

RESURRECTION—INTERRUPTION—TRANSFORMATION: INCARNATION AS HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGY

A SYMPOSIUM

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Because of its commitment to the Incarnation and the Resurrection, Catholic theology is impelled to deal productively with the issues of embodiment and particularity. These have been noticeably absent in postmodern discussions of religious experience, which tend to be abstract, "dis-embodied," and dismissive of specific religious traditions. This symposium continues the important intervention of Catholic fundamental theology in these discussions, so that theology might respond more adequately to the embodied religious experience of Christians and the sacramental imagination of the Catholic tradition. The authors argue for the necessary employment of "incarnation" as a fundamental hermeneutical strategy, and apply it to issues in eschatology, theological anthropology, interreligious dialogue, and theological epistemology.

PART ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUM

WHAT IF THE DOCTRINE OF THE INCARNATION were the guiding principle of Roman Catholic theological reflection? "Well of course," one might say, "but hasn't this already occurred?" After all, the Incarnation is central to Catholic belief and a nonnegotiable element of our confession of faith.¹ One might claim that especially since the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon in 1951, Catholic theology has become even more "incarnational," more Christocentric, more world-affirming, more aware of its historical situatedness, more hermeneutical.

While arguably true, these observations side-step a crucial issue, namely, the precise formative influence that the doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Christ has on the practice of Catholic faith and theology, especially in judging the value of the material and the particular. The fundamental

¹ See the creed of "the 150 fathers" of Constantinople I (381), later endorsed by the Council of Chalcedon (451): "for us humans and for our salvation he came down from the heavens and became incarnate (*sarkôthenta*) from the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, became human (*enanthrôpêsanta*) and was crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate" (Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. [Washington: Georgetown University 1990] 1:24).

importance of this issue is undeniable, even when one acknowledges, as we do, the truth of Timothy Radcliffe's brilliantly succinct identification of "the point of Christianity": "If Christianity is true, then it does not have a point other than to point to God who is the point of everything."² Our emphasis here, in other words, is on the value of historical and material particularity in mediating this "point."

In Catholic theology, the doctrine of the Incarnation surely plays a pivotal role. But precisely what role? How does it and should it inform theological reflection today, in a post-Holocaust, postcolonial, post-9/11 world, one seemingly full of terror-without-end? Theology's unprecedented contemporary context demands that we analyze its methodologies and presuppositions more closely. So too does theology's contested status in the consumer-driven culture of the West, a culture that often commodifies religious experience, fetishizes idealized attractive body-images, and yet suppresses the substantiality of real bodies as they experience their pleasures and pains, ecstasies and tragedies, lives and deaths. Can belief in Jesus Christ as the Word truly made flesh (Jn 1:14)—and therefore in the irreducible *particularity* of the Incarnation—be the ground of a theological method that is accountable both to revelation and to the long Christian tradition of practices and reflections, while also speaking to our contemporaries? If we answer yes (as we emphatically do in the following essays), then what does theology look like when *Incarnation* is seen as its *fundamental hermeneutical strategy*?

We raised these questions in a session at the 2005 annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, where these essays were first presented. While the meeting's theme was the "Resurrection of the Body," we realized that certain crucial preliminary issues had to be tackled before any theology of the Resurrection or any eschatology could be meaningfully articulated. Not the least of these issues are the understandings of "body" that are presumed whenever the Resurrection becomes the focus of theological reflection, and especially the body as a locus of encounter between God and humanity. Any mention of the body within Catholic theology automatically leads back to the body of Christ, in all of its modalities, and especially his human body. It also recalls Catholicism's inherent sensuousness and sacramentality, which derive above all from God's initiative to use history and materiality, and especially the materiality of the body, as the means of the world's salvation. Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection thus form an indissoluble continuum in the light of revelation. Faith in both Christ's resurrection and our own, then, compels the theologian to reflect on embodiment, and especially the revelation-in-embodiment that consti-

² Timothy Radcliffe, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2005) 1.

tutes the doctrine of the Incarnation. These issues must be emphasized not only because of their intrinsic relationships, but also because theological reflections on embodiment, its specificity, its various "locations" (geographic, social, political, economic, etc.), and the implications thereof have become especially critical at this (post-) postmodern juncture in history, when the potential for development or destruction seems to loom over embodiment in equal measure.

The doctrine of the Incarnation, as traditionally defined, refers to the belief "that the trinitarian God assumed human reality in the person of the eternal Word who is the Father's eternal self-expression, so that God, the Creator, could save humankind." A closer look reveals that the doctrine entails a double reference, "both to the *act* by which the Word of God *assumes* human nature and to the *abiding state* that results from the Word's having assumed human nature."³ This specific act of God is the necessary condition for this abiding state whereby humanity, precisely in its embodied subjectivity (and by extension all creation in its materiality), is deemed a fitting locus for God's revelation. Revelation thereby influences the parameters of all thought and action. The event of God's unique self-revelation, occurring as it does within a particular human life at a particular place and time, also indicates God's positive judgment on the suitability of humanity, human embodiment, and the particularity of its historical situatedness for the mediation of divine love and salvation.

Over a half-century ago Karl Rahner indicated where a theological understanding of this situation should start. He emphasized the "eternal significance" of the finite, contingent humanity of Jesus for our access to God, the basis for "the permanent openness of our finite being" to the eternal life offered by God.

The fact that God himself is man is both the unique summit and the ultimate basis of God's relationship to his creation, in which he and his creation grow in direct (and not in converse) proportion. This positive nature of creation, not merely measured in relation to nothingness but also in relation to God, reaches its qualitatively unique climax, therefore, in Christ. For, according to the testimony of the faith, this created human nature is the indispensable and permanent gateway through which everything created must pass if it is to find the perfection of its eternal validity before God. . . . We may speak about the *impersonal* Absolute without the non-absolute flesh of the Son, but the *personal* Absolute can be truly *found* only in him, in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead in the earthly vessel of his humanity. . . . This, however, can be found only where Jesus of Nazareth is, this finite concrete being, this contingent being, who remains in all eternity.⁴

³ Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Handbook of Catholic Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) s.v. "Incarnation" (Gerhard Ludwig Müller) 377 (emphases original).

⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for our Re-

Our reflections in the following essays go a step further. They focus on the "abiding state" that results from this divine initiative and the effects that this state has on our contemporary experience, broadly construed. We presuppose that "the world in its historicity and materiality does not separate us from God, but binds us to God. In the incarnation, creation in its openness and receptivity to God . . . becomes a basic means of grace for humankind."⁵ The Incarnation thus opens up *the materiality of the particular* as the arena of this receptivity. As the means of the universal range of grace, the roles played by both embodiment and the particular in the logic of the Incarnation should be characterized in the strongest possible terms. As Michael and Kenneth Himes put it, "The heart of the Christian gospel is that the eternal plan of God is realized in a particular time and place, that the perfect self-expression of God has become flesh and dwelled among us (Jn 1:14). Any attempt to separate the particular and the universal distorts the mystery of the incarnation and necessarily misunderstands Catholicism. For the hallmark of Catholicism is its radical incarnationalism."⁶ The specific form taken by God's revelation in Christ, that Christ is "like us in all respects except for sin,"⁷ accounts for the radical particularity of the mystery of the Incarnation, as well as its universality. As intensifications of the goodness of creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a), both the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ in their affirmations of the goodness of corporeality together form the condition for the sacramental potential of the particular as well as for faith's recognition of the perduring presence of God's salvific power as mediated by particularity. Lieven Boeve's essay underscores how particularity is a constitutive element of Christian truth: it is a "saving particularity" because of God's initiative to save by means of particularity, while saving particularity at the same time.

With notions of "presence" in disrepute these days, we do not employ the terms "particularity" or "perduring presence" lightly. Anyone acquainted with the critique of ontotheology in the later works of Martin

lationship with God," in *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger, Theological Investigations 3 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1967) 35-46, at 43-44. See in the same volume "Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas" 24-34, at 29-30: "God is man, this really tells us something about God himself. Because the human itself, affirmed by the fact that he pledges himself to us, is really and truly affirmed of *him* himself (although differently from his divinity), this human nature is thus his very own reality in which *he himself* and not merely a human nature different from him comes out to meet us, so that, when one grasps this humanity, one has in very truth understood and grasped something of God himself."

⁵ *Handbook of Catholic Theology* 379.

⁶ Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 130.

⁷ From the *definitio fidei* of the Council of Chalcedon, echoing Heb 4:15 (*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:86).

