The Incarnation : An Exchange

Maurice Wiles & Herbert McCabe O.P.

Dear Fr. McCabe,

You clearly enjoyed writing about *The Myth of God Incarnate* and I have enjoyed reading your review. I am sure you are right that if we are to get any further with the problems that the book raises, deeper insight into the doctrine of God is called for. But perhaps I should have said if *I* am to get any further, because you don't seem to think the book does raise any real problems for you; its problems are pseudo-problems, arising out of a fundamental misunderstanding, and in the light of a truer doctrine of God they will all simply melt away. The fact that you offer so quick-acting a panacea tends to make me suspicious and to discourage me from pursuing the road you propose for me. I want to tell you why I feel the problem is not patient of quite as ready a solution as you suggest.

Let me begin with the parallel with eucharistic doctrine since you find that a useful one. If I understand you aright, you are convinced that the consecrated elements are the real body and blood of Christ; you are open to different ways of understanding that but can clearly distinguish theories which are saying the same thing in a new way from ones which see the elements as mere representations of Christ's body and blood. I am not clear how you would understand 'real' here in terms of that 'clear analysis or critique of religious language' that you rightly desiderate. But the main issue between us is that I start from a different point. What I am convinced of is that the elements are spoken of as the body and blood of Christ and that that way of speaking of them conveys something of deep spiritual importance. What I would want to know from you is not only what you mean by the 'real' bit, but also how you know it in advance of any particular understanding.

But since this is only a parallel and not the substantive issue, I must move on. For the same sort of thing is true in the case of the incarnation. Your starting-point is the knowledge that 'Jesus was ... a man who was God'. In starting there you are, of course, at one with so much of the best Roman Catholic scholarship and I tried to express my difficulty with taking that as the starting-point in my *Remaking of Christian Doctrine* pp. 42-3. And the way you develop your argument reinforces my sense of a fundamental dif-

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ference at this point. Let me try to show why.

You don't say on what grounds you accept your starting-point that 'Jesus was ... a man who was God' as true. Is it because that is the Church's dogma and being such can be known to be true? That would seem to be in line with a good deal of thoughtful Catholic scholarship. If that is the case, then the way you go on to discuss the issue becomes clear. To check the truth of the doctrine by reflection on the life of Jesus is irrelevant. Indeed it shows a misunderstanding of what the doctrine is about for the doctrine 'does not tell us of his life'. The one requirement you do acknowledge (and from your point of view it is perhaps a work of supererogation even to argue for that) is 'that at least it should say something i.e. that it should not contradict itself' (p.354). I don't think those two requirements are in fact identical. One may fail to say something for reasons other than self-contradiction. But let that pass. In considering the issue of self-contradiction you reject John Hick's analogy of square and circle as too simple. I agree. The self-contradiction there is far clearer and more precise than in the case of God and man, because squares and circles are far clearer and more precise concepts. But your statement of the opposing case seems to me equally oversimplified. You write: 'It may be part of the meaning of man that he is not any other creature; it cannot be part of the *meaning* of man that he is not God.' (p.353) Perhaps, but not self-evidently so. There is always an element of arbitrariness in deciding which characteristics of a species are part of its definition, part of the meaning of the term, and which are accidental corollaries, however unfailingly they appear. It seems to me not unreasonable to regard 'being created' as part of the *meaning* of man (which there's no point in drawing attention to when what is at issue is the relation between man and other creatures) and 'not being created' as part of the meaning of God. Now if there is an analogical relationship between God and man, if indeed there is any real relation between them (as you want strongly to insist), then they inhabit a common logical world, though not of course a common logical world of shapes. *Prima facie* at least there is a case of self-contradiction involved. I do not myself want to argue dogmatically that there is clear self-contradiction, but I am certainly not clear as you appear to be that there is not. If I am to accept the doctrine as true and therefore also meaningful, I need convincing by some means other than simply reference to the Church's dogma. I want to know how the Church arrived at that conviction. And I want to be shown, not, I am ready to concede to you, that it is 'clearly intelligible' but that it is the best way of making sense of all the evidence.

