

GOD BECOMES MAN

FROM A HUMAN CONCEPTION OF GOD TO A CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF HUMANITY¹

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In the last few decades, the teaching about Christ, so-called “Christology,” has posed enormous difficulties not only for those with little or no church connection, but for an increasing number of those active in the church as well. How can explaining the significance of the cross of Jesus, who gave his life for his own, still be possible for modern people? How can we today share the first generation of Christians’ joy over Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead and his appearance to the disciples? And how can the mystery of Christmas that God himself came into the world in a stall, becoming human in the form of a little child, still be intelligible against the background of our modern understanding of the world?

Not only the mystery of Jesus Christ’s person, ministry and suffering appears rather puzzling to many; in addition to “Christology” they also find traditional Christian “anthropology,” i.e., the teaching about humanity and the basic way in which people in general are portrayed, to be seriously problematic. When the Christian tradition portrays humans as “sinners” whose “inclination is evil from youth” (Gen 8:21 NRSV) and who therefore needs to be forgiven and redeemed, more than a few of us are at a loss about how to deal with this.

It has become generally “inappropriate” and “out of place,” or even pedagogically and theologically “harmful” and “politically incorrect,” to address humanity in terms of its *insufficiency* and *neediness* at all. Should we not instead, in keeping with the dominant conception of humanity, assume that people are basically good and are only held back from developing naturally by negative social and political influences? How can biblical language about humans being sinful from birth and even from the beginning of history be combined with a “socially acceptable” conception of people as basically being capable of living positively and loving each other?

Thus, when it comes to the idea of the “incarnation of God,” both the teaching about *Christ* and the teaching about *humanity*, which is implied and included in “Christology,” have become difficult to comprehend in modern thought. At the same time, “God” himself can still be spoken of, and the idea of an ultimate reason for existence, a higher power, the principle of life or the ideal of love is something virtually nobody wants their worldview to be without.

¹ English Translation by Lucas Ogden & Simon-M. Schäfer (2013). English version of Eckstein, H.-J. ([2006] 2010). Gott wird Mensch: Vom menschlichen Gottesbild zum christlichen Menschenbild. In H.-J. Eckstein, Glaube als Beziehung: Von der menschlichen Wirklichkeit Gottes (Grundlagen des Glaubens 2, 3. Aufl., S. 9-31). Holzgerlingen: Hänssler Verlag.

“God” is mentioned in dialogue with other religions, but also in very trivial contexts like when speaking of the “weather god” or “sports god.” We might tell a child longing for comfort and security about our “loving God” and in the hour of our own sickness and need we may for once even send a prayer up to heaven ourselves. However, in general the way we talk about God in the modern era tends to be non-specific and figurative. In comparison to that, the conception of God as an almighty being who intervenes in space and time and who took on human form in Jesus of Nazareth seems out-dated and problematic.

Since the Enlightenment, profound changes have not only taken place regarding our conception of *God* and of the *world*, or how we understand nature and history, but also regarding our conception of *humanity*. The old contrasts of heaven and earth, God and man, transcendence and immanence have all been dissolved by a worldview that puts humanity itself in the center of the world and history, of reason and of how to live life. “I think, therefore I am!” “I act, therefore I am!” “I feel, therefore I am!” These are the confessional statements of modern people who have come to recognize themselves as independent subjects of their own lives. It is not somebody else’s will or a prescribed destiny that they are to live up to, but rather their own potential and what they have recognized to be beneficial.

FREEDOM FROM A BLEAK CONCEPTION OF HUMANITY?

Doing away with the old way of thinking that placed God above man felt freeing for many people. This feeling can partially be explained by traditional theological connections and anthropological implications that had often crept into pronounced religiosity in particular. Thus, the contrast between God and man became a dualism of good and evil, light and darkness, strength and weakness, truth and falsehood, reducing humans to their inability, mortality and guilt at a time. The goal of an upbringing marked by this mentality could be to drive children’s innate spirit of rebellion out of them, making them always know their place and submit.

