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Theological Atomism

William Charlton

Abstract

By 'atomism' I mean the idea, applicable in various fields, that explanation proceeds from small to large and part to whole. A theological atomist would see the salvation of mankind as the sum of the salvations of individuals and try to understand the Incarnation, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension as successive episodes each making its own separate contribution. I argue that we are essentially social beings, and infer that God can communicate with us, and we can be united with him, only as forming a society. More controversially, I suggest that the Son of God became incarnate primarily in a society, and saved it by turning it into a single supernatural organism, living with divine life.

Keywords

atomism, soteriology, incarnation, sacrifice, divinisation

Atomists are people who hold that explanation should proceed from the small to the large, that the properties and behaviour of wholes are determined by those of the parts of which they consist or into which they can be divided. In itself atomism is a purely philosophical idea, belonging to metaphysics or the theory of knowledge. It may be applied in various fields. Physics deals with bodies interacting in space and time, and physical atomists hold that all the behaviour of every such object can be explained by the laws governing the behaviour of the entities – atoms, sub-atomic particles or what not – of which, ultimately, it consists. The social sciences deal with human societies, and a social atomist holds, in the words of Mill, that 'men in a state of society are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature.'[1] Accordingly, 'However complex the phenomena, all their sequences and coexistences result from the laws of the separate elements. The effect produced, in social phenomena, by any complex set of circumstances amounts precisely

[1] *A System of Logic,* 6.7.1.

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to the sum of the effects of the circumstances taken singly.'[2] Logic deals with things that are true or false – usually called 'propositions'; and logical atomists hold that there are simple propositions, each of which is true or false of itself, independently of any other, and that if there is any proposition that is true or false but not simple, its truth or falsehood is determined by the truth or falsehood of simple propositions of which it is a construct. Russell not only accepted logical atomism but applied it to nature by taking an atomistic view of time and motion. He advocated regarding time as a continuous series of durationless instants, temporal items analogous to unextended points in space, and declared that 'motion consists *merely* in the occupation of different places at different times.'[3] My flying continuously from London to New York consists in the presence of a humanoid figure at infinitely many intervening points at successive instants, each presence being logically independent of every other.

Modern theology[4] deals with a being that is not part of nature but the source of it. That may seem to leave theologians little scope for atomism, since they say that the natural order has a single and indivisible source. The Trinity is sometimes represented as a society united by love, but developing this idea atomistically leads to tritheism. There are at least two further ways, however in which theologians can be atomistic. I shall illustrate this from that part of theology which is called soteriology. First, they can accept Mill's social atomism. They can say that the behaviour of men in society is determined by the laws of individual human nature, and that God's relationship with mankind is the sum of his relationships with individual men. Secondly they can accept Russell's atomistic view of time. They can regard history, including the history of salvation, as an aggregate of logically independent episodes. They can treat the Incarnation, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost as successive episodes, each making its own contribution to salvation, and salvation as the sum of these contributions. No doubt they form a sequence, and the later events could not have occurred without the earlier; Christ could not have risen from the dead if he had not died, or died if he had not been conceived. But we can try to treat each episode as complete and intelligible independently of its sequel, as we think of ordinary events in our own lives like travelling by train from London to York, from York to Newcastle, and from Newcastle to Edinburgh. I shall query these forms of soteriological atomism and sketch out an alternative way of thinking.

[2] *A System of Logic* 6.9.1.
[3] *Principles of Mathematics* Ch. 44 s. 447; Russell's emphasis.
[4] Unlike Aristotle's *theologia*: see *Metaphysics E* 1026a18–21; *De Anima* 1 402b2–8.

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The idea that the behaviour of men in society can be explained in terms of the laws of individual human nature needs to be combined with a recognition that one of those laws is that we are social beings. We do not just depend on two parents to come into being, and on food and shelter from other human beings (or, like Romulus and Mowgli, from other animals) to grow up. It is only recently that philosophers have recognised how dependent human intelligence is upon language, and language upon society. Until Wittgenstein argued otherwise many philosophers thought that a solitary individual might devise a language for recording his 'ideas', and the concepts we use in understanding mathematical proofs, the causes of natural phenomena and the reasons for people's actions seem to require an ability to put things into words. A human child cannot develop distinctively human capacities except among people who have customs, recognised ways of doing things, which are not universal throughout the species but vary from society to society. And there is a further dependence. Philosophers still hesitate to admit that we are motivated by anything except desire for our well-being as individual organisms, but in fact we also have living in society, conforming to social customs and benefiting other individuals as ends in themselves. These desires can be discerned even in species we think less intelligent than our own. We pursue our own interests and we espouse the interests of others in the framework of our customs. Not only are our ideals shaped by them: without the support of our fellows and shared belief about how it is good to act we should lack motivation: neither in selfishness or in unselfishness can we go it alone.