Heidegger or with contemporary continental philosophy's discussions regarding religious experience carried on in the wake of Heidegger (by Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Derrida, et al.)⁸ will be aware of the negative connotations that cling to "presence," due mainly to the currently pervasive condemnation of the "metaphysics of presence," which is accused of grounding notions of truth that lead to closure, violence, and even death.⁹ The contemporary antidote to metaphysics and to metaphysically-dependent theological expressions has tended to be a formalized, disembodied, and indeed misnamed "negative theology" which is dismissive of the "determinate" character of religious traditions and the practices they engender. This antidote claims to be a critique of modernity, but a closer look reveals rather that it is (ironically) a quintessentially modernist move, having more in common with Enlightenment "natural religion" and its search for religion's "essence" than with any of the apophatic traditions in the history of spirituality within the religious traditions of both East and West.¹⁰

However, both the structure of revelation and the specific witness of the New Testament force us to *think otherwise* about presence, particularity, and embodiment. That "otherwise" is the sacramental potential of the particular—the openness to grace, by God's initiative, that renders presence and embodiment indispensable to revelation. That sacramental potential, present from creation, is further actualized by the Incarnation and universally affirmed by the Resurrection. Rather than being one-time events in the economy of salvation, the Incarnation and the Resurrection continually shape that economy by granting to the particular and the contingent the perduring power to mediate divine life, by God's design. They also impel theology to develop an "incarnational imagination" which can

⁸ See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. and intro. Joan Stambaugh, bilingual ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University, 2002); Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in his *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978) 79–153; Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. K. Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University, 1989) 3–70; Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University, 1998) 1–78.

⁹ For a clear statement of this claimed equivalence, see John D. Caputo, "Gadamer's Closet Essentialism: A Derridean Critique," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York, 1989) 258–64.

¹⁰ See Martin Laird, "'Whereof we speak': Gregory of Nyssa, Jean-Luc Marion and the Current Apophatic Rage," *Heythrop Journal* 42 (2001) 1–12.

guide theological reflection in discerning this sacramental potential within the particular. In this way, theology can consider embodiment and contingency to be true *loci theologici*.

We attempt to carry out this discernment in the following essays, where we draw out some of the implications of the incarnational imagination. Anthony Godzieba's essay argues for the close connection between eschatology and a theology of the Incarnation; in fact, Christian theology is always performed in that space where the two are related in a productive tension. Christ's resurrection, especially in its revelational confirmation of embodiment's possibilities, demands the development of a fully incarnational theology and an activation of the theological imagination that would be able to envision embodiment and particularity as the necessary preconditions for all the theological *loci*. Theological anthropology could then be seen as fundamental theology, and thereby provide a basis for a post-postmodern Christian humanism to which Catholic theologians from all across the spectrum could commit themselves.

Boeve's essay takes up the problem of interreligious dialogue. By arguing that the doctrine of Incarnation signifies more than simply "the particular is the vessel of the universal," he shows how the particular is constitutive of the truth, which is real, concrete, incarnate, and can be grasped only as such. He thereby proposes a way in which Christians can acknowledge their own fundamental truth claims while respecting the truth claims of others. Since belief in Christ implies a very particular interpretation of history and reality, the Resurrection confirms and supplements the theological-epistemological link between Incarnation and truth—it "saves" particularity. For us human beings embedded in our particular histories, the risen Jesus opens up a future beyond death, not by lifting us out of particularity, but by healing and transforming it into life in plenitude.

Finally, Michele Saracino offers a creative response to both essays. She endorses Godzieba's call for an intensely incarnational and eschatological hermeneutic and for a focus on theological anthropology. But she asks how his proposal avoids the temptation to anthropocentrism, and wonders what the embodied subject of his post-postmodern theology looks like, since bodies signify a diverse range of meanings, including those related to power and authority. In response to Boeve, she agrees that genuine interreligious dialogue must grapple with the Incarnation; to avoid this is to water down Christian religious convictions. At the same time, to embrace the gospel message of a God who becomes human leaves Christians with no choice but to engage otherness of all kinds with respect and compassion. Saracino insists that the embodied dialogue that Boeve calls for would undoubtedly be difficult, since it is complicated by affective dissonances at the borders of self and other, differences that must be acknowledged and even embraced in any incarnational hermeneutic. She concludes by sketching out

the agenda that arises from this discussion and confronts contemporary theology: to continue the long Catholic tradition of reflection on why bodies matter; to grapple with the affective dissonance that accompanies all encounters with alterity; and to grow in awareness of the unavoidable global issues that affect any discussion of the body.

We believe that a discussion of Incarnation, sacramentality, and particularity is precisely what Catholic theology and the Church needs at present. And we hope that interested readers will not only agree with that need, but will find in these essays a catalyst for their own contributions to the ongoing theological reflection on the contemporary implications of the Word becoming flesh.

PART TWO

“STAY WITH US . . . ” (LK 24:29)—“COME, LORD JESUS” (REV 22:20): INCARNATION, ESCHATOLOGY, AND THEOLOGY’S SWEET PREDICAMENT

ANTHONY J. GODZIEBA

I WANT TO MAKE THE CASE that the fundamental theological principle of Catholic theology is that it must be both incarnational and eschatological. Now, this may seem so obvious that the reader may wonder why I pursue the issue at all. But in answering the inevitable “so what?” question, I can show that the incarnational and eschatological heart of Catholic theology has consequences that necessarily transform our theological perspectives. One immediate consequence is a more inclusive way of thinking and speaking that provides an alternative to left-right, progressivist-traditionalist, or correlationist-anti-correlationist discourse—the “party politics” approach that too easily morphs into the zero-sum “winner-loser” metaphors that recently have held Catholic theology hostage.

To put the principle more expansively, *any sort of Catholic theology necessarily takes place in the luxurious and productive tension between In-*

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carnation and eschatology. On the one hand, there is Catholicism's legitimate yearning for *presence* and *certainty*. This desire is our faith-response to the Word becoming flesh (Jn 1:14) and to the incarnational and sacramental structure of revelation. It echoes the plea made by the Emmaus disciples to the (initially unrecognized) Jesus, whose comforting companionship and interpretation of the Scriptures had set their hearts aflame: "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over" (Lk 24:29). Dwelling, we might say, between the most brilliant noon and the deepest midnight, where the light of lived experience, on its own, would fail to eliminate ambiguous shapes and the most fabulous phantasms, theology draws on the power of the paschal mystery for its sacramental imagination, that is, for its ability to discern and articulate God's mediated presence, and the positive value that this revelational situation bestows on materiality and historical particularity. On the other hand, theology also recognizes the *contingent, temporary* character of all these mediations, the fact that we are indeed immersed in the half-light of limited perspectives, that creation is incomplete and stands under the eschatological proviso. Faced with this lack of full presence, the early Christian communities, while experiencing the presence of the risen Lord and the life-giving power of the Spirit, believed at the same time that "all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now" and that humanity also groans "as we wait for . . . the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:22-23). No wonder, then, that the last book of the New Testament ends with the ecstatic eschatological cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

Some recent discussions of Christian belief rely too heavily on postmetaphysical critiques of "presence," or ignore the embodied particularity of faith in favor of a concept of religion-in-general, or circumvent the inherent fragility of the created order so as to impose a brand of epistemological certainty that dissolves the essential tension. These discussions lead to inadequate construals of reality—for example, the realized eschatology hidden within Radical Orthodoxy's "postmodern Augustinianism," or the anti-humanism of certain negative theologies and postmodern philosophies of religion.¹ One cannot ignore the fact that belief in Christ's bodily resurrection stands at the beginning of Christianity, and belief in the resurrection of our bodies stands at the "end." These defining moments form an *inclusio* that structures all Christian life and is the reason for Christianity's fundamental commitment to Incarnation and sacramentality. This *inclusio* impels Catholic theology, then, to deal directly with issues of embodiment and particularity. It should make us theologians skeptical of the currently dominant critique that labels "presence" as a kind of metaphysical strait-

¹ For a critical analysis of these theological positions, see Anthony J. Godzieba, "Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies: What Should Post-Postmodern Catholic Theology Look Like?" *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003) 217-31.

jacket or death-inducing closure. It should force us, instead, to rethink the notion of "presence" in the light of our incarnational and eschatological commitments.