Whenever mankind “itself” was seen as the actual problem, the true goals of personality development were found in subduing and denying one’s “self.” And when the individual’s will and independence were understood as rebelliousness, then it was an explicitly indicated pedagogical goal to “break the will” of the child using all available means, even physical punishment, until it finally obeyed a will considered greater than its own.

Against the background of such a “poisonous pedagogy,” the worldview of the Enlightenment and the modern conception of humanity had to appear as nothing less than freedom from slavery and oppression. It was not an external force, not a God or his earthly representatives that would continue to dominate history and individual lives, but rather it was humanity itself, which now acknowledged itself and determined its own path. Humanity no longer has to bow before external norms and conceptions. Humans no longer need to pay heed to standards laid down for them, but they can establish themselves and create

and realize their own criteria. A sense of guilt is replaced by a strong will, and heeding the interests of others is replaced by asserting oneself.

People no longer need to be condemned as “evil” and “guilty” since they come into the world innocent and with the potential for good. The point of education is simply to *develop* this good potential so that people’s true selves emerge. After all, humanity’s basic constitution is defined as good; everything that people need to develop properly is already within them – they just should not be held back. People are made bad and unsocial exclusively by an inappropriate upbringing based on old norms, and by harmful social and political conditions. The position that God had in an older worldview is now assumed by humanity itself, which believes it has come to the realization that God did not create humans in his image, but rather that they themselves – humans, in their former state of immaturity and fearfulness, created the conception of God.

A THEOLOGY OF CREATION INSTEAD OF A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS?

Indeed, it is also possible for a theology in the spirit of the Enlightenment to make use of biblical conceptions and traditional paradigms for the new vision of humanity, thus using the Judeo-Christian tradition to further benefit its own cause. *First of all, theology of creation* is brought up again and again for this purpose. In contrast to a *theology of the cross* that emphasizes the need for redemption and reconciliation, this alternative seems easier to communicate to modern people with their unbroken self-confidence.

As a matter of fact, according to this interpretation, the creation narrative is not about a contrast between the Creator and his creation, but rather about humanity being the image of God – representing and embodying him on earth, ruling over creation and life. The “image of God” is taken to mean recognizing in oneself one’s own view of being good and of the undying “divine” spark deep within that just needs to be released.

In the age of God’s absence, or as has already been put bluntly, “after the death of God,” humanity, which has now “become God,” steps into his place and takes responsibility for itself, creation and history. While the biblical account of creation in Gen 1 – 3 shows precisely the inconsistency of humanity by depicting humans endangering their own humanity and life in their desire to be like God and know both good and evil, a theology of creation that does not express antithesis between God and humanity, between the Creator and his creation, ultimately propagates the age-old, enticing message: “You will be like God!”

Now undeniably, we cannot emphasize enough that we as humans are responsible for our own lives and this world, that we cannot excuse ourselves by pointing to a higher reality and prescribed norms. “Here and now” is where we should be living, taking hold of our opportunities and realizing our goals. Nevertheless, lofty words about unlimited opportunities, of an optimistic self-image and absolute decisiveness get us off track sometimes. Then we stagger between illusory fantasies of being all-powerful and unrealistic feelings of being powerless on the ground of reality. In the end, getting intoxicated with what we can

do leaves us with a painful hangover of missing the mark, of failing and of lost opportunities. For if our entire future is exclusively in our own hands, then we are also left all on our own to bear our unsuccessful present, carrying it with us as our unredeemed past.

JESUS OF NAZARETH AS OUR MODEL

The *second* area in which modern ideas about a self-reliant and self-determined “divine” humanity are applied to theology is found in orientating ourselves on the *exemplary man Jesus of Nazareth*. Certainly, in this context he does not embody the *God who became man*, but rather the *man who became God*. Jesus represents the human being who revolts against any false respects and to any outdated norms, successfully asserting himself and his ideals. In his irreproachable speech, in his radical ethical demands and in the consistency of his own ethical behavior, even without any religious overtones he can serve as a model for true humanity. In fact, as the exalted “Christ,” whose message and cause have survived far beyond his own death on the cross, he can really come to symbolize the “self,” which all people are to develop in their own lives against any kind of decisions made for them by others, overcoming every form of alienation, even in spite of all their experiences of suffering.