One consequence is that if God is to have any communication with human beings he must deal with a society. The same is true even of a human anthropologist. If you discover an unknown (and so-called 'primitive') society, to communicate with its members you must not only learn their customs, including their linguistic customs or language, but convey to them some of your own custom-shaped ways of thinking. God creates species, and his creative work covers long stretches of time. Making a species with which he can communicate involves not only making a species with the organs necessary for speech, but making a society within the species with suitable customs and concepts. The Old Testament can be read as describing this: God takes a vine from Egypt and domesticates it;[5] he gives a nation laws and customs. The Jews by the age of Augustus were not only monotheists; they had a theocratic state, ruled by priests, and their moral ideals and their customs with regard to slaves, women and the poor compared well with those of gentile societies. It is hard

[5] Psalms 80. 8–9, cf. Isaiah 5. 1–2. Ezekiel also uses the images of cultivation and a vine, (17. 3–10, 22–4; 19. 10–14,) see below.

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to imagine a Greek or Roman teaching what Christ taught or finding many followers like Peter and Paul in Athens or Rome except among the resident Jews. We like to think that God may reveal things to us as individuals, and we accept that some individuals have had mystical experiences, but revelation of anything deeply mysterious like the Trinity, the Incarnation or the Eucharist must be to a society.

A second consequence is that we cannot separate our need for God from our nature as social beings. We are plainly imperfect and have difficulty in behaving well. But theologians have been inclined to see our imperfections as part of our inheritance as individual organisms, coming to us from our parents like skin pigmentation, height or mental capacity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says our sinful nature is 'transmitted by propagation' (ss. 404, 419) from our first parents. This is inconsistent with what we know of genetics: sinfulness is supposed to have been a characteristic acquired by our first parents, and acquired characteristics cannot be transmitted by propagation. The doctrine of original sin is also inconsistent with evolutionary theory, according to which species evolve out of early species by some continuous process, so that a species does not have first members. Every human being is the child of human parents, but we are directly descended from creatures of a different species, with whom we could not interbreed. Not only does evolutionary theory rule out first parents; it makes it incredible that our remoter ancestors should have had the intellectual and moral perfection past theologians like Aquinas have attributed to them.[6] It suggests rather that they were, as Genesis 3 in fact represents them as being, almost wholly devoid of knowledge of good and evil. Far from falling, they had a long way to rise.[7]

Heredity by blood descent is the wrong direction in which to look for an explanation of our moral imperfection. Our bodies, which really are the work of our genes, are on the whole perfectly fitted for good behaviour. But societies have cruel or unjust institutions like slavery, infanticide, killing of the old and sick and subordination of women, they have bad ideals such as military aggrandisement, limitless wealth, sexual conquest, power over others, high social status and celebrity, which lead to defective judgements in practical situations, and they tolerate poverty, unhappiness and brutality in a way that dulls conscience and sympathy. Bad aims and practices are transmitted not through propagation but through society; they are as

[6] E.g. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 qq. 94–5; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ss. 374–6

[7] In *The Fall and the Ascent of Man*, (University Press of America, 2012) Joseph Fitzpatrick argues persuasively for an interpretation of this chapter alternative to Augustine's: that it depicts the passage of our species to moral maturity.

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unavoidable, however, and as severe a handicap, as original sin is traditionally held to be.

Theological beliefs too are transmitted in societies. There still are Jewish, Christian and Muslim societies in which people just take it for granted that the natural order depends on God. In other societies people are unable to view the world in this way, and in some they may think that the system of nature is its own source. These assumptions are hard for individuals in the society to resist, and interact with ideas about what is right and what constitutes the good life.