I want to argue here that Christ's resurrection points us toward a fully incarnational theology, and that only a theology with a fully incarnational and sacramental imagination discloses the deeper implications of the resurrectional *inclusio* in which faith is lived.² Only a fully incarnational theology—one that views Incarnation as a fundamental hermeneutical principle—can function productively within theology's sweet predicament of living between presence and expectation, of having to account for both the already-present mediated immediacy of divine life and the "not yet" of fragile creation longing for fulfillment. And only a fully incarnational theology can respond adequately to the embodied religious experience of Christians in their contemporary estheticized context, while respecting the eschatological character of the kingdom of God.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL OPENNESS

As my point of departure, let me cite two extensive but significant passages. The first comes from Maurice Blondel's *Letter on Apologetics*, specifically the section where he carefully delineates the roles of philosophy and theology in dealing with the reality of the supernatural. Despite what he calls the "radical" heterogeneity of rationality and faith,³ Blondel insists that they work together in the "method of immanence."

There is only one relationship [between theology and philosophy] required—that which is determined by the method of immanence, which considers the supernatural not as a historic reality, not as simply possible like an arbitrary hypothesis, not as optional like a gift which is proposed but not imposed, not as appropriate to our nature and belonging to it as its supreme development, not as so ineffable as to lack all foothold in our thought and our life, but . . . as indispensable and at the same time as inaccessible for man.⁴

² I use "imagination" here in a way similar to Richard Kearney's definition of the "poetic imagination," i.e., a way of thinking by which one can "begin to imagine that the world as it is could be *otherwise*" (Kearney, "Ethics and the Postmodern Imagination," *Thought* 62 [1987] 39–58, at 44 [emphasis original]). The incarnational imagination recognizes an already revealed salvific "otherwise" made available to the world by God the Father through Christ. See Anthony J. Godzieba, "Incarnation and Imagination: Catholic Theology of God between Heidegger and Postmodernity," in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 160 (Leuven: Leuven University/Peeters, 2001) 279–98.

³ Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and, History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Iltyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 [French orig., 1896]) 160: "What faith imposes upon us as a reality, reason conceives as necessary but impracticable for us."

⁴ *Ibid.* 161.

The other comes from Raymond Brown's classic analysis of the New Testament evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus.⁵ In his conclusion, Brown first summarizes the theological implications. On the one hand, the resurrection of Jesus explains what God has done *for all men and women*, namely, changed their relationship with God and given them a new vision of God's intentions for humanity, time, and history. On the other hand, the New Testament's emphasis on *bodily* resurrection presents us not only with universal implications but also with an event steeped in particularity: "The resurrection was and remains, first of all, what God has done *for Jesus* . . . a sovereign action of God glorifying Jesus of Nazareth. . . . Only because God has done this for His Son are new possibilities opened for His many children who have come to believe in what He has done."⁶ Then, in the concluding paragraph, Brown notes that our position on the meaning of bodily resurrection will determine what sense we make of these future possibilities.

In man's anticipation of God's ultimate plan, one of two models is usually followed: the model of eventual destruction and new creation, or the model of transformation. Will the material world pass away and all be made anew, or will somehow the world be transformed and changed into the city of God? The model that the Christian chooses will have an effect on his attitude toward the world and toward the corporeal. What will be destroyed can have only a passing value; what is to be transformed retains its importance. Is the body a shell that one sheds, or is it an intrinsic part of the personality that will forever identify a man? If Jesus' body corrupted in the tomb so that his victory over death did not involve bodily resurrection, then the model of destruction and new creation is indicated. If Jesus rose bodily from the dead, then the Christian model should be one of transformation. The problem of the bodily resurrection is not just an example of Christian curiosity; it is related to a major theme in theology: God's ultimate purpose in creating.⁷

These two passages suggest the intimate connection between Incarnation and eschatology. Blondel's theory of action argues that empirical, historically-situated human life is neither sufficient nor closed in upon itself, but rather opens out beyond itself to a supernatural end without which human life can neither be lived nor understood. At the same time, he implies that this particular lived experience, which he calls the "drama" of the individual's thoughts and actions,⁸ is the necessary precondition for the discovery of the "indispensable" supernatural. Brown's remarks take this insight further, from Easter into the very depths of creation. He outlines a debate between two types of eschatological expectation: the first, the destructive model, we can call apocalyptic; the other, the transformative

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, "The Problem of the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus," in *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973) 69-129, at 125-29.

⁶ *Ibid.* 128.

⁷ *Ibid.* 128-29.

⁸ Blondel, *Letter* 162.

model, prophetic. Which one wins? Brown, after all, is correct: pious "curiosity" about the afterlife is not the fundamental issue; rather, the debate centers on God's intent at creation, the status of *this* material world in the economy of salvation, and the value of our behavior in it. The New Testament clearly opts for prophetic eschatology's transformative model as the most adequate. The resurrection narratives in the Gospels express the disciples' faith-response to God's action in the risen Christ, a faith that is the result of experience and interpretation. In their testimonies, the Gospels present Jesus as both frighteningly unfamiliar *and* reassuringly familiar; in other words, they narrate the disciples' encounter with the eschatological transformation of Jesus' corporeal identity. As a result of God's initiative, the corporeality that before Easter bore the gradual constitution of Jesus' self-identity through his human actions now after Easter communicates, in a transformed way, Jesus' unified individuality and provokes new relationships with his disciples. The gospel narratives insist on using language grounded in ordinary bodily experiences (seeing, touching, hearing), as if to assert that *only* such metaphors, despite their inadequacies, are up to the task of interpreting the personal unity of Jesus whom the disciples experience.⁹ Whatever their source in the oral tradition, the gospel narratives and the witnesses they represent insist that the language of corporeality—its *use* as well as its conscious *misuse* by the stretching of its boundaries—can begin to express this experience of the risen Christ.¹⁰

INCARNATION AND THE POWER OF THE PARTICULAR

If we truly believe that Christ is "like us in all things but sin,"¹¹ then the paschal mystery reveals an important clue about embodiment, its particu-

⁹ E.g., see how John 20, in narrating the encounter between Thomas and Jesus, forces the issue, even to the point of gruesomeness: [Thomas:] "Unless I . . . put (*balô*) my hand into his side" (20:25); [Jesus:] "and bring your hand, and put (*bale*) it into my side" (20:27). The evangelist here uses *ballô* (throw, put, place) rather than the expected *psêlaphaô* (touch, feel). Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 3, trans. David Smith and G. A. Kon, Herder's Theological Commentary on the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 330.

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the resurrection narratives and the implications for a theology of embodiment, see Anthony J. Godzieba, "Bodies and Persons, Resurrected and Postmodern: Towards a Relational Eschatology," in *Theology and Conversation: Toward a Relational Theology*, ed. J. Haers and P. De Mey, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 172 (Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2003) 211–25.

¹¹ From the definition of faith of the Council of Chalcedon (451), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 1:83 (Greek and Latin orig. and Engl. trans. on facing pages [trans. modified]); Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum/Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 38th ed. (Freiburg/Br.:

larities, its possibilities, and its role in the economy of salvation. The grammar of Resurrection is impossible without the grammar of Incarnation. Indeed, *the grammar of Resurrection is the intensification of the grammar of Incarnation*. And the doctrine of the Incarnation, in one of its most fundamental meanings, is the recognition and celebration of the capacity of the material and the particular to mediate divine presence. As Karl Rahner puts it, "in the Incarnation (which also includes Jesus' human life, his death and resurrection), the history of the world has been decided as a victorious history of salvation, not of perdition, and has been made manifest as such."¹² The Resurrection actualizes the possibilities of embodiment already disclosed in the Incarnation, which in turn actualizes the *capax divinitatis* already inherent in corporeality from creation. Not only does Jesus' resurrection encourage us to make a "forward glance" and ask about our ultimate destiny, both individual and corporate (familiar to us from Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 15), but to make the "backward glance" as well, and ask this: what kind of body is it that can have the capacity to accept and sustain the eschatological transformation experienced by Christ?

I have argued elsewhere that a strong theology of the resurrection of Jesus (not literalist or physicalist, but phenomenological and prophetic-transformational, and prepared to deal with the event's objective and subjective elements), coupled with some contemporary theories of the body (which emphasize the performative nature of embodiment and the residual material effects of those performances), can lead us to an eschatologically-attuned theological anthropology that views the body as more than a material-empirical or commodified object. Instead, it reveals the body to be open beyond itself by its pluriform possibilities and intentional desires. A strong theology of the resurrection demonstrates how this openness is graced and redeemed by indicating that this symbolic depth of the body (its analogical and anagogical senses, if you will) has been confirmed by God and fulfilled in the risen Jesus. At Easter, we are promised that our constituted embodied selves, with all their history, will be redeemed and transformed as well.¹³

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the issue of *particularity* that the Resurrection brings to the fore. Resurrection, in the New Testament,

Herder, 1999) 142 (= DH 301). The phrase, derived from Heb 4:15, is also quoted in the Roman Catholic liturgy's fourth Eucharistic Prayer.