Of course, it could be conceded that orientating ourselves on the *man Jesus* cannot really be all that off base and that we could not wish for anything better for our society today than for as many people as possible to take Jesus’ ethics and behavior as a model for themselves. However, problems begin once again in failing to recognize our own condition and overestimating our own potential. For our own lives ahead of us we might still believe in youthful exuberance that the impossible can be done and the world can be fundamentally changed. Which one of us would not go out full of illusions and good intentions from education into employment? At the latest, when we try to actually live out our ideals in our everyday lives we will realize that we not only deluded ourselves concerning our own strength and possibilities, but also at the same time concerning the brokenness and contradictions of reality – and by this of the people we care about. Should we keep holding on to our unified, ideal worldview anyway in denial of our own reality, continuing to drown out our experience and our perception of ourselves with appeals and rallying cries? Or will the proverbial “reality shock” hit us so hard that we not only give up on our unrealistic ideals, but in the end also on our much-needed professional perspective and even on ourselves?

Whether we define our commitment to Jesus of Nazareth as our model rather in a conservative sense of steadfastly “taking up our cross” and “obeying” Christ, or in a more liberal, respectively, neo-humanistic way speak of orienting our lives on the true human Jesus of Nazareth, in either case we will end up *excessively overburdening* both ourselves and those in our care. What about the experience of failure and guilt? What about the reality of our own limits and the ambivalence of actions with even the best of intentions? Where will our passion for change be when we cannot get out of unchanged situations with people who are tired of change? How can we deal with ourselves and others when

looking at our exemplary model cripples us, making us more aware of how small and inconsistent we are, instead of motivating us to greater ethical character and consistent discipleship?

THE HUMAN REALITY OF GOD

Now the secret to what the New Testament gospels tell us about Jesus of Nazareth is not to be found in *glorifying a human's divine potential*, but instead in *exalting God's human reality*. To say it with the words of the well-known prologue to John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh [i.e., a perishable, mortal man] and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1; 1:14 NRSV).

In light of the problems with the modern conception of man, it may surprise some that of all things a dogmatically "high" Christology is supposed to provide the solution. However, it is in fact precisely this Christology beginning in heaven that actually reaches the earth; and it is the message about God becoming human in his own Son that can comfort and encourage humans in the midst of the "twilight of the gods" when they themselves are exposed and disillusioned.

But how are we to understand Jesus Christ when he is confessed as the unique Word in creation and God's self-revelation or even as "the Son of God"? As becomes clear in all narratives, speeches and dialogues, he is supposed to be acknowledged as a person, but not as a human "just like you and I." He is much more considered as *God's* personal presence and loving expression of *his* concern for humanity. Everything that is confessed about Christ in the gospel could not be said of any human, but – theologically speaking – only of *God himself*, or philosophically speaking, only of "Being" and "the first Cause," "Life" and "Love" themselves. Christ is not only one of a million people alive, but all life that has been created is grounded in Him and takes part in His life, so that He Himself is understood as "*the Life*" (John 1:3f; 11:25f; 14:6). He does not just have enlightening words and he is not only a radiant person, but He Himself is "*the Light*" in which everything exists and lives (John 1:4; 8:12). He does not only speak truth and does not only proclaim binding teachings, but He Himself is "*the Truth*" (John 14:6) and thus the measure and standard of reality. He is not only someone who "is," but rather "Being" itself, not only someone who "loves," but rather "Love in person," for "God is love" (1 John 4:8; 4:16).

When the incarnation of God is defined in such depth, the contrast between God and humanity is seen from a fully different perspective. The conception of humanity set forth in the gospel, especially in the Gospel of John, does not mainly have to do with ethical failure and moral guilt, not with inferiority or immaturity. Rather, humanity's dependence on God is understood as being something basic and fundamental. As a creation of God, humanity depends on God as its Creator; this is entirely natural and not simply due to failing or falling short. Being alive, humans are in constant need of life and could not live

on their own for even a moment without it. Those who are take part in Being, and those who love embody love.