We are not responsible for the deeds of our first parents, if first parents we have, or for the practices and beliefs prevailing in the societies in which we are brought up. Hence we are inclined to say that God judges us by how well we have lived up to the standards we have adopted. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, s. 16:

> Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.

I should not venture to dispute this but as it stands it does seem to make salvation an affair between God and each individual. Theologians have held that the nature of human race is partly if not wholly corrupt, but the human race is not a society; it is a zoological species; and if its corruption is to be repaired, that will presumably be at the Last Day. Individuals need to be saved before that. The salvation of the human race is, a theologian might think, the sum of the salvations of each member, and the repairing of human nature an added bonus. As for defective beliefs and practices in our societies, either individuals should separate themselves from these or, if that is impossible, they can be discounted.

This view of salvation does not fit well with the New Testament. The Jews of the first century, including Christ's own followers (Lk 24. 21; Ac 1. 6), looked forward to some kind of salvation as a society: getting rid of the Romans, political independence, and a restoration of genuine Jewish kingship. The Idumaean Herods were kings, but hardly Jews; they were not the Davidic dynasty and the Jews preferred rule by priests. With the idea of political independence may have gone some dream of world domination. Geza Vermes says 'The recognition of the God of Israel by the Gentiles was expected to be accompanied by simultaneous submission to the Jews, and worship in the Temple of Jerusalem.'[8] It is against this background

[8] *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, (London: SCM Press, 1993) p. 123. Vermes quotes Isaiah 49.23 and might have added Psalm 72. 9–10 and Isaiah 54. 2–3 and 60. 1–12.

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that Christ's life is related by the Evangelists. In Mt 1.21 Joseph is told that Mary's son is to be called Jesus ('Saviour') because 'he will save his people from their wrong-doings.' At Lk 1.32 Mary is told that her son is to have 'the throne of his father David.' In Mt 4. 17 Christ's preaching starts with the message 'The Kingdom of the Heavens is near' (Mt 4. 17), while in Lk 4. 16–21 Christ's address at Nazareth starts with a quotation from Isaiah 61, which is a prophecy addressed to the Jewish people about restoring ruined cities and making famous the race God has blessed. Much of Christ's teaching (e.g. Mt 13) concerns the 'Kingdom of Heaven' which can be nothing but a society. He accepts from Peter (Mt 16.16–7) the title of Messiah, which refers to a society, and from Pilate (Jn 18.33–7) that of King. And that it is a society that has been saved, not an aggregate of individuals, is taken for granted by Paul. Salvation is a fulfilment of the promises to Abraham (Gal 3. 16–18). Paul's letters are addressed either to communities, or to individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon) as people working in communities. There is no suggestion in them that anyone is saved as an isolated individual; on the contrary, people are saved not just as members of communities but, in some way, 'in Christ' (Gal 2.20; Gal 3.28; Eph 2.6; Eph 4. 12–13; Rm 12. 5; 1 Cor 12. 12.)

As the Old Testament may be read as showing how God brought into being a society with which he could communicate, so the New Testament may be read as showing, not how God set aside this carefully fostered society in order to communicate with individuals, but how he developed from it a supernatural society with himself, a society in which we are transformed not just as individuals but as social beings.

Jeremiah 31.29–34 may be thought to tell against such a reading:

> Look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall make a new covenant with the House of Israel (and the House of Judah), but not like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt . . . No, this is the covenant I shall make with the House of Israel when those days have come, Yahweh declares. Within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts. Then I shall be their God and they will be my people. There will be no further need for everyone to teach neighbour or brother, saying 'Learn to know Yahweh!' No, they will all know me. (vv. 31–34)

This is quoted twice in Hebrews (8.8–12 and 10.16–17) but the stress there is not on the content of the New Covenant but on its novelty (and the implied senility of the Old). I quote the translation of the 1985 Jerusalem Bible, which comments: 'In vv. 31–4 Jr reaches its highest peak of spirituality . . . The covenant is "new" in three respects,' two of which are 'individual responsibility and retribution' and 'interiorisation of religion'. They seem to suggest that in the

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New Testament salvation becomes an interior, not a public affair, something between each individual in his heart and God. I do not think such an interpretation fits with the whole chapter, which is addressed to the Houses of Israel and Judah, and concludes with an assurance that the whole race of Israel will last as long as the natural order.