¹² Karl Rahner, "Incarnation," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 691.

¹³ Godzieba, "Bodies and Persons" 214–20. See esp. 214–15, where the multiple meanings of the body are compared to the medieval senses of Scripture (literal, analogical, moral/tropological, anagogical).

fulfills the possibilities of materiality which has already been graced at creation and made the locus of divine presence by the Incarnation. The risen Christ is the unrepeatable configuration of personal experiences who has been eschatologically transformed by the power of the Father. This individuality drives us back again to the meanings and possibilities of embodiment. Indeed, Easter puts the body squarely at the center of our beliefs and theological concerns. This should not be surprising. Recent sociological studies of religions as ensembles of meaningful practices have emphasized that bodily metaphors are central to the communication of all types of religious faith. This is because "the body is traditionally always the nearest-to-hand source of metaphors for understanding society," including religious society.¹⁴ Alongside this sociological warrant, the central role that the body plays in Christianity is also warranted by the historical form that revelation takes: Jesus is seen by his disciples as the human face of God not simply because of his preaching of the message of the kingdom of God, but also because his person, life-style, and praxis concretely enact the values of the kingdom of God—the reversal of negativities to positivities by the power of God, beyond any human accomplishment. The possibilities of new life imaginatively narrated by Jesus' parables become actualized only when they are incarnated by Jesus' life and actions and by the actions of all who call themselves his disciples. Thus, the embodied enactment of the values of the kingdom of God is critical to their claim to truth.

A particular body configures subjectivity in a unique, unrepeatable way in space and time; it is "the basis on which our perceptions of the world are constructed, and the stuff from which our identities are framed."¹⁵ The fundamental goodness of materiality and history is confirmed by the doctrine of creation: the world is the arena for the manifestation of God's glory and saving power (see Psalms 8, 19). This claim is intensified by the Incarnation: particularity and presence are given revelational value. And Incarnation, the Word's embodiment, locates divine presence *somewhere*. John Meier is right to remind us that "when the Word became flesh, the Word did not take on an all-purpose, generic, one-size-fits-all human nature. Such a view would not take seriously the radical historicity of both human nature and divine revelation. The Word became truly flesh insofar as the Word became truly Jewish. No true Jewishness, no true humanity."¹⁶

What difference does the particularity of Incarnation make? It could be

¹⁴ Bryan S. Turner and Chris Rojek, *Society and Culture: Principles of Scarcity and Solidarity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2001) 215.

¹⁵ Ibid. See also my argument for bodily intentionality and the self as "incarnate personal style" in "Bodies and Persons," as well as the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler, and Caroline Bynum cited there.

¹⁶ John Meier, "The Present State of the 'Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80 (1999) 459–87, at 486.

the catalyst for a substantive revision of the way Catholic theology deals with scriptural authority and ecclesiology. Peter Hünemann has recently argued that Vatican II's "rediscovery" of the fundamental relationship between Judaism and Christianity, as presented in the Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*), should provoke a fundamental change in theological methodology.¹⁷ Using Melchior Cano's 16th-century system of *loci theologici* (the ordered list of "theological authorities" or fundamental sources ["places," "domiciles"] of theology),¹⁸ Hünemann demonstrates that the Church's acknowledgment of its rootedness in Judaism, both in faith and in history (mirroring Paul's argument in Romans 11), as well as the enduring validity of God's covenant with Israel, should lead theology to reevaluate how it considers "the authority of Sacred Scripture" (reconceiving the relationship between Old and New Testaments) and "the authority of the Catholic Church" (a "relational reality," relative to the "original root" of Judaism). The particularity of the Incarnation, of "the Word becoming truly Jewish," thus builds upon the history of Israel which, as *Nostra aetate* puts it, is "the root of the good olive tree, onto which the branches of the wild olive tree of the gentiles have been grafted."¹⁹

¹⁷ Peter Hünemann, "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Conciliar Discovery and Its Methodological Consequences for Dogmatic Theology," part of the lecture series "The Catholic Church and the Jewish People from Vatican II to Today," Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome (7 December 2004), available at Boston College, Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/center/conferences/Bea_Centre_C-J_Relations_04-05/Hunermann.htm (accessed July 7, 2006). See also the longer version, "Die methodologische Herausforderung der Dogmatik durch die Wiederentdeckung der theologischen Relevanz des Judentums," in *Methodische Erneuerung der Theologie: Konsequenzen der wiederentdeckten jüdisch-christlichen Gemeinsamkeiten*, ed. Wilhelm Damberg, Peter Hünemann, and Thomas Söding, *Quaestiones disputatae* 200 (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2003) 142–63.

¹⁸ In *De loci theologicis* (1543–50), Cano lists ten "authorities": (1) Sacred Scripture; (2) the oral traditions of Christ and the apostles; (3) the Catholic Church; (4) the councils; (5) the Roman Church; (6) the fathers of the church; (7) the (Scholastic) theologians; (8) human reason; (9) the philosophers; (10) history. The first seven are considered "proper" authorities (*loci proprii*), the last three "remote" (*loci alieni*). Cf. Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, "Normen, Kriterien, und Strukturen der Überlieferung," in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, ed. Walter Kern, Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, and Max Seckler, 4 vols. (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 1985–88) 4:124–52, at 132–33; Peter Hünemann, *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre: Glaube—Überlieferung—Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2003) 162–66, 207–51. Cano's *loci* reflect an insightful principle of evaluation that is still useful in fundamental theology.

¹⁹ Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*), chap. 4, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 2:970. The image of the tree with grafted branches comes from Rom 11:17–24.

I want to press Hünermann's point further, however, and suggest an even more fundamental effect. If theology were to activate the incarnational imagination and employ the Incarnation as its fundamental hermeneutical strategy, then embodiment—and the materiality, particularity, and “presence” that accompany it—would be seen not simply as one theological locus among others, but as the necessary precondition for all the *loci*, and for the act of faith itself. We indeed have a revelational warrant for claiming the body and its intentionality as the revelatory space *par excellence*. Embodiment thus becomes a fundamental theological principle, and theological anthropology becomes fundamental theology. The particularity of materiality and of place would then not be considered epiphenomenal, but would have to be considered central aspects of the Catholic construal of reality.

This point is significant for at least two reasons. First, the incarnational imagination gives Catholicism and Catholic theology a stake in the heated ongoing discussions regarding the viability of Christian belief in the context of postmodern, estheticized Western culture. This claim updates the insight of Thomas Aquinas, that every aspect of culture matters to theology, since every aspect of creation has the possibility of being a locus for the mediation of grace.²⁰ At the same time, it helps Catholicism to resist being coopted and domesticated by certain cultural trends. For example, it can prevent Catholic belief from being reduced to yet another cultural commodity (e.g., as a pawn in the culture wars, or as a therapeutic self-help remedy) or being branded a quite unfashionable, all-too-inadequate “determinable faith” by postmodern philosophy of religion. The postmodern discussion prefers to label as more authentic or “true” those notions of religion that are formalistic and disembodied, such as “religion without religion” and “the impossible”—ironically, a replication of the Enlightenment search for a universal natural religion by an avowedly anti-Enlightenment philosophical discourse.²¹ But these attempts to define the

²⁰ When demonstrating that theology is a science, Thomas says that it deals principally with God (*de Deo principaliter*) and secondarily with “creatures in relation to him, who is their origin and end” (*Summa theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] 1a, q.1, a. 3, ad 1, in *Summa theologiae, Volume 1: Christian Theology [1a. 1]*, trans. Thomas Gilby [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964] 14–15). For nature as the necessary presupposition for the workings of grace, see *ST* 1a, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2 and q. 2, a. 2 (*Existence and Nature of God [1a. 2–11]*, trans. Timothy McDermott [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964] 10–11).

²¹ Emblematic of this approach are Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995) and John D. Caputo, *On Religion, Thinking in Action* (New York: Routledge, 2001), especially the discussion on “religious truth” in chap. 5. For critiques of this approach, see Godzieba, “Incarnation and Imagination” and “Bodies and Persons”; Kevin Hart, “Without” (in press).