Hence, the antithesis between God and humanity is not regarded as being debilitated and devalued, but instead as supported and appreciated. Humans have a natural need for relationships and cannot really develop adequately as completely isolated individuals. It is by experiencing love that individuals become capable of loving, and it is by experiencing affection that they learn to treat others well. Therefore, the most basic problem of humanity is not being weak and dependent, but instead it is not being able to deal honestly with such candidness and with its own limitations. It is thus not merely deviations from our own self-understanding and deficiencies in our own behavior that can be labeled “sin” and “transgression,” but rather harming our lives and impeding love by being closed to the God who is understood as Life and Love *itself* (John 15:22-24; 16:9).

WORTHY OF LOVE OR LOVED WORTHILY?

Now, applying the categories of “relationship” and “love” surely does not eliminate all misunderstandings that might arise in respect of God’s concern for people and their relationship to him. Even “personal relationships” can certainly be detrimental, and there are forms of attention that are anything but strengthening and freeing. From social psychology and education we have learned the terminological differentiation between “conditional” and “unconditional” acceptance. When affection depends on how well another person behaves and suits, then we speak of “conditional” acceptance since it is subject to “requirements” and hence is given “conditionally.” In truth, this sort of affection is not directed to persons themselves, but rather to certain aspects, characteristics or qualities of their personalities. People are not valued in and of themselves, but instead only with respect to their attractive sides and to their behavior that meets others’ expectations. Since this kind of approval and love is not unconditional affection, but in truth has to be acquired and earned, it is not only disappointing for the “unloved” but for those who are supposedly “loved” as well. The latter have to be “worthy of love” in order to gain the affection that they actually need to receive without any prerequisites; and they have to act in a way that is “worthy of love” in order to be appreciated, but actually they long for being appreciated unconditionally.

As humans we gain our confidence, security and happiness from relationships in which we feel ourselves being unconditionally and entirely loved and accepted. When we experience not having to first prove ourselves as “worthy of love” to receive affection, then we are freed from seeing ourselves only according to our accomplishments and from who we are depending on how successful we are. There are no longer any prerequisites that we first have to fulfill in our lives in order to gain acceptance and love, but love itself becomes the prerequisite and basis of our lives. Then “actual” joy in life is no longer to be found sometime in the future, but it can be experienced and lived out here and now. In this way we do not have to keep chasing after being accepted, constantly fulfilling new conditions that our happiness depends on, but we can begin to *be*.

When we experience another person's love applying not only to our "lovable sides" but to us *ourselves* in our entirety, we then find the courage to deal more and more with our own dark sides and to see ourselves as we really are. We no longer have to be afraid of losing affection by being truthful and open. On the contrary, because we are loved and not merely the roles that we play, it can only deepen our relationships when we stop fooling ourselves and others and finally start being honest.

Thus, the kind of love that affirms us just as we are has the effect of changing us, and unconditional acceptance increasingly makes us want to act correspondingly. Nothing is more overwhelming for us than experiencing unreserved devotion. Hence, there is no stronger imperative than the *indicative of love*! Precisely, since it does not have any prerequisites and conditions, it has more significant *consequences* and *effects* than any other experience.

GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

If we apply this differentiation between "conditional" and "unconditional" acceptance or affection to various ideas of faith and to different ways of formulating conceptions of God and of humanity, then the examples for being accepted in religious contexts based on meeting prerequisites and for conditioning and rule-based, restrictive forms of religiosity may well predominate empirically.

How are fallible human beings supposed to present themselves to a God conceived as perfect and appear righteous before him? How can a human being hold up under the strenuous role of being worthy and deserving of love before a God who has the exclusive ability to examine the thoughts and hearts of humankind? For someone who wants to measure up, this conception of God does not have a freeing effect, but an oppressive one like an overpoweringly strict father. A comparison with how perfect and exemplary Jesus of Nazareth was will ultimately drive anyone who strives honestly, but hopelessly, to imitate him into *self-deception* or *despair*. This type of conditioning has chained and enslaved religiosity for centuries, in part even up to the present day.