This brings me to the second form of theological atomism I mentioned, treating salvation, in Aristotle's words, 'as episodic, like a bad tragedy.'[9] The Incarnation is God's becoming incarnate in a single human being at the instant when the Virgin Mary conceived. The act that 'accomplishes the definitive redemption of man'[10] is the offering of a single victim, Jesus, by a single priest, himself. The institution of the Eucharist is logically independent of it. It occurred before it and the discourse in John 6, which we take as foreshadowing it, is set before it is clear that Christ will be condemned to death. The Resurrection is the resurrection of a single individual, to be followed, we hope, by the resurrections of many others. And Christ's Ascension is the ascent of a single individual, 'the irreversible entry of his humanity into divine glory.'[11]

To obtain a different view we may start with Christ's offering himself as a sacrificial victim. This was not a solitary act of suicide; he did not position himself on an altar and cut his own throat. Arrested by the official Jewish police, he had a full trial before the Jewish supreme court and was found guilty. He then had a further trial before the Roman authorities and was executed by Roman soldiers. His own contribution to his death was that he went willingly. Israel being at that time hierarchical, the judges who condemned Christ were also the High Priests, and although the charge on which he was found guilty was blasphemy, John 11. 47–53 tells us that Caiaphas, speaking as High Priest, said that it was best for him to die on behalf of the nation, since otherwise the Romans would destroy it. Christ's execution was therefore a sacrifice by the High Priest of the chosen Jewish nation, and a sacrifice, John says, 'not for that nation alone but to bring together into one the scattered children of God.' The Roman official who sentenced Christ was the actual governor of the province and the representative of the most comprehensive and civilised non-Jewish society the world had ever seen; and we are told that he condemned Christ not because he believed him guilty of insurrection, but because he judged that there was no other way of preventing a riot in which many other people would have been killed. For Pilate too, therefore, Christ's death was a kind of sacrifice. It could be said that, so far as was possible at the time, Christ was

[9] *Metaphysics N* 1090b20.
[10] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s. 613.
[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s. 659.

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offered as a sacrifice not by himself alone but by the whole human race or its best representatives.

Neither Pilate nor Caiaphas acted in full knowledge. We have the advantage over them there, and at the Mass we can participate consciously in the offering. We can pray that God should receive the sacrifice at the priest's hands, and the priest says that the congregation, the 'people standing round,' are offering the sacrifice with him, 'his sacrifice and theirs'.

A sacrifice is not the killing of a living thing or the destruction of a valuable object; it is an offering to a god, and it is successful only if the god receives it. The gods of Greece did not always accept what was offered, and there is a suggestion in Genesis 4 that God accepted Abel's slaughtered animals but not Cain's vegetarian produce. The priest at Mass prays that God will accept the sacrifice offered by him and the congregation, that it should be taken up to God, and at the same time that those who receive the body and blood of Christ should be 'filled with heavenly blessing and grace', 'gathered together by the Holy Spirit into one', 'one body and one spirit in Christ'. We think of being sacrificed as unpleasant for the person offered; but to be accepted by God is good for the person accepted. This was recognised by some non-monotheistic societies. In the Marquesas only chiefs and upper-class people were thought to have a life after death, but at the death of a chief low-class people (usually kidnapped from a different tribe) were sacrificed to attend on the chief in the after-life, and they came to share in his immortality. William Golding in *The Scorpion King* makes fun of similar thinking among the ancient Egyptians. Our prayer at Mass is not only that the slain Christ should be accepted as a sacrifice by the Father, but that we, – having been nourished by Christ's body and blood and made one in him, – that we may be accepted as an offering with him. Our prayer is not only to join him in making the offering but also in being the victim: In a traditional prayer of preparation for Mass we speak of Christ as both victim and priest, *sacrificium et sacerdos*, and we aspire to be the same.

On this view Mass is neither a repetition nor just an image of the redemptive sacrifice, but (by virtue of representing it) an extension of it; the sacrifice will not be complete before the last Mass has been said.