“true essence of religion” as pure *apophasis*, and the critiques of ontotheology (à la Heidegger) and of the “metaphysics of presence” (à la Derrida) from which they take their bearings, miss the point that Catholicism is an ensemble of embodied practices and reflections having an eschatological intentionality. They mistake modern (either post-Suarezian or post-Cartesian) metaphysics for theology. The Catholic construal of reality, however, could never define “being,” “presence,” or “body” as wholly autonomous substances or objectified representations. Instead, Catholicism argues that the world is autonomous precisely because of its theonomous character.²² The incarnational imagination agrees with Thomas that “grace presupposes nature” and “brings it to perfection,” and with Blondel that embodied human experience intends the supernatural as its “indispensable” destiny.²³

In light of the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ, “being,” “presence,” “representation,” and especially “body” have a positive character, a sacramental intensity, and an eschatological intentionality that is not obscured by their finitude. Theology driven by the incarnational imagination will insist that the kataphatic is equal in value to the apophatic, and thereby will recognize the dignity and truth of the particular. This is “faith seeking understanding” precisely because of and by means of our embodied particularity, which can mediate God’s comforting presence without denying either our finitude or our “groanings” as we await the fullness of redemption. The presence of God’s love and grace can be salvific for human persons only when that divine presence in some way appears within the field of their embodied lived experiences and particular categories of understanding, even while it exceeds these categories. Aquinas and Blondel are examples of this incarnational imagination in action; so are Gianlorenzo Bernini, Thérèse of Lisieux, Thomas Merton, and Mother Theresa—works created, lives led, interpretations made, actions performed in the *inclusio* between Christ’s resurrection and ours, in the sacramental space between incarnation and eschatology.

The second reason for considering Incarnation as a fundamental theological principle is the focus it puts on the individual human person and on forms of human society. The particularity of embodiment, threatened by its inherent ontological frailty, forms the mediating horizon of expectation for the human experience of God’s salvific love.²⁴ The incarnation of God in

²² Cf. Walter Kasper, “Autonomy and Theonomy: The Place of Christianity in the Modern World,” *Theology and Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 32–53.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1a, q. 2, a. 2; q. 1, a. 8, ad 2; Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics* 160.

²⁴ See Godzieba, “Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies” 229–30. See also Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus caritas est* (December 25, 2005), <http://>

Christ confirms the revelatory value of this always-vulnerable mediation. Is it possible that the incarnational imagination can help to craft a Christian understanding of the person for the current epoch, indelibly marked as it is by terror-without-end interlaced with the consumerization of all experience? This post-postmodern Christian humanism—an affirmative, recuperative construal of humanity that comes after and sees beyond the post-modern dissolution of the self—would have to be different from the optimistic humanism that led to some of the most significant statements of Vatican II. Forty years after that council's *Gaudium et spes*, precariousness of all types (economic, medical, technological, psychological, environmental, etc.) have so invaded the rhythms of everyday life and changed the terrain of human relationships that today the views of the early 1960s look like a dream.

Can the development of a post-postmodern Christian humanism become the rallying point for all the different styles of Catholicism that presently exist in the Church? Creating a viable and vibrant Christian view of human flourishing for our tragic and threatened epoch seems to be the focus in all quarters in the Church today, the point where the concerns of all the various positions of whatever theological or ideological stripe overlap. One of the Vatican's major initiatives, especially in its reaction to the composition of the European Union's constitution, has been to highlight and safeguard the essential characteristics of human freedom in the face of overwhelming pressures to view the person strictly through the lenses of economic models. A driving force throughout John Paul II's papacy was his rejection of the instrumentalization of human persons, whether under Communism or Western capitalism, in favor of a view of the person conformed to the presence of Christ.²⁵ Other major Vatican figures have echoed John Paul's position. Over the past few years, the argument for the development of a new Christian humanism has been forcefully advanced by Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger and Camillo Ruini, the vicar for Rome.²⁶ In

www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html (accessed July 7, 2006).

²⁵ This view is present even in John Paul's final published work, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005).

²⁶ For the background to this emphasis on a new Christian humanism at the highest levels in the Vatican, see these articles by Sandro Magister, published online in *L'Espresso* (Milan), all trans. Matthew Sherry: "Exclusive Interview with Cardinal Camillo Ruini: 'My Battle for Man'" (December 12–19, 2002), <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=6896&eng=y> (accessed July 7, 2006); "The Theologian, the Philosopher, and the Bishop: Three Lessons for the Church and the West" (May 20, 2004), <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=7040&eng=y> (accessed July 7, 2006); "The Religious Geopolitics of Cardinal Ruini" (includes Ruini's speech "Christianity's Place in the New Europe,"

his role as Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger has continued to press this issue, especially in a number of his recent statements dealing with the effects of secularization on the vitality of Christian belief and the role played by culture in Catholicism's dialogue with other religions.²⁷

No matter where one stands regarding Vatican pronouncements on the issue, there can be no doubt that the fate of humanity in the midst of unprecedented cultural changes has become one of Rome's focal points of interest. But such an interest is also true of feminist theologians, liberation theologians, Christian ethicists, and systematic theologians who regularly participate in discussions about Christianity and contemporary culture. The argument against the instrumentalization and objectification of the human person is a critical theological anthropological issue in which theologians of all persuasions, forsaking any ideological polarization, can join in a common cause and draw on the deepest resources of Catholic belief, spirituality, and reflection for guidance. To put it another way: in view of the theological task at hand, one can argue that Rahner's sketching of human possibilities in the light of the supernatural existential and von Balthasar's notion of a creation suffused with the drama of divine salvation are not contradictory but fundamentally complementary, despite their differing emphases.²⁸

In the current situation, however, these approaches need to be supplemented with the insights of a Catholic theology that is rigorously incarna-

given February 11, 2005 at a meeting of the Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi) (February 21, 2005, 2 parts), <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=23170&eng=y> and <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=23108&eng=y> (accessed July 7, 2006); "The Pope and his Two Consuls" (March 30, 2005), <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=26889&eng=y> (accessed July 7, 2006).

²⁷ For important differences between Ratzinger and Ruini on how the Church ought to respond to its European situation, see Silvio Ferrari, "Civil Religion or Intransigence: The Two Strategies," included in the article by Sandro Magister, "Minority Church, Church of the Masses: The Two Strategies of R. & R., Inc.," *L'espresso* (May 30, 2005), trans. Matthew Sherry, <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=32031&eng=y> (accessed July 7, 2006). For Ratzinger's emphasis on humanism and culture as central to the dialogue with other religions, especially Islam, see Magister, "The New Curia of Benedict XVI Looks toward Asia," *L'espresso* (May 26, 2006), trans. Matthew Sherry, <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=60561&eng=y> (accessed July 7, 2006). See also Samir Khalil Samir, S.J., "Benedict XVI and Islam," *AsiaNews.it* (April 26, 2006), <http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=5998> (accessed July 7, 2006).

²⁸ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1989; orig. publ. 1978); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 5 vols., trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988-1998).

tional and eschatological. A post-postmodern theological anthropology emphasizes the essential role that embodiment plays in our attempt to discern "God's ultimate purpose in creating" and how that purpose is active today. Today, when difference, particularity, and esthetics have more communicative force than any appeal to universal absolutes, the incarnational imagination's ability to value embodiment and particularity for their own sakes allows theology to join a conversation about human destiny that is already taking place. The power of discernment given to theology by the incarnational imagination can direct our actions toward what is life-affirming across all differences. At the very least, Jesus' kingdom preaching and its intensification through his resurrection make it clear that one of God's intents is to promote human flourishing, through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and through the emancipative power of the Word of God that the Church is committed to make known in all cultural contexts. The point is to show how God's intent is incarnated in each particular life, each particular situation, each particular relationship, and then how the ensemble of lives, situations, and relationships works together to actualize the values of the kingdom of God in a way that truly mediates God's salvific power and manifests God's consoling love to the world.

To show that God's love is present, active, comforting, transforming, enabling *and* that there is more of God's inexhaustible goodness that exceeds any presence that we have experienced—that indeed is theology's sweet predicament, one that theology should embrace without reserve, for the life of the world.