Now I may be being unfair to you. It may well be that that is a challenge you would accept as fair and be ready in the appropriate place to take up. After all you could hardly be expected to

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have done so as part of one review article. But if that is the case, I very much doubt whether having undertaken that task you could remain as dismissive of concern about the content of the belief in terms of 'the life of Jesus', or 'what Jesus was like'. But it's difficult for me to pursue that point any further without knowing how you would respond to my request to spell out the grounds of your conviction about the basic truth of the doctrine in the first place.

So pending further development of any discussion along those lines, let me now make the attempt to clarify your own understanding of the doctrine in the light of your article. It seems to me that despite your very proper stress on mystery you are prepared to speak of an 'understanding' of the doctrine and not to say simply that it is sheer mystery. But I don't find it easy to grasp just what that understanding is, and if I've got it all wrong I must ask you to trust me that it is a serious attempt to understand.

You say that the doctrine "does not tell us of his life but of the *significance* of his life", and go on to suggest that "It may be that the doctrine is intended to 'express an evaluation and evoke an attitude'." (p.354). Now if what you say there is taken in the normal sense of the words used, it seems to me that your position is wholly in line with the general tenor of our book and the argument between us would be purely one about the most appropriate language to use. But other things that you say, and your earlier reference to transignification as an alternative way of proclaiming the same truth as transubstantiation, suggest that what is to me the natural meaning of your words at this point is not a safe clue to your intentions.

Earlier (p.352) you speak of the doctrine as concerned with 'what constitutes him as what he fundamentally is', and that suggests to me something more than your language about significance. In the discussion on that page you stress the need to use the concepts 'nature' and 'person' with careful attention to their technical meanings. You then go on to say:

> 'Part of the doctrine of the incarnation is precisely that Jesus was and is a human person; the other part is that this same identical person was and is divine.'

If, on the assumption that you are choosing your words carefully, the lack of parallelism here is deliberate and not just stylistic, your position would appear to be very close to that developed by Piet Schoonenberg, when he writes 'Jesus Christ is one person. He is a human person', and develops his intention as one in which 'not the human but the divine nature is anhypostatic'.[1] If that is so, it seems difficult to claim that it's what the Church has always taught and that all our fuss about crypto-docetism is due to ignorance and confusion. So far from treating the statement that 'Jesus

[1] P. Schoonenberg, *The Christ* (Sheed & Ward 1974) pp.74 and 87.

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is a human person' as one which could only be doubted by the muddled 'works of debased scholasticism', Walter Kasper draws attention to the fact that Schoonenberg expresses the idea 'in so many words' and sees it as something that 'leads him to reverse the Chalcedonian dogma'.[2]

But perhaps I am reading more into your phrasing of the doctrine than you intend. It may be that it is intended simply as a neutral statement of the dogma and I must look elsewhere for clues as to your way of understanding it. You go on to draw an analogy with someone being a policeman and a murderer at the same time as an argument against saying that Jesus did things *'qua* God'. That is not language that I feel tempted to use, though of course it was regularly used by almost all the early patristic defenders of the doctrine of the incarnation and seen by them as vital to its defence. But you candidly (and in my judgment rightly) acknowledge that your analogy has no bearing on the basic meaning of the doctrine as you have set it out.

What then are we left with? You twice emphasise the way in which the doctrine authorises such statements as 'God was whipped and spat upon' or 'God died on a cross'. It almost appears as if the doctrine has become a device in formal logic for authorising such statements. I don't want to disparage the importance of what I take to be the religious import of such statements. I discussed the issue explicitly in *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* pp.70 ff. and both my contributions to the book now under discussion bear indirectly on the same question.

You won't, of course, feel any need to ground your religious conviction about the suffering and the love of God in the way I am attempting to do, because you feel no difficulty about your own grounding of it in the doctrine of the incarnation as you define it. My difficulties about the doctrine arise when I probe the two questions: 'On what grounds do I believe it to be true?' and 'What do I mean by it?' Those two questions seem to me inescapable. They can be ruled out as methodologically improper only if they are put in a form which implies: 'Only a logically coercive proof will convince me' and 'Only that which is *fully* intelligible is worthy of belief'. Moreover they are closely interrelated, because if the belief is not simply something directly given but is human interpretation of what has been experienced in history, it must be understandable in some measure for it to be the interpretation we adopt. I hope you agree that these questions are the ones that need to be explored; because if so you would clearly be a helpful fellow-explorer, but if not I do not think our minds will really engage with one another however much we may appear to be pursuing the same subject.