Viewing the Crucifixion in this non-atomistic way may enrich our view of the Ascension and the Resurrection. An accepted sacrifice is taken up by God, 'carried [*perferri*] by his holy Messenger into his altar in heaven'. It is only at the Ascension that Christ is 'taken up' [*aneilephtheis*] into heaven, so the sacrifice cannot be understood separately from that. If the Ascension is linked in this way with the sacrificial act on Calvary, both may be linked with the Resurrection, since that is surely the beginning of God's reception of the victim.

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And since only the risen Christ was taken up at the Ascension, perhaps just as the offering is still being extended by additional worshipers, so it will be completed only when the last worshiper has made the ascent.

Christ's death, resurrection and ascent are here understood not as discrete incidents but as a whole, and one that is not complete with Christ's own Ascension, but still continues. And although we participate in this whole of our own free will, we do so as members of a society following liturgical rules. I have not yet, however, drawn on the idea that Christ's purpose was primarily to save a society rather than the individuals in it, and before looking at his life in the light of that idea, I must flesh it out and meet some difficulties in it.

If Christ wished to save a society, that can only have been the Jewish nation: there were no other existing societies available as candidates. But, it may be objected, if that was his aim, he failed. The Jews did not obtain political independence, far from it, and although as a result of the teaching of Jesus and Mohammed a great many Gentiles have indeed come to accept the Jewish God, it is not clear that that has greatly benefited the Jewish people. This objection, of course, is simplistic. Christ made it clear that he did not mean to restore the kingdom of Israel as a kingdom 'of this world'. But what else would constitute salvation for the Jewish nation? They already had a good set of laws. The laws might be fine-tuned and brought up to date. The Sermon on the Mount suggests some refinements. Christians pay lip-service to these, but it is not clear that they form a society continuous with the first century Jews, or one notably superior, and with all their divisions they are less of a unity than the Jews were then or are today.

An answer to the question 'In what did Christ take the salvation of the Jews to consist?' is to be found in the New Testament, but it is so surprising that it is hard to accept. Christ took the image of the vine, which was familiar as an image of the Jewish people, and applied it to himself. *He*, he said, was the vine, and other people were his branches, living in him with his life. Paul says the same. He speaks of himself and his correspondents as people living in Christ, with Christ's life, living, moving and having their being in him. The simplest interpretation of this is that the Jews are to be saved by being made into a single organism. In the Old Testament an ordinary human society, the wild vine or olive, is elevated into a divinely domesticated but still natural society. Christ transforms this domesticated society into a supernatural living organism, an organism living with God-given life.

It may be objected that Christ and his followers, whether before or after his death, though they may have formed a society, were not the Jewish people, and still less were they a living organism. As to the first point, they were Jews and certainly thought of themselves as

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part of the Jewish people, even after admitting Gentiles and waiving the requirement of circumcision. Salvation, Paul's eyes, does not miss out the Jews, but comes to them first, and only afterwards to the Greeks or Gentiles (Rm 1.16). The first people to join Christ's followers in Jerusalem must have been Jews (Ac 2.41) and included a large number of priests (Ac 6.7); what proportion of the Jewish communities in cities like Corinth, Alexandria, Rome and Vienne accepted the teaching of Christ's followers we have no means of knowing.

Less intractable than how much continuity there was between the Jewish nation and the early Christian communities is the question whether Christians formed a living organism. They certainly did not form a natural living organism, and we may therefore be inclined to take it as metaphor to say Christians make up the body of Christ, or stand to him as the rest of a human body to the head. Such metaphors are often used of natural human societies. Talk of sharing in divine life may also be taken as metaphorical. If we had lived in the Castle at Eisenstadt, eaten with the family, and listened to the music of Haydn, we might have said that we shared in the life of the Esterhazys, though we should not have formed a single organism with the princes, and it is in this figurative sense, we might say, that if we get to Heaven we shall share in God's life; for of course we cannot hope actually to become Gods. The fullness of divinity was in Christ (Col 2.10), but despite 2 Peter 1.4 (a letter of doubtful authenticity) the rest of us cannot share in the divine nature, the *theia phusis*, in that literal way. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says 'Grace is a *participation in the life of God*' but defines grace as 'an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural gift that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God.'[12] Before concluding, however, that we are members of Christ's body or live with his life only in this 'spiritual' sense, let us try considering if the Incarnation can be understood as God's becoming incarnate in a society.