Martin Luther's foundational realization of "justification of humans through God alone in faith, by grace alone and in Christ alone" can hardly be expressed more appropriately than by this differentiation between conditional and unconditional acceptance. Here the same basic alternatives are in view: Are human beings "justified" and "accepted" because they have proved themselves to be "righteous" by their convictions and behavior, i.e., by following standards and norms? Or are they placed in a "right," meaning "righteous," relationship to God by being unconditionally "acquitted" through God's love and grace? Does God love humanity as long as it shows itself to be worthy of love, behaving accordingly? Or is it the other way around, that human beings recognize how valuable and dignified they are because they know that God loves them and deems them worthy of his attention?

Ever since the gospel started being preached, the message about God becoming man and his Word being incarnated was understood as an unmistakable testimony to God's love for the "world" without any prerequisites and conditions, i.e., for humanity in its state of shutting God out and refusing to turn to him. To use the well-known words of John's Gospel once again: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16f NRSV).

To the extent that we value others, we share ourselves with them. We give those we love time, attention, care and trust. Just as we impart a piece of ourselves every time we communicate, it is a distinguishing characteristic of unconditional devotion and unlimited love when we are prepared to give someone not only time, money or words, but to share ourselves in a way that leaves us open and vulnerable. We recognize mutual love when people are willing to give of themselves. When somebody is ready to even risk his own life for those he loves, we speak of unlimited and unconditional love. Or as Jesus said it to his disciples, who he called his friends, while bidding them farewell before being arrested in Gethsemane: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13 NRSV).

THE DIGNITY OF A PERSON WHO IS LOVED

What is the significance of the central Christian confession of God's incarnation for our conception of humanity? Looking at it from many possible angles, two aspects stand out for us in particular: *First* of all, God's self-revelation without any prerequisites and conditions and his personal, binding devotion to the world are experienced as expressions of limitless affection and appreciation. God's willingness to become a man stands for the Creator's unconditional love for his creation, of the heavenly Father for his children, of Christ for his friends. How God behaves as Being and Love for his people, who are needy and totally dependent on him, is not an open question, but is clear and has been decided overwhelmingly in our favor.

At the same time, *secondly*, the theological realization that in Jesus of Nazareth God himself lived among us in human form, becoming dependent and transient while sharing our weakness and mortality, is linked with a *fundamental change in the human situation* and in our *conception of the world*. The contrast between God and humanity, omnipotence and weakness, love and neediness, eternity and temporality, no longer needs to be denied and compensated for because the apparent contradictions are *reconciled* in God giving himself. Humanity's self-development and God's glorification are no longer opposed to each other, since the Creator is glorified when his creatures mature, and the creatures find themselves when they open up and turn to their Creator.

Knowing Christ brings knowledge of God and people's knowledge of themselves together into a life-affirming form of *communication*. God came to people so that people

would finally come to God; Christ became poor and was despised so that we can take part in his riches and his glory. Life did not shun death, so that, from this point onward, no one will have to die without the hope of life. The light shines in the darkness so that from now on those who were at the mercy of the darkness will see the splendor and the glory not just of a man, but of their God (John 1:1-18).

What both aspects, that of the revelation of what God is like and that of changing the way we see the world and humanity, have in common is their emphasis on an unprecedented *dignity of humanity* that does not need to first be earned through self-development and cannot be lost due to one's own insufficiency. By giving the people he created not only words, but his one decisive Word in person, God communicates to them that they are *valuable* and *significant* to an extent that they could never have suspected before. Precisely, by seeing how *God* gives of himself without restraint, humanity finds *itself* without restraint.

Nevertheless, recognizing God's unconditional love cannot remain *without consequences*, but drives us to *respond* to this acceptance and to *pass on* this appreciation to others; this is the secret of unconditional love. While *conditional* love keeps people from becoming who they are expected to be, *unconditional* love causes people to want to conform to it, even though this was never demanded as a condition.

Sure enough, "self-development" is in this sense neither an expression of a desperate attempt to be accepted and to assert oneself nor is it overburdening oneself with excessive and compulsory rules, but it signifies an entirely new commandment based on love and understanding: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34f NRSV). "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (John 15:8f NRSV).