

Incarnation: Some evolutionary thoughts

By Diarmuid O'Murchu

According to Christian theology Incarnation refers to God's entry into human life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, about 2000 years ago. Accordingly, this has not happened in any other religion – for Christians, Jesus alone is the incarnation of God on this earth.

I find this view disturbingly reductionistic and anthropocentric, and from a multi-faith perspective, it strikes me as being unpleasantly imperialistic. It seems to me that there are underlying assumptions urgently in need to re-evaluation.

God's Involvement in Creation

To the best of my knowledge, Christians have always claimed that God has been fully involved in creation at every stage of its unfolding and development. Presumably, that means that God was fully involved – affirming and blessing - humanity's unfolding over the past six million years (the length of our time on this earth). If at our origins, God was fully endorsing what was happening through the emergence of this new (human) species, then surely this means that Incarnation (**in the literal sense**) begins **7,000,000** years ago, and not just **2,000** years ago.

I cannot envisage this highly creative God fully endorsing a new evolutionary breakthrough, while simultaneously saying: "Yes, I endorse what is happening now, but in fact I will only declare this group saved in about 6,000,000 years time when Jesus of Nazareth comes along." The very notion is so capricious and convoluted, it simply does not stand up to credibility.

Enter Jesus . . .

Adopting the notion that God was fully involved in our unfolding from the very start, it seems to me that we should be understanding Jesus - not as the beginning of something (**e.g., our salvation**) as rather the fulfilment - of the long creative story of **7,000,000** years. I suggest that Jesus is about an affirmation and celebration of everything we achieved throughout that long journey.

Not that we always got it right. We certainly did not, but there is ample evolutionary evidence to show that we got it right most of the time. From an evolutionary viewpoint, we are a highly creative and innovative species. Unfortunately, humans today see themselves as the progeny of a patriarchal era of some **10,000** years, and that badly distorts our view of the big picture. In the world of scholarship, it is universally accepted that we always messed things up and that the further back we go the worse things get. Obviously, the academics have not gone back very far!

And the negative picture becomes grossly misleading when we introduce the notion of Original Sin. Then we really are playing God, and the creative God of the long story

becomes totally eclipsed. And not only God but also Jesus, the one who is sent by the ruling patriarch in the sky – a perfect projection of the patriarchs on earth – to rescue something that was flawed from the start.

From God's point of view, it seems, to me that there is no fundamental flaw. There is the paradox of creation and destruction forever interweaving the dynamic of birth-death-rebirth. And in this cycle death is not the Pauline "consequence of sin" or "the last enemy to be conquered." Death is an integral dimension of the divine will-to-life, which Jesus radically affirms in his commitment to life (variously described in the Gospels as the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven).

The Evolutionary Context

The fulfilment that Jesus affirms and celebrates may be explored in terms of Teilhard de Chardin's evocative insight that in biological terms, our evolution has reached a high point of development. That being the case we are now poised on the cusp of a new evolutionary breakthrough which Teilhard called psychic evolution, focussing primarily on the development of mind and spirit. Might this be what Jesus is hinting at in the words recorded in John's Gospel: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counsellor will not come to you . . ." (16:7). Furthermore, might we also envisage the Risen Jesus as the evolving human endowed with this new evolutionary giftedness, a model and pattern for us all to follow henceforth!

In this vein, Walter Wink writes: "The world that Jesus entered was seething with human longings, that showed in messianic dreams, millennial fantasies, apocalyptic desperation, mystical revelations, suicidal nationalism, religious critique and reform, reactionary rigidity, and a sense that time was collapsing, that the future was foreshortened, that the mystery of reality was about to be revealed. In such a milieu the authenticity of Jesus was like a beacon that drew all mythological motifs to itself. Incubating in the womb of that period was God's rash gamble that humanity might become more humane (Wink, p.250).

Contrary to Wink, I suspect that on God's part it was not a rash gamble! It was a very timely one, which in Wink's own words could liberate afresh something of the archetypal depth of authentic humanity: "The Human Being(Jesus) is a catalytic agent for transformation, providing the form, lure and hunger to become who we are meant to be." (Wink, p.193).

And What of Other Religions?

If the rise of the Christian Faith marks an axial moment, might that not also be true of the other great religions? And if so, wouldn't we expect to encounter a process of Incarnation also in their creeds? I suggest we don't have to look beyond the Avatars of Hinduism, the Bodhisatvas of Buddhism, the Prophets of Islam – in all cases, human beings so highly developed humanly that they are capable of revealing the life and power of the divine source.

And why stop at the major religions? Perhaps right through human history, incarnational figures have befriended us as models and catalysts, including several of the great Goddesses, reclaimed by feminists in recent decades. The potential for dialogue is enormous as we begin to realise that what unites us under God is far more powerful than what divides us. Our patriarchal, tribal inheritance has left us fragmented and confused. Incarnational wholeness was never so urgently needed.

Nor should the concept of Incarnation be reserved just for humans. The word includes all forms of corporeality that adorn God's creation, from the tiny bacteria to the elegant universe. Bodies are special to God. The divine creativity seems to flourish generically through embodied expression. Incarnation in the fullest sense is the declaration that God loves bodies.

So Much to be Reclaimed!

These reflections can be summarised in the following key points:

1. We need to outgrow the stultifying reductionism of the 2000 year bench mark.
2. Jesus did not come to rescue or redeem us – there is nothing from which we need to be rescued, other than our own patriarchal dysfunctionality which is our problem and not God's
3. Jesus, along with the incarnational figures of the other great religions, affirms and celebrates all we have achieved throughout our evolutionary journey of 7,000,000 years.
4. Jesus embodies for us and points us in the direction of our next evolutionary leap as a human species
5. From an evolutionary perspective, it is the humanity of Jesus that is all important, not his divinity. Fidelity to the transformative humanness of Jesus is what will guide us to become more God-like.
6. And the wholeness that Jesus models for us is not in the power of his Death, but in the power of the radical way he lived Life – so radical, original and inspiring that it cost him an untimely death.
7. And central to this new way of being human is the call to work for right relationships and the building of faith communities based on love and justice. Relational wholeness rather than individual prowess is the goal to which we are all called.
8. Finally, Jesus serves as a power not to be imitated, but rather as an empowerer who can liberate us to empower others so that together we can build up that new world order, which the Gospels call the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

The physicist, Elizabet Sahtouris, reinforces this notion that we are undergoing a major evolutionary transition, one that requires us to outgrow our adolescent belligerence and mature into responsible young adults, who will learn to treat creation and each other in more adult and liberating ways. And this, too, I suggest, is the major challenge facing

Christians at this time. We are called to outgrow religious co-dependency and embrace an inter-dependent incarnational spirituality.

Over the past 2,000 years the Jesus story has been bedevilled with patriarchal co-dependency. The Gospel narratives have been simplified and domesticated for children and for adults of childlike disposition. Subservience has been the desired outcome and in many cases has been effectively achieved. But it leaves us with an adult population, many of whom have abandoned the Christian faith or find its patronising propaganda intolerable and oppressive. The old plot is becoming increasingly dysfunctional.

I wish to suggest that incarnational Christianity is a faith first and foremost for adults, for people mature and visionary enough to embrace the daring praxis of a subversive adult Jesus, seeking to honour an adult God. Rightly, therefore, Jesus needs to be contextualised afresh within the big story of creation, reinforcing the big vision of God's creative Spirit. Nothing short of this will satisfy the spiritual hunger of our age, nor indeed will anything less be of much use to humanity on the threshold of a new evolutionary leap.

References:

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