We may note, for a start, that incarnation in a society need not be inconsistent with incarnation in an individual. On the contrary, it is hard to make sense of the idea of becoming incarnate in a society except through becoming incarnate in at least one member of it. Incarnation is a matter of taking flesh, and a human society, since it is not a material object at all, has no flesh apart from that of its

[12] Ss. 1997, 2000 (the *Catechism's* emphasis). Similarly the older *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, arranged and edited by George D. Smith, (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1952,) p. 66:'The life which we receive in virtue of our incorporation into Christ is none other than a participation in the life of God which, *in its inceptive state during our earthly pilgrimage, is sanctifying grace; in its perfect and consummated state, is the glory of the Beatific Vision*'(my emphasis.) We receive this grace, it is said, at baptism.

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members. The question is whether the Incarnation should be seen, not as something completed at the instant at which Mary conceived, but as something that started then.

Next, while we are taught that Christ was both God and man, *deum verum de deo vero*, it is not quite accurate to say that God became incarnate in him. It was the Second Person of the Trinity who became incarnate. The three Persons of the Trinity do not share in divinity in the way the three Triumvirs Anthony, Octavian and Lepidus shared in humanity. The Triumvirs were three men, but the Persons are not three Gods, each with the same nature. Rather there is a divine nature peculiar to each, these natures being in some way inseparable and complementary. I touch here, of course, on something we cannot understand. We can take models from the natural order to help us to think about it, but we deceive ourselves if we think that any such model shows God as he is. Various models have been proposed. Simple models are a flame passing from one torch to another, and the petals of a shamrock. Augustine looked for models in human psychology: a lover, a beloved and love, a mind, its knowledge and its love, or the three mental faculties of memory, understanding and will. A model which I have advocated elsewhere[13] is three complementary practical principles in a rational agent. We have three kinds of aim: what is beneficial to ourselves as individual organisms, life in society, and the good of other individuals, whether members of our society or not; and our actual behaviour is a coordination of these aims. Rational human behaviour has, we might say, three dimensions: individual self-interest, regard for society and disinterested concern for others: we act as embodied individuals, as social beings and as altruists.

Social atomists deny the reality of a distinct social dimension. A theologian, however, who is not a social atomist and who wishes to use this model will probably say that the nature of the Second Person corresponds to the social nature of a human being. Christ does, on any showing, act as a person through whom God communicates by speech with human beings and enables them to enter into some kind of society with Him. It might be objected that the Second Person is regularly spoken of as the Son of God, and the notion of a son seems quite different from that of a social being. The notion of a son is in fact, primarily biological, but the idea that God has a son in the biological sense is as alien to Jewish as to Moslem thought, and is wholly absent from the Old Testament. The title 'Son of God', however, seems to be first applied to the society, the Jewish nation as a whole (Exodus 4. 22), in which I am suggesting the Second Person became incarnate; and there are at least two ways in which Christians

[13] *The Physical, the Natural and the Supernatural*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1998), Ch. 8.

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(prompted by John's Gospel) can think of Christ as God's Son. First, they believe themselves adopted as children of God. If it is through union with Christ that we are adopted, surely Christ himself must be by nature a son of God. Secondly, the Old Testament personifies God's messages to Abraham as a messenger (Gen 22. 11, 15; cf Gen 16. 7–12; 2 Sam 14.17), and the beginning of John's Gospel treats God's speech (*logos*) as a person. The relationship of a speech to a speaker can be compared to that of child to a begetter.

We as social beings are products of society, living with regard to rules and customs which for the most part we received from the society into which we were born. God is not a product of society; he creates beings with a social nature, and as a creative social being communicates with societies and raises them towards his own level.

Ezekiel 17 uses horticultural images in a different way from the authors of Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5. He talks of a cutting from a cedar tree that is planted and grows into a cedar tree which bears fruit and in which winged creatures come and rest, or perhaps not into a cedar but a fruitful vine. A cedar does not naturally bear fruit, let alone grow into a vine, so the chapter as it stands is puzzling, even if we interpret it to refer to Israel's experiences with Babylon and Egypt. Christ, however, may have had it in mind when he compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard-seed, which is the smallest of seeds but grows into the largest of domesticated shrubs (*lakhanôn*), in the branches of which birds come to dwell (Mt 13. 31–2). Similarly in Romans 11. 16–24 Paul speaks of olive-grafting, and compares the entry of non-Jews into Christianity to the grafting of wild olives onto the domesticated Jewish stock. No doubt the Incarnation was 'unique and altogether singular event' in human history.[14] It does not follow that no other human being could ever become divine in a literal way. The scriptural images together illustrate the idea that God as a social being becomes incarnate initially in an inconspicuous member of the Jewish nation but grows into a large supernatural organism which is joined by people of other nations.