PART THREE

RESURRECTION: SAVING PARTICULARITY: THEOLOGICAL-EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF INCARNATION AND TRUTH

LIEVEN BOEVE

THERE IS NOTHING IN CHRISTIANITY that forces people to believe: no awe-inspiring events, no ironclad logic, no exceptional religious ex-

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periences. On closer inspection, the fact that some Christians read narratives and events as the history of God's relationship with humanity would appear to be little more than accidental. There is nothing to compel such a reading, certainly not with respect to the most important element of the Christian faith, namely, the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the resurrected crucified one, God and human being at one and the same time, God's Word made flesh, God's incarnate Son. Was not Jesus the son of Mary and Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth? Was not Jesus a marginal Jew, caught up with God, perhaps, but not to the extent that people were immediately compelled to recognize him as God? Did the earth really quake, the rocks really break asunder, the graves burst open and the dead rise up at the crucifixion of Jesus as Matthew narrates it (Matt 27:51-52)? It would seem that even the resurrection was not the earth shattering global event as it has been portrayed. If it had been so, all of Jesus' contemporaries would have been able to do nothing other than to believe in Jesus' divinity. According to the high priest and the elders, the disciples removed Jesus' body from the grave (Matt 28:13). Is it possible to prove that the empty grave was a result of Jesus' resurrection? In spite of many unanswered and unanswerable questions, the first Christians and, on their testimony, many generations thereafter claimed and continue to claim that this very Jesus is the risen Lord, and this on the basis of their experiences with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is their firm belief that God came close to humanity in an unforgettable and unparalleled way in this concrete human being of flesh and blood. Believe if you can!

The situation is no different today. For many, Christians and non-Christians alike, the idea that God became human in Jesus is difficult to accept. Today, as before, there is nothing to force such a confession: no awe-inspiring events, no ironclad logic, no exceptional religious experiences. Few would be inclined to deny that the Christian faith has to do with a collection of meaningful Christian values. Many would even subscribe to the suggestion that the Christian faith is still entirely plausible when it speaks of a loving God, the deepest mystery of reality, the "something more" than I can see. There is here a profound core to which our experiences of joy and pain, of amazement and dependence point us. The claim that such a message is dependent in its entirety on one single human being who lived 2000 years ago, however, remains for many a serious stumbling block.

Moreover, at the level of both theoretical and practical concern, the ongoing defense of Jesus Christ as the ultimate expression of the core of the Christian faith remains a problem for continuing dialogue with other religions and convictions. Many—both Christian and non-Christian alike—are of the opinion that the "Christ claim" precludes every form of rapprochement. The idea that Jesus was a prophet, a religious genius, a wise spiritual master, is acceptable to many, but at the same level as Moses,

Mohammed, and Buddha, or divine in the sense that Brahman, Shiva, and Vishnu are divine.

I will argue here that, whether it is difficult to believe or not, the entire Christian faith nevertheless stands or falls on the premise that God became human in Jesus. The person who desires to understand the Christian faith cannot avoid this premise. At the same time, the person who seeks to understand the truth claim of Christianity will, sooner or later, have to deal with the doctrine of the Incarnation. Indeed, the truth of faith (the truth I live by) and the way this truth functions are therein revealed. Connected to this, I will also point to the similar and thus confirming epistemological consequences of the Christian belief in Christ's resurrection.

To interact with this reflection, I will introduce the question of interreligious dialogue, examining how our understanding of the truth is challenged thereby and how I can stress the distinctive features of the truth of faith maintained by the confession of Christ. At the end of this exercise I hope to have made clear that Christians, rooted in their particular Christian critical awareness, have a genuine contribution to make to discussions on truth and values in our contemporary societies. However, to begin with, I offer a brief sketch of how men and women of every age have wrestled with Jesus Christ.

A STUMBLING BLOCK TO JEWS AND FOOLISHNESS TO GENTILES

Since time immemorial, the Christian truth claim of the Incarnation has been a source of difficulty, misunderstanding, and even conflict, both within the Christian community and in its relationship with the world outside. The turbulent history of the early church is characterized by a search for the appropriate way to express, in the language and thought of the day, the belief that God came close to humanity in a unique and definitive way in Jesus. In the early church, it was ultimately and primarily the humanity of Jesus Christ that people found difficult to combine with his divinity, which, in the Hellenistic context of the day, was much easier to accept as the point of departure for the theological significance of who Jesus Christ was. The church fathers and theologians of antiquity, on the other hand, sought in the first instance to conceptualize the real humanity of Jesus Christ from the perspective of his divinity.¹

¹ Their effort ultimately represents the point of discussion with the Arians on the divinity of Jesus; not so much that Jesus would thus be too human but rather that he would be less divine, a lesser god. Arius (circa 318) considered Jesus Christ to be a sort of divine intermediary between God and creation. The disputes between the so-called Alexandrian and Antiochian schools, expanded into Monophysitism and Nestorianism (first half of the fifth century), revolve around the question of the divine Logos becoming human: did he merely take on humanity in a general sense (Alexandria), or was he indeed very specifically human (Antioch)?

This approach changed dramatically in the modern period. The Enlightenment challenged religion before the court of reason. The fact that Jesus was a human being, even an extremely special human being, did not emerge as a cause of concern for the modern person. The idea that this same human being was also God and thus that the meaning of all humanity and the history of the world had been revealed in him in a decisive way, however, was beyond modernity's capacity to comprehend.

Modern theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx wrestle with this problem when, having taken Jesus' humanity as their point of departure, they point to traces of Jesus' unique relationship with God, his Father. According to Schillebeeckx, it is on the basis of these traces that the first Christians were inspired to confess this Jesus as the Christ, God's definitive revelation. Schillebeeckx refers, for example, to Jesus' intimate experience of God as "abba" (Aramaic for "daddy"), which would have been extremely unusual in those days. He alludes further to Jesus' boundary-breaking accomplishments that set him apart from Jewish society and to the disciples' extraordinarily profound resurrection experience, an experience of ultimate forgiveness articulated in expressions such as "He is alive," "I have seen Him"—an experience that set them on the path toward forming community in Christ.² Rooted in Jesus' humanity, an effort is made to work toward what it means to confess this human being as the Son of God. However, because of the detraditionalization and the pluralization of the religious scene, at least in Europe, the challenging step from "Jesus the extraordinary human being" to "Jesus the divine human" has certainly not been made easier.

THEOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

Today, it is no longer only the secular, modern culture of science and emancipation that challenges Christians to renew their understanding of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, but also the encounter with the diversity of religions and fundamental convictions. The effort to address this encounter clearly presents Christians with a twofold challenge. In the first instance, questions arise with respect to the relationship between the Christian faith and the other (world) religions in question, and the validity of the theological strategies of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Second, the confrontation with (someone adhering to) a different religion forces Christians to reflect on their own identity: what does being Christian

² See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979).

mean exactly? What distinguishes Christians from those of different faiths? What does the Christian truth claim consist of, and what does it mean in practice? How can I justify this claim against the background of religious diversity, and more concretely, in interreligious dialogue?

A response to the first question cannot be given in isolation from the second series of questions and vice versa. I contend that the Christian response begins and ends with an answer to what it means to believe in Jesus Christ. It is precisely in the theological reconsideration of such faith that I am able to clarify the Christian truth claim while simultaneously opening a way to reflect on this truth claim in relation to other religions.

This construction may immediately become clear when I consider the three classical theological strategies to conceptualize the relationship between the Christian faith and other (world) religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. On the one hand, none of the three relationships appears to be subtle enough to adequately and plausibly formulate the delicate balance required to maintain the Christian identity and truth claim. On the other hand, none of these establishes a fundamental respect for other religions and their particular truth claims.

To begin with pluralism, its conceptual strategy tends to weaken the constitutive character of the christological confession of the Christian faith. Most pluralistic Christian thinkers begin with the presupposition that God is in principle unknowable and that Christians cannot legitimately claim to have privileged access to such knowledge. Such a perspective calls, first of all, for a review of the central role of Jesus Christ, the man in whom God has been revealed, according to the Christian confession. Some pluralists redefine Christ's role by designating the Incarnation as a myth or a metaphor, or by describing Jesus as one of the many faces of God. Others separate the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity, the Son/Word and the Spirit, from the concrete figure of Jesus Christ and ascribe to them a more elaborate salvific role remote from Christ. Other religious figures may then likewise be incarnations of the Second Person of the Trinity or be inspired by the Third Person. As a consequence, the revelation of God in Jesus, and thus also his salvific role, is considered to be limited, incomplete, or imperfect. In short, to ascribe a role to other religions, the pluralist theologians radically *relativize* the Christian truth claim. At most, Jesus Christ *represents* God, but he does not *incarnate* God. Jesus is a human example of God, but not God made flesh.

Are the other two conceptual strategies more promising? Exclusivism tends to have totalitarian features and finds it enormously difficult to ascribe a place to the good that takes place outside of Christianity. Incarnation, as God's concrete intervention in history, is both absolute and limiting

at one and the same time: since salvation is complete in Jesus Christ, there is no room for salvation from elsewhere. When it comes to respecting the "seriousness" of other religions, inclusivism appears to be much better placed. It allows for the presence of truth and salvation outside Christianity, albeit always in a partial form that can achieve completion only within Christianity. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is ultimately the deepest realization of the fragments of salvation and truth to be found in other religions. Upon closer inspection, however, inclusivism does not really succeed in ascribing a worthy place to other religions and their truth claims in relation to the Christian faith. In this view, Christianity is always more true, more good, more authentic. Such an often latent sense of superiority has the evident capacity to undermine every form of interreligious communication in advance, because it remains in essence just as totalitarian as exclusivism (although less in practice).