2 W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (Burns & Oates 1976) pp.270 and 244.

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I have tried to draw out the main lines of the debate rather than pursue all the various points you raise. But there is one final and general point, which what I have said so far bears upon though it would require much more to substantiate at all adequately. You present yourself as teaching 'just what Holy Mother Church has been teaching since before Chalcedon' and the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* even where they are right, as being so for the wrong reason of seeking compatibility 'with the European way of life in the second half of the twentieth century'. Now, I don't want to deny for a moment that in a perfectly proper sense your position is more 'traditionally orthodox' than ours. But I don't think the difference is anything like as deep as you suggest. As soon as you move beyond the bare words of the Christological dogma, you show yourself to be a thoroughly twentieth-century man. I remain convinced that the incarnation means something very different to you from what it has meant to almost all your forbears in the faith, and the difference between your attitude to questions about the knowledge of Jesus and theirs is evidence of that. Your beliefs, it seems to me, arise from a dialectic between the tradition (especially the dogma) of the Church and your twentieth-century European way of understanding man and his place in the world. That is true of us also, though with a lower degree of special importance attached to defined dogmas. The balance of the mix may come out differently. But there's more in common in the way we reason than you seem to allow. At least, I hope there is, for that again is one of the conditions for mutual enlightenment. But I shall perhaps know better if we are able to carry this discussion a stage further.

Yours sincerely,

MAURICE WILES

Dear Professor Wiles,

Thank you for your most valuable letter. Every editor, as Chesterton once pointed out, sooner or later discovers that if he can only make his readers angry enough they will write half his journal for him. How much more blessed the editor whose readers will do this without even getting angry!

Quite rightly you pose the two essential questions:
"On what grounds do I believe it (the doctrine of the incarnation) to be true?" and
"What do I mean by it?"
It may help to clarify things a little if I try to explain why I think we each have different answers to these questions.

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I

First: On what grounds do I think the doctrine to be true?
You say: "I want to be shown not . . . that it is clearly intelligible, but that it is the best way of making sense of all the evidence." I, for my part have no reason to think that the formula of Chalcedon is the best way of making sense of the evidence about Jesus and, as I said in my review, there is every reason to hope that the modern Church enlightened by a whole range of insights from Darwin to Heidegger will come up with new and more illuminating ways of presenting the mystery of Jesus. It is this relativity of ecclesial documents such as those of Chalcedon that marks them off from ecclesial documents such as the New Testament. It seems to me the main business of theologians to explore just such possibilities, and I have certainly no disagreement with you about the need for "a dialectic between the tradition . . . of the Church and the twentieth century European way of understanding man and his place in the world"–though, of course, neither of us would want to restrict ourselves to European ways of thought. I don't think my position here is very different from your own in *The Making of Christian Doctrine* where you say, in reference to Chalcedon that such developments as were defined there might be regarded as 'necessary to the life of the Church' but another position is possible–evidently your own (and mine): "If . . . while still regarded as a true development of christian doctrine, they are understood as the Church's self-expression within the terms of a particular limited cultural system then . . . the (hypothetical future) African theologian will be seen not so much as building on the foundations of Chalcedon but rather as repeating the work of the early centuries within a new idiom." (p.10) I think, however, we still differ, for it is not clear to me that you still regard Chalcedon as a 'true development' in the sense that its denial is false; for me the definition, however inadequate, stands in the sense that we now know that the denial of it is incompatible with the christian faith. I believe that the Church is capable at certain historical moments of, so to say, gathering herself together and saying who and what she is and what she is not, and that if ever there was such a moment Chalcedon was one.

I am not certain whether I am here saying the same thing as your concluding passage in *The Making of Christian Doctrine:* "It is only as the Church as a whole gives herself with full seriousness to the task that true development becomes a genuine possibility. And the only test of whether the development in question is a true one is for the Church to ask herself repeatedly whether she is expressing as fully as she is able the things to which her Scriptures, her worship and her experience of salvation bear witness." (p.181).

