have attempted to show that there are decided advantages to a religion without a literal divine incarnation. First, one avoids the basic logical problems involved in the concept of a man-God. Why should one add unnecessary logical problems to a world-view which atheists already find burdened with logical difficulties? In other words, the cause of theism is enhanced significantly without the myth of God incarnate. Second, one preserves the seminal discovery of the ancient Hebrews: that God is God and that creatures are creatures; and that one should not mix the nature and attributes of one with the other. Third, one avoids the mythologizing that is inevitable when one wants to speak seriously of a literal God-made-flesh.

The ancient Hebrews were correct: Philo of Alexandria said that "neither is God in human form, nor is the human body God-like";(30) and Yahweh himself allegedly declared "I am God and not man" (Hos. 11:9). With regard to the Incarnation the evangelical rationalists would like to have more logic and less mystery, but I believe that conservative Christians generally ought to be content with less reason, weaker beliefs, and more faith. My real sympathies, however, lie with the Christian progressives, primarily the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, who partially justify their actions with a little history lesson: in the 17th Century the church survived when it was forced to give up a three-story, geocentric universe; with the rise of textual criticism Christianity has not only survived but benefited enormously; and most Christians, even some conservative evangelicals, have also managed to come to terms with modern evolutionary theory. With these major historical adjustments in mind, the Christian liberals see no reason why Christianity cannot give up the myth of God incarnate.

Endnotes

1. Donald C. Bloesch, *The Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 128, 139, 141.
2. Michael Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 33, 35.
3. Donald Cupitt, "The Christ of Christendom" in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), p. 140.
4. Bloesch, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 140.
5. Henry, *God, Reason, and Authority*, vol. 2, p. 302.
6. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 140.
7. Maurice Wiles, "A Survey of Issues in the Myth Debate" in *Incarnation and Myth*, ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 5.
8. Michael Goulder, "Paradox and Mystification" in *Incarnation and Myth*, p. 54.
9. Wiles, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
10. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, p. 105.

11. John H. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 410.
12. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
13. See Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 5-6.
14. Paul Helm, "The Role of Logic in Biblical Interpretation" in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, eds. E.D. Radmacher and R.D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 847.
15. Mark M. Hanna, "A Response to The Role of Logic in Biblical Interpretation" in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, p. 868.
16. Gordon Clark, *In Defense of Theology* (Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1984), p. 104.
17. Cupitt, "Jesus and the Meaning of God" in *Incarnation and Myth*, p. 36.
18. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), vol. 1, p. 445.
19. Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 28, 41.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
21. John Hick, "Evil and the Incarnation" in *Incarnation and Myth*, p. 178.

22. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 123.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

24. Cupitt, "The Christ of Christendom" in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. 137.

25. Quoted in Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 53.

26. See *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 236.

27. Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 21. 15. I also found a good response from Augustine to Davis' contingent omniscience: "...What are we mean wretches that dare presume to limit His knowledge?" (*ibid.*, bk. 12. 18).

28. Bloesch, *Essentials...*, vol. 1, p. 137.

29. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

30. Philo of Alexandria, *On the Account of the World's Creation*, p. 213.