Each of the three classical strategies intended to facilitate our conceptualization of the relationship between Christianity and other religions must inevitably come face to face with their own limitations. The pluralist position requires relinquishing in advance a core element of the Christian confession of faith as a self-imposed condition to enable participation in interreligious dialogue in the first place. Exclusivism and inclusivism take the veracity of their own convictions as their point of departure and leave little if any room for any kind of otherness that does not square with their own position.

INCARNATION BETWEEN UNIVERSALIZATION AND PLURALIZATION

All things considered, the three conceptual strategies can ultimately be reduced to two ways of resolving the question of the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions. In the first instance—with respect to exclusivism and inclusivism—Christianity is *universalized*: the Christian faith is the one and only truth for all times and places and peoples. From the perspective of this truth, therefore, Christians perceive other religions as either completely lacking in truth or sharing in only a part of it. The person of Jesus Christ is considered primarily from the perspective of his divinity. The fact that Jesus Christ is God incarnate makes the Christian faith superior to or at least more comprehensive than other religions.

In the second instance—with respect to pluralism—Christianity is *particularized*: the Christian faith is (only) one perspective or one part of a greater truth. It is thus one specific (particular) truth that is contained in or surpassed by a higher (universal) truth. The divinity of Jesus Christ be-

comes relative in the Incarnation. Jesus was certainly an extraordinary human being, characterized by a profound relationship with God, capable of inspiring people and leading them to the knowledge of God, but he is not *the* incarnation of God, qualitatively incomparable, unique, and definitive. In a best case scenario, Jesus is certainly a representative of God, but not necessarily the only one.

In more technical terms: for exclusivism and inclusivism, the historical-contingent particularity of the Christian revelation is immediately positioned within a virtually meta-historical Christian frame of interpretation. Concrete narratives and histories, people, and events are taken up into an all-inclusive vision of history; they stand face to face with *the* truth, *the* salvation, and are thereby deprived *in principle* of their historical accidentality. In the second instance, the Christian truth claim is relativized in function of a more general religious truth, precisely because it is *merely* a product of an overly historical-particular and contingent history or tradition. Precisely because Christianity is rooted in an accidental convergence of circumstances, an historical conglomeration of narratives, events, and rituals, it cannot lay exclusive claim to the truth. The concrete particularity of the Christian faith narrative is thus used as an argument to support relativizing Christianity's truth claim: the particular can never be identified with the whole truth.

In both instances, "incarnation" is understood as the absorption of the historical-particular into the universal or the reduction thereof into the universal. Truth thus comes to equal universality. This also explains the way in which the strategies in question evaluate "incarnation": for exclusivism and inclusivism, Incarnation is the cornerstone of the truth claim that universalizes Christian particularity: the human Jesus becomes the vessel of a universal, all-embracing divine truth. For the same reason, by contrast, Incarnation is *the* stumbling block for pluralism. Precisely because the doctrine of the Incarnation universalizes the historical-particular Christian truth claim, thus making it totalitarian, a respectful approach to other religions becomes impossible. It is only when the fullness of truth is not identified with the Christian faith that it becomes possible for other religions to claim the truth (however partial). The truth in both instances is not to be found in the specific particularity of the Christian faith, but rather in a universalized Christian faith or a universal religion, of which the particularity of Christianity is but a single form. If truth exists, it does so in spite of particularity.

It remains a question whether the truth of a religion (understood as the truth one lives by rather than scientific truth) is best conceptualized in general, universal terms to which concrete religious traditions, insofar as they are particular, concrete, historical, and accidental, are related. Do I

not do an injustice to the specificity of theological truth by capturing it in an asymmetrical opposition between particularity and universality? Furthermore, is it not possible to understand Incarnation in an opposite sense, namely, by insisting that, if truth exists, it is to be found in the concrete, historical, and particular? In other words, is this not the ultimate meaning of Incarnation: that the "all-too-human" speaks for God, without diminishing God in the process and without assimilating humanity into God? To complete our line of inquiry, I now return to the theological reflection on interreligious dialogue, to the communication between fundamental life options.

TRUTH AND COMMUNICATION WITH RELIGIOUS OTHERS

I have already noted not only that contact and confrontation with other religions force Christians to reflect on the relationship between Christianity and the religions in question, but also that Christians must think about the Christian faith itself and the truth claims for which it stands. An encounter with a Muslim or participation in a Hindu ritual can confront Christians with questions regarding what they themselves stand for, and how they themselves experience their faith. In contrast to pluralism, which maintains that one's own truth claims and one's own identity have to be relativized, or with a view to interreligious communication, the dynamic may well be precisely the reverse: in one's contact with other religions and the dialogue that ensues therefrom, potential points of mutual kinship can emerge side by side with the reciprocal difference and uniqueness of the dialogue partners.

A discussion between Christians and Buddhists on the topic of mysticism and contemplation, one suspects, would reveal significant points of agreement while simultaneously clarifying points of difference. It truly makes a difference if one contemplates the mystery of reality as "love" or as "emptiness." For the Christian believer, the ultimate truth of reality was definitively revealed in Jesus Christ as the mystery of love. Living one's life according to this reality makes one a Christian and ultimately serves as the measure of one's Christianity. It is thus rooted in such an identity—which is not acquired automatically—that Christians approach the plurality of other religions and enter into dialogue with them. Their endeavor to follow Christ in their lives not only leads Christians on a path that brings them into contact with others, but it also forms the background and interpretative key to their engagement in such interactions. For Christians, the recognition of goodness and truth in other religions must necessarily take place in reference to Jesus Christ, precisely because they engage in contact with others as Christians. Does this mean that Christians necessarily enter

into every dialogue in an *inclusivistic* way? In a certain sense, yes, but how then do I deal with the objection that inclusivism leans in the direction of totalitarianism?

Perhaps in such instances we are dealing with a different type of inclusivism, one that does not bear the universalizing tendencies noted above. Indeed, interreligious dialogue teaches us in practice that there is no neutral place or neutral language in which to speak about the multiplicity of religions, and that the peculiarly Christian language game also consists of a highly specific grammar and vocabulary rooted in its own background and traditions. This Christian language cannot simply be translated into the language games of other religions and vice versa. Non-Christian dialogue partners are often unable to recognize themselves in the language used by pluralistic theologians, for example, to conceptualize the multiplicity of religions (because it often contains a significant residue of the Christian language game). There is no such thing as a religious Esperanto into which every religion can be translated. We have no standard religious language at our disposal that allows us to make the uniqueness of every religion, as it is sensed from within it, transparent and understandable to all. We do not possess a conceptual framework in which a kind of unified religion can be designated or constructed, a framework in which the various religions of the world are concrete representations. With their own background and horizon, Christians engage in dialogue with people of other beliefs and other fundamental life options.

As a matter of fact, interreligious dialogue itself confronts inclusivistic theologians with their own particular points of departure and makes them aware of the Christian perspective from which they participate in such a dialogue. Christians are already located, and have already adopted a position in the plural domain of interreligious communication, and it is from this position, in the midst of other positions, that they should assess their necessarily inclusivistic dealings with others. Christians do not have a bird's eye view that allows them to survey religious plurality as detached observers and grant it a place in the light of its own truth. Indeed, Christianity's own place in the midst of plurality is part of the picture. The "different inclusivism" to which I refer is conscious of the particularity of the Christian faith and brings it into the dialogue, not to relativize its own position but rather to determine it in the plural interreligious world. In the context of interreligious dialogue, Christians will ultimately be confronted with their own specific way of speaking about reality. Unable to distance themselves from their particular options, presuppositions, terminology, and conceptual schemes, Christians ultimately approach others with their own "baggage." An example of this "baggage" is the Christian conception of the universal salvific will of God, which explains why

Christians tend to be so highly motivated to engage in interreligious dialogue.

