

Exploring a Christian incarnational approach to the human condition in the context of a theology of followers of other faiths and none

The question

Many Christian people have told me that they know in their hearts that people of other faiths and those who profess no faith live godly lives and that their relationship with the one and only God is manifest in their lives. There is almost a sense of guilt: “But how can I believe that as a Christian? How can I make sense of what I know to be true whilst being faithful to my Christian belief?”

This brief sketch is one way of expressing Christian theology, which operates within a Christian theological paradigm and is addressed to Christians for reflection. The need here addressed is for Christians to work towards a theology that is in continuity with the four Christian sources of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, whilst at the same time striving to recognise God at work in the lives of all human beings and the ways of life, be they theistic or otherwise, that they follow.

Salvation as healing or the ‘whole-making’ of human life

There are those, like Plato, that regard ignorance as the root of all ‘unskilful’ acts and thus the remedy for such is education or training. Christianity has historically perceived that something more than education is needed to deal with sin and its effects, namely an act of God to bring about healing and wholeness in human life, or what is commonly called salvation. In western Christianity, this is often couched in terms of debts to be paid, or atonement through sacrifice, but this is not the only model within the Christian ambit.

The Incarnation reveals what it is to be fully human

The emphasis on God bringing about the healing of the human condition by revealing the fullness of humanity as being both human and divine through the incarnation in Christ has played a more dominant part in the theology of salvation in the East. The action is all God’s and the recipients are human beings without exception. It is not then, as formulated by the 16th century western Reformers, that righteousness is imputed (or attributed) through faith in Christ, but rather that wholeness is imparted or revealed as being the natural condition of the fully human being through the Christ-event. In short, this means that the Incarnation makes apparent something that is real in the human condition as such and not just for those who come overtly to believe in it. Every good human act, therefore, becomes incarnational: God is revealed in human actions. In the example of the gathering of all people for judgement given by Jesus in the gospel (Matthew 26:31-46), ‘the righteous’, who enter into eternal life, include those who do godly acts to other human beings without knowing that by so doing they are serving God and acting as the agents of God by incarnating goodness through their actions. Every godly human act is both an act of worship and a revelation of God. As Christ, the bearer by right of both divine and human natures in his one person, is the

archetype of what it is to be human, so every human being made whole by the Christ-event naturally is an incarnation of that divine nature and thus, even unknowingly, reveals God through their good actions.

Salvation uniquely comes through Christ

This theology would hold that salvation comes through the unique act of God in Christ, but that it is applicable to all humanity and not just to those who ‘come to a lively faith in Christ’; indeed, the unique Christ-event reveals the true nature of all human life. The human being is the bearer of both human and divine natures that come to their ultimate fulfilment through a process of becoming open to the whole-making grace of God both in this life and the next. This position takes seriously a theology of prevenient grace, that which goes from God to all human beings throughout our existence, without necessarily any human awareness or acceptance. Salvation is thus entirely God’s work which begins before any consciousness or acceptance on the part of the individual. Just as a flower, by nature, turns towards the sun to expose itself to the life-giving solar rays, that natural act of phototropism being the result of God’s design and action, so the human being, as a result of God’s grace at work in their life, naturally becomes predisposed to receive the overwhelming gift of entering consciously into eternal life, even though this may not be fully evident in this life.

The unique revelation and the many revelations

This position maintains the uniqueness and necessity of the revelation of God in Christ but takes seriously that the Christ-event, albeit unique, is not the only revelatory action of God in human history. The Word and Spirit of God have been at work throughout the creation from its very beginning and remain ubiquitous. As human beings then, responding to and guided by the Word and Spirit of God, develop ways of life that lead them on that godly path towards human fulfilment, so we can see the spore of God’s grace at work and all human beings can learn to recognise and benefit from that godly experience. In this way, the Christian theologian can maintain both the uniqueness and necessity of the Christ-event and see the seeds and fruit of God’s grace at work in other faiths and philosophies as vehicles leading to the fulfilment of human life in its dual nature.

The Trinity as the goal of human existence

Alongside the exploration of these themes of incarnation and salvation, we are led inexorably to the third example of a Christian doctrine in need of exposition, namely the Trinity. The technical term for the process here described is *theosis*, that is, the process of the human being growing into our fully divine nature and the awareness thereof. The doctrine of the Trinity is the attempt by Christian theologians to find ways of speaking about the oneness and indivisibility of God and God’s action in regard to the creation, whilst allowing for the divine-human relationship exemplified in Jesus as the Incarnation, which is both unique and the archetype that others follow;

in biblical language, Jesus is ‘the first-born of many brothers and sisters’ and we are ‘co-heirs with him of the Kingdom.’ In their striving to speak of the fellowship within the one substance of God, these theologians were also seeking a way of expressing this process of human beings fully realising their divine nature and thus entering into that fellowship.

What have we done?

This is a sketch, an outline, that seeks to provoke reflection by the reader to explore and evaluate the content. It aims to point in a direction within the spectrum of Christian theology that allows us to grapple with the reality that many sense: the godliness of people who follow other faiths and non-theistic ways of living. It is written within a Christian theological paradigm, for Christians, to give a glimpse of a way forward and not to convince those who are not Christians that this is the way that they should see themselves. Christians cannot expect that other people necessarily recognise and accept that it is the indwelling Spirit of God at work in their lives that enlivens and expands their Christ-nature so that they proceed on the path of *theosis*, but this is what this Christian theology requires Christians to believe.