How? How can other people join the organism, and how can they share its life? People can join a society by going through some formal procedure like filling in a form or applying to an official, if such a procedure exists, and they share its life by living according to its rules and thinking them good. Baptism is a procedure for entering Christian society, and there are distinctively Christian moral rules. As I said earlier, besides, our nature as social beings is shaped by our society. Christians, to adapt the words of Jeremiah, teach their neighbours and brothers to love Yahweh, and this might be compared to the way in which a vine's branches communicate its life to one

[14] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s. 464.

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another: the tip of a branch receives sap and life from the parts nearer the root. This still, however leaves it a figure of speech to say that Christians form a single organism.

Christ himself in Jn 6. 53–7 speaks in a crude and literal way:

> If you do not eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you do not have life in yourselves. Anyone who chews [*trogon*] my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true bread and my blood is true drink. Anyone who chews my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in that person. As the living Father sent me, and I live through the Father, that person, too, who chews me will live through me.

We are told that his hearers disputed among themselves and asked 'How can he give us his flesh to eat?' Catholic theologians take Christ to be referring to the Eucharist: we eat his flesh and drink his blood when we receive the consecrated bread and wine, though exactly how this incorporates us, or grafts us, into him remains open to debate. A mainstream theologian might say that individuals receiving Communion are given a helping of sanctifying grace: or, since 'grace' (*gratia*, *charis*) can be used as a term of aesthetic praise, that their souls become more beautiful. I have elsewhere advocated a bolder interpretation. The consecrated offerings, when we receive them, are digested; they turn into living flesh and blood. My suggestion was that this flesh and blood is not just ours, living with our life, but Christ's, living with his life.[15] If that is part, at least, of what is involved in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, then we quite literally become parts of a single organism, living in him with the life he has from the living Father.

And what is that life? In the first place, it is eternal; the source of the natural order is not in time. If we are reborn into it, death, which in the natural order is passing out of existence, need not be the end for us. The New Testament, it seems to me, speaks of salvation as salvation, in this way, from death.[16] Secondly, it is creative. To share in it is to share responsibility for the continued existence of the natural order, not just by joining some Green Party or recycling our waste, but by experiencing a joy in nature like that of an artist

[15] 'The Eucharistic Presence', *New Blackfriars*, Vol.82 no. 962 (April 2001) pp. 161–74; *Being Reasonable About Religion,* (Aldershot, Ashgate 2006), Chs. 18–20

[16] So, e.g., Rm 8. 1–17. Similarly the third Preface for the feast of the Nativity says that it is through the Incarnation that we made eternal (*nos quoque, mirando consortio, reddit aeternos*). It must be acknowledged, however, that according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* s. 366, 'every spiritual soul is created immediately by God' and 'is immortal'. If that is right, salvation is not from death but only from sin and perhaps Hell: either every human being after death shares in God's eternal life, or people can continue to exist after death without sharing in it. Severed branches of the vine burn, it has been suggested to me privately by P.T. Geach, not atemporally but for unending time.

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in his work. It is also to share in the lives of other people insofar as they live with God's life. That may seem a less exhilarating prospect, since many people we know, even people we consider virtuous, are little to our liking, and while we may generously pray for them, we may be less willing to think we owe much to their intercession; we don't ardently desire either to live in them or to have them live in us. To share fully in Christ's divine life we need both divine humility and God-given charity.