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For me the Church as a whole asks and partially but definitively answers such questions in, for example, an ecumenical Council such as Chalcedon. I think there can be debate, often inconclusive debate, about which pronouncements by representatives of the Church amount to such an act of self-definition (I do not, for example, reckon myself any less a Christian for rejecting Pope Leo XIII's opinion of socialism, Pope Paul's beliefs on contraception or the views expressed at the Council of Florence concerning the damnation of those outside the visible Church) but there are some cases, such as Chalcedon, which are clear by any criteria. The topic is plainly central to the christian faith, the doctrine was produced consciously as a formula distinguishing the christian faith from error, and it was, broadly speaking, endorsed and accepted in the life of the Church for centuries afterwards.

Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum. I take this to imply that the deepest insights into the meaning of Jesus are to be found in the faith of the Church where he is present in word and sacrament—and I do not understand why anyone who did not believe this would bother to belong to the Church. For this reason I think that to depart from the faith of the Church (as distinct from merely recognising its inadequacy and continuing reformability) is to make mistakes about Jesus. There is, to my mind, a clear difference between seeking an improvement on the Chalcedonian expression of christian faith and asserting what Chalcedon sets out to deny.

I am not offering reliance on the faith of the Church as a substitute for scholarship and historical research, whether into the New Testament itself or into formulations such as that of Chalcedon. Even simply in order to understand what the Church, whether in the New Testament period or later, thought her faith to be, and how she came to formulate it in these and those ways, we certainly need to explore the economic, political and cultural determinants under which she lived and worked, the class-interests served by her preaching and so on. None of this is in the least incompatible with recognising in the faith of the Church a unique insight into Jesus.

There are areas in which such historical scholarship overlaps with the definition of faith and where it would be logically possible for conflict to occur. Evidently a historical discovery that Jesus never lived would invalidate pretty well all christian doctrine, and so, in my opinion (though not in that of all Roman Catholics) would an archaeological discovery that the body of Jesus rotted away in Palestine. There are, however, other areas of doctrine which do not in precisely this way overlap with historical research, and I think the incarnation is amongst these. The incarnation, in my view, is not vulnerable to historical discovery of this kind because it does not assert historical facts either about the be-

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haviour of Jesus or about his inmost psychology. There could however, be conflict of a different kind if scriptural scholarship were to show, for example, that some New Testament writers specifically denied what the Fathers of Chalcedon asserted, for then there would be contradiction, not between faith and historical fact, but within the faith of the Church itself. The mere fact that New Testament authors did not assert the doctrine of Chalcedon or would evidently have been surprised by it is, however, no difficulty at all; but it does present us with the historical problem of tracing the development of the Church's understanding over the first centuries.

It is thus that I would accept your invitation: "If I am to accept the doctrine as true and therefore also meaningful, I need convincing by some means other than simply reference to the Church's dogma. I want to know how the Church arrived at that conviction" . . . "if the doctrine is not something directly given but is human interpretation of what has been experienced in history, it must be understandable in some measure for it to be the interpretation we adopt. I hope you agree these are the questions to be explored." It is indeed important to explore how and why the faith of the Church developed from the first hints we find in Paul and the Synoptics which surely do not suggest any clear doctrine of the divinity of Jesus through John to Chalcedon; important because without some understanding of this we shall be unlikely to play even our tiny part in the further development towards whatever improvements on the Chalcedonian definition the Church may make in our century. I must confess, though, that I would make a laggard 'fellow-explorer' here; my training is not in history and I would prefer here simply to learn from the experts (yourself, for example).

II

The importance I have attached to the faith of the Church in this matter may become more understandable if we now turn to your second question:

"What does the doctrine of the incarnation mean?"

Here, perhaps surprisingly to you, I think the real division between us concerns the metaphysical question which you treat relatively lightly ("perhaps, but not self-evidently so") and the importance of which for my argument I had obviously not made clear.

It is central to my position that being created cannot be part of the meaning of any creature. You say: "It seems to me not unreasonable to regard 'being created' as part of the meaning of man . . . and 'not being created' as part of the meaning of God."