If we put together Christ's words in Jn 6 and in Jn 15, the institution of the Eucharist will appear not separate from the Incarnation but a stage of it and a means of extending it to people other than Christ himself. Christians expect to receive Communion many times in their lives. Is each reception, then, a separate incarnation? We need not take such an atomistic view; instead we may say that incarnation, or divinisation as it is sometimes called, is a gradual process. The botanical model of grafting, or the physiological model of a donated organ or a reattached severed limb, helps us to conceive this. It takes time for the organ to grow into the body, for the graft to become part of the tree. If we do not try to match the episodes too atomistically, we might compare baptism to implanting a graft, and the Eucharist to the flow of sap. I suggest, at least, that as the Second Person becomes incarnate over time in an increasing number of individuals, so he becomes increasingly incarnate over time in a single individual: time in which our aims and desires become closer to God's.

Does that graduality extend to Christ himself? We are taught that from the moment of conception he lived with the life of the divine Second Person. But he did not, when first conceived, have human aims or desires to be brought into harmony with God's, and although we are told that he never sinned, we are not to suppose that he never could have done wrong. The Gospels show him undergoing temptations at the beginning of his mission and at the end he could have withheld his consent to the Passion. If Christ did not have to bring his aims into line with God's, he certainly had to keep them in line. Moreover I have been suggesting that the incarnation was primarily into a society, and it had not extended beyond a single individual before Christ began to teach, perhaps not before the Last Supper. Altogether the harmonising of his divine and human natures was completed on the cross, and the fulfilment of the incarnation is first visible first in what is called Christ's 'glorified body' after the Resurrection, a body no longer fixed, it seems, in the features of a single recognisable individual.

Earlier I criticised the atomistic idea that salvation was complete at the instant at which a single priest, Christ, offered a single victim, himself, for everyone. I said that at Mass we all make the offering, and we are all included in the victim. We are part of the eternal offering, according to the Third Eucharistic Prayer, because we are

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nourished or remade, *reficimur*, by Christ's body and blood. If that is right, the Crucifixion cannot be properly understood independently of the institution of the Eucharist. But could the Eucharist be understood independently of the Crucifixion?

In John 6 Christ says that eating his flesh and drinking his blood is necessary for eternal life without mentioning any sacrifice. He may have foreseen his death on the cross. But Jewish and Roman authorities were surely under no physical necessity to sacrifice Jesus. Many people would say that they were under no moral necessity. It was slightly paranoid of Caiaphas to think that if Jesus continued what he was doing the Romans would destroy Jerusalem and subject the Jews to another exile and captivity. Pilate's decision can be defended on grounds of act utilitarianism, but that is a questionable moral theory and even in Pilate's day it was not generally accepted. *Fiat justitia et ruant caeli*, if we go by Cicero's *De Officiis* 3, was nearer to Roman orthodoxy. Christ could have wished to impart eternal life through a real incorporation in himself, and thought that this could best be accomplished by some kind of meal. That idea would be intelligible to many non-monotheistic societies. At the Last Supper he speaks of being handed over and shedding his blood, but this could be a response to events as they were shaping themselves. An atomistic theologian might be correct in thinking that we could have had the Eucharist without the Passion; but Christ turned the questionable decisions of the Jewish and Roman authorities to good account, not just by giving an example of heroic endurance and self-sacrifice, but by making the incorporation into himself doubly salvific.

I have argued that we are essentially social beings, and must remain social beings in our relations with God: his purpose for us is as creatures with a social nature. God's purposes are mysterious and any reading of them must be conjectural; but that being admitted, I do not think it wrong to speculate. The Old Testament presents God's relations with a society, the Jews or the descendants of Abraham, and uses two main models. One, which I have not discussed, is that of a Bridegroom, a person who cherishes the society as a bride. The other is that of a Gardener, who domesticates a wild plant. Both models require the society to be viewed as an individual organism. Both models appear in the New Testament, and there is symbolic significance in the fact that when the Perfected Man first appears after his Resurrection he is taken, according to Jn 20. 14–15, for the Gardener. My suggestion is that in the New Testament we see the society transformed into a living organism that is supernatural, living with God's creative life. The Creator effects this transformation by becoming incarnate in the society. A society cannot be made into a natural organism. If we try to give it the unity of an individual then

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(as Aristotle observed,[17]) as we destroy it. But God enables members of a society to become parts of a supernatural organism by choosing freely to be incorporated into Christ. On this view the Incarnation and our Salvation are not distinct successive events but merge into one another in a homogeneous creative process that starts with time itself and is still going on.

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[17] *Politics* 2 1261a10–22.

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