It would, of course, follow from your position that the proposition "This man was not created" would, like "This man is not an animal" or "This triangle has not got three angles", be self-

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contradictory. Traditional theology would certainly hold that "This man was not created" (which, of course, every atheist holds to be true) is in nearly every case false, but not that it is self-contradictory; we would not say that the atheist simply does not understand the meaning of the word 'man'.

Your position suggests, indeed, a new, remarkable, but no less invalid, version of the ontological argument. Whereas Anselm sought to prove the existence of God from the meaning of the word 'God', you could seek to do so from the meaning of the word 'man'. Traditional theology would argue to the existence of God and the createdness of man, not from the *meaning* of 'man', not from the essence of man, but from his *existence*, from the fact that the world is here instead of nothing.

Being created could not possibly be part of the meaning of man or of anything else (except of course 'a creature'); being created could not possibly make any *difference* to anything. If it did, creation would be impossible. God might set out cheerfully to create, let us say, a Nicaraguan Okapi but he would never be able to do so; all he would be able to create would be a *created* Nicaraguan Okapi, which would, on this hypothesis be different. But maybe all he ever proposes to create is a created Nicaraguan Okapi? Alas for the vanity of divine wishes; he would have to end up with a *created* created Nicaraguan Okapi, and that would be different again.

It is easy to see why Aquinas, for example, insisted that creation is not a change; being created cannot make any difference at all to what anything is any more than existence can; it could not enter into the description of anything. We could not ever say "If this is created then it must be like this and not like that." This truth is not only of interest to logicians and metaphysicians, it also matters to theologians, because part of the doctrine of the incarnation is that the person of Jesus is *uncreated.* Being uncreated doesn't make any difference either. Just as we cannot infer from the fact that Fred is created that he must be this kind of being rather than that, so we cannot infer from the fact that Jesus is uncreated that he is this kind of being rather than that. To be divine is not to be a kind of being, just as to be a creature is not to be a kind of being, (the word 'nature' is used only analogically in the phrase 'divine nature'). To be a man, on the other hand, *is* to be a kind of being, and this is the kind of being that Jesus was and is.

So long as we are asking historical questions about what Jesus was like, we shall, according to the traditional doctrine of the incarnation, come up with answers to the effect that he was a man; not, therefore, an angel or a 'supernatural visitant', but a human being like ourselves except in not deceiving himself or playing at being superhuman as we do when we sin. But, of course, we do not simply examine Jesus historically to see what he was like; we

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listen to him, he established communication and friendship with us, and it is in this rapport with Jesus that we explore a different dimension of his existence—rather as when we say that the world is created we are considering a different dimension of it from the one we look at as physicists.

The insight that Jesus is uncreated, that he is divine, is available only to those in whom this rapport is established, to those 'who have faith in his name'. That is why the Church alone, the community founded on this rapport, is able to pronounce on the divinity of Jesus, as she has done (I would maintain) implicitly in the New Testament (especially in John) and later more explicitly in the conciliar pronouncements. It would, I think, be absurd for a man to say: "I'm not a christian myself, but I do see that Jesus must have been Son of God."

It is in the contact with the person who is Jesus, in this personal communication between who he is and who I am, that his divinity is revealed in his humanity, not in any, as it were, clinical, objective examination of him. Any such examination will simply reveal correctly that he is splendidly and vulnerably human.

Perhaps there is a difference between us as to the point of this whole discussion. Perhaps, for the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate,* the incarnation, whether true or false, is interesting because it tells us something about Jesus. For me, however, it is interesting because, if true, it tells me something about God. For you, I think, the proposition that Jesus is divine might be (though probably isn't) the conclusion from a scholarly examination of the texts of the New Testament and related documents. I have tried to show why I think that such an examination outside the context of the believing community never could arrive at such a conclusion. But in any case, for me it is the other way round; the proposition that Jesus is divine provides a new and most urgent motive for a scholarly and critical examination of the New Testament texts and for recovering whatever precious fragments we can of the actual historical life of Jesus.

You ask whether I think of the doctrine as simply a device in formal logic for authorising such statements as "Our God was whipped and spat upon". I certainly do not despise devices in formal logic, for without them, muddle and intellectual dishonesty are ever liable to overwhelm our venal minds, but I do mean more than this. The doctrine points me to where I can find God, in Jesus, and I can think of no more urgent motive for a careful, critical, historical study of the New Testament. The doctrine as traditionally defined does not prejudge any of the issues that would be raised in such a study; all it says is that here, in all this puzzling complexity, God is being revealed to me. It is for this reason that I could not possibly be "dismissive of concern about the content of belief in terms of the life of Jesus or what Jesus was like". But,

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for me, the doctrine of the incarnation does not tell us about these things; it says that these things tell us about God. I do not reflect on the life of Jesus in order "to check the truth of the doctrine" but in order to enter into the immense mystery of the love of God.

III

To come now to some points of detail:

1 The sense in which I hold that the consecrated elements at the eucharist are *really* the body and blood of Christ is such that they are not, except metaphorically, bread and wine any more. For an explanation of this rather enigmatic utterance, perhaps I could refer you to my article "Transubstantiation" in *New Blackfriars* December 1972. I know 'in advance' that any account which makes of the elements simply bread and wine representing Chirst is mistaken because I think that the Church (but for which I would not believe in the eucharist at all) has ruled out that option.

2 You are quite right. In "that at least it should say something i.e. it should not contradict itself", the "i.e." should read "e.g.".

3 You are also quite right to detect and castigate my false eirenicism when I suggested that perhaps Professor Hick's view that the doctrine of the incarnation was intended to 'express an evaluation and evoke an attitude' was the same as the traditional view. It has this in common with the traditional view that it does not make of the incarnation an additional element in the empirical life of Jesus, but as you correctly point out the traditional view is a metaphysical statement which does express an evaluation and evoke an attitude but says much more than this.

4 I can see what is meant by saying (as for example, Aquinas does) that the Word of God did not *assume* a human person (i.e. an already constituted human being) but not what would be meant by saying that the incarnate Word *is* not a human person. A human person just is a person with a human nature and it makes absolutely no difference to the logic of this whether this same person does or does not exist from eternity as divine. Confusion arises about this from the muddled idea that a human nature ordinarily has a 'human sort of person' to sustain it or in which it can inhere, and that this sort of 'personality' is missing in Jesus and replaced by a divine kind—as though the proper and appropriate hypostasis for a human nature were replaced by a divine one. But this all comes from forgetting what we use 'person' for; we use it to answer the question "Who?" not the question "What?". No meaning can be attached to 'the appropriate kind of hypostasis for a human

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nature'; there are no *'kinds* of hypostasis' except in so far as they *have* natures. In virtue of the incarnation, in virtue of assuming a human nature, the Son of God becomes a human person in exactly the same sense as I am a human person. (All those Scotists and Capreolus and Cajetan *et al.* notwithstanding.) When Schoonenberg says "Now not the human but the divine nature in Christ is anhypostatic, with the proviso, moreover, that this is valid inasmuch as we do not know the Person of the Word outside the man Jesus". He is writing, I am afraid from within this muddle. The notion of an 'anhypostatic nature' just does not bear serious examination.

5 I think you have misinterpreted my reference to the murderous policeman; it was intended simply as a clarification of the use of the word *'qua'*, and not as any kind of argument. Its bearing on the incarnation is simply that just as we can say that the policeman does things which he does not do *qua* policeman, so Jesus can be said to do things which he does not do *qua* divine (or, in other cases, *qua* human).

Finally you say: "I remain convinced that the incarnation means something very different to you from what it meant to almost all your forebears in the faith." My idea of the life of Jesus is indeed different from that of most christians before this century. Quite apart from a different view of the psychology of Jesus, a view which makes him a lot less self-consciously messianic, there is the whole question of his involvement in the revolutionary turmoil of the time which was not, I think, much considered until recently. But my central point is that none of this implies that the incarnation has a different meaning for me. The incarnation is only a doctrine; it serves to block certain blind alleys in our search for Jesus. Rather than turn down these byways, I would prefer to explore with you the possibilities of a "Christology expressed in wholly different categories from the two-nature categories of Chalcedon". *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (p.181) and to seek to understand the human significance of the life of Jesus in the sure knowledge (established at Chalcedon and elsewhere) that such an understanding is taking us into the mystery of God.

Yours sincerely

HERBERT McCABE O.P.

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