The following image better explains what I mean: Some present the various religions as a variety of different paths that lead to the same mountain-top engulfed in clouds. But how can we verify such a hypothesis, if we follow only one of the said paths, namely, the Christian one? Without a bird's eye perspective on the religious reality, it is impossible to legitimate the image. There's the rub! The experience of religious plurality and interreligious dialogue reveals that the observer's position is in fact unsustainable. We are all *participants*. We each follow our own path. We are each aware that other paths exist that cross our own from time to time or run parallel with ours for a while only to go off in their own direction farther down the line. We cannot confirm, however, that all these paths actually lead to the same mountain top. Indeed, it is equally possible that a path that disappears beyond the horizon and into the clouds leads to a different mountain top. It is impossible to confirm this from the perspective of our own path and likewise impossible to deny it. We simply do not know. Nevertheless, we climb the mountain using our own path and discover from time to time that other paths cross our own. It is thus as mountain climbers that we enter into dialogue and are able to exchange thoughts and customs, joys and concerns with others, but are still rooted in our experience of the journey. A particular role is set aside in this endeavor for the imagination. Aware of the fact that we are participants, and learning about others in contact with the other, we are capable, to a degree, of changing our perspective, without denying the irreducible otherness of the other in the process.

An inclusivistic perspective is thus—epistemologically speaking—unavoidable. The question posed by pluralistic theologians with respect to the relationship between Christian truth claims and the other religions remains a pressing one: how do we combine Christian identity with a fundamental respect for other religions? The practice of interreligious dialogue would appear to have room for both, but how are we to conceptualize this reality in theological terms? Is a sort of “pluralistic” inclusivism possible?

In contrast to the classical inclusivistic position, this possibility would imply that Christians must approach religious plurality from the perspective of participants. For us as Christians, the mystery of Christ constitutes the perspective from which we speak about religious salvation and truth, because we live in and from this truth. In the same way the universal salvific will of God, which is revealed to us in Christ, provides the Christian point of cross-reference for recognizing traces of goodness and truth in other religions. We can follow only one path at a time—trusting that all humanity is ultimately saved in Christ.

THE TRUTH OF THE INCARNATION IS THE INCARNATION OF THE TRUTH

I noted above that the Incarnation might signify more than the idea that truth is revealed in the particular, or in other words that the particular is the vessel of the universal. The truth of the Incarnation indicates, rather, that the particular is constitutive of the truth, essential and indispensable. Truth is real, concrete, incarnate, and can only be grasped as such. Thus, when we speak of Jesus Christ, God's Son made flesh, we cannot simply make a distinction between the divinity and humanity of Jesus, even though they do not coincide. God's revelation is unthinkable without the humanity of Jesus; the humanity of Jesus is constitutive of what we know of Jesus as Christ and of Christian faith in him. It is in Jesus, in his concrete humanity, that God is revealed among human beings, the Jew from Nazareth who proclaimed the kingdom of God in the language and narratives of his own day and put it into practice until he died on the cross outside Jerusalem. After his death, his disciples confessed this same Jesus: that he had risen, and that he was the Christ, God's Son, *in his humanity and not in spite of it*. The one who desires to know God must look at Jesus. In what became the New Testament, the first disciples expressed in the language and stories of their day the results of their faith-inspired observation of Jesus, just as later faith communities would be inspired age after age by their words.

Moreover, Jesus Christ reveals God and God's desire for human beings as a result of his humanity. Classical theology tends to explain this point in soteriological terms, from the perspective of "he descended from heaven for our salvation." Only if God really becomes human, it is proposed, can the human person really become God; it is only because God *fully* shared humanity with us that we human beings are saved. At this juncture, I emphasize the epistemological perspective with the following question: what does it say about the truth unfolded in Christ? As I have already stated, the person who desires to know God must look to Jesus Christ who, as a human person, definitively revealed God in history. At the same time, divine truth for Christians is also to be located in concrete events and narratives. It is only in the all-too-historical, concrete, accidental that God can—and does—become manifest. This does not mean that God coincides with the concrete and the accidental, but that the concrete and the accidental make the manifestation of God possible, not in spite of but rather as a result of the concrete and the accidental. Every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential location of God's manifestation. For Christians, therefore, God's manifestation in Jesus Christ forms the hermeneutical key to the particular and contingent.

What the christological dogma of the Council of Chalcedon can mean for us today is this: God is manifest in Jesus Christ, not without Jesus' humanity but in and through it; Jesus as human reveals God, without thereby giving up his humanity. Jesus' concrete words and deeds reveal God, who is historically situated in a very specific context. Every actual statement about this God and this revelation must comply with the same rules of the game. Even today, it is possible to express God's involvement in history and the world only in all-too-human terms. Jesus' particular humanity, concrete history, and the events, narratives, and conceptual frameworks thereof do not represent a stumbling block on our journey to God. They represent the very possibility of the journey.

What I have just said is in fact true of every human engagement with the Christian faith. It is only in the particular word, narrative, ritual, and practice that the profound significance of the Christian faith can be revealed. Incarnation thus demands—formulated once again in technical terms—an ongoing “radical hermeneutics” in which the particular, as the possibility of divine revelation, is taken seriously and at the same time relativized, since this particular never coincides with God, just as God and humanity are united in a single person, undivided and undiluted. This is the core around which the Christian tradition revolves: the tradition cannot be substituted for, nor can it be absolutized. It speaks of God—and without it there can be no talk about God—but it is not God. When tradition is absolutized, it is precisely Godself who interrupts such rigidity and fosters recontextualization.³ There is no such thing as a core of truth that stands at our disposal, free of every form of mediation that is given expression in ever-changing historical frameworks, as many classical hermeneutic theologians have argued. Every truth is constituted in part by the all-too-human, and by concrete history and context. This particularity does not do an injustice to such truth, since it is only through time and history that I can speak about God. It is likewise through this tradition that God speaks to Christians, embedded in the historical context of today, whereby the said tradition perpetuates and renews itself.

Therefore, Christology, the theological understanding of Jesus Christ, is the cornerstone of all theology and necessary for a clear understanding of what in theological terms is the truth. The all-too-human does not obstruct genuine Christian discourse about God and to God, but is the precondition thereof.

³ For further reflection on the interruptive God, see, e.g., Lieven Boeve, “Theology and the Interruption of Experience,” in *Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Yves De Maeseneer, and Stijn Van den Bossche, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 188 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005) 11–40.

RESURRECTION: SAVING PARTICULARITY

The Christian belief in the Resurrection confirms and supplements the theological-epistemological link between Incarnation and truth. It also reinforces the view that belief in Christ implies a very particular interpretation of history and reality. Whereas the death of Jesus is regarded as a historical event witnessed by a multitude of people, the Resurrection is accessible only through a hermeneutics of testimony, an auto-implicative witnessing.⁴ The belief in Christ's resurrection is both the product of experience and interpretation, and leads to new experience and interpretation. The faith in a God who rescues the one who lived his reign up until death on the cross, as a promise to us all, fosters a very specific view of history and reality.

In line with what I said above, and from a fundamental-theological perspective, this view can be further explicated in reference to the double meaning of my title: "saving particularity." First, epistemologically speaking: whoever wants to enter into contact and understand Christian faith and its promise of salvation has to look at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In what happened to him, through a particular interpretation of a particular history, of particular experiences, we are able to come to know who God is and how God relates to history—as the saving particularity, Jesus Christ. At the same time, the metahistorical event of the Resurrection is also about saving particularity. With the resurrection of Christ as a promise to us all, and in contradistinction to more dualist anthropological accounts, the corporeality of our historical existence is coimplied: Jesus is resurrected by God not as a spirit, but as a complete human subject. And in Jesus' resurrection, God saves the concrete corporeality of our being human. In short, the connection between the two dimensions of Resurrection, of saving particularity, are shown by a quotation from the French Dominican Christian Duquoc: "To the one who did not refuse to give his life for the others, God gives life in its fullness. . . . As it is in his body that he surrendered himself to the other, so it is in his body that he experiences the power of life. . . . If he has died for the others, a death thus of universal value, he definitely also lives for the others, a life with universal comprehensibility."⁵ In the Resurrection, Jesus who died for us is risen, opening for us historical human beings, embedded in particular histories, a future beyond death—not by lifting us out of this particularity or undoing it, but by healing and transforming it into life in its fullness.

⁴ See Christian Duquoc, "Résurrection du Christ," in *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002) 994–98, esp. 997.

⁵ *Ibid.* 998 (my translation).

CONCLUSION

As I have already stated, Christians today are being challenged by religious plurality. In the context of interreligious dialogue, they are being called upon to respect their own truth claims as well as the truth claims of others at one and the same time. Rooted in their own Christian background, Christians engage as participants in a dialogue that need not lead to greater unity—although the effort to conceptualize and understand points of difference is already a major step in the right direction. As conscious participants, Christians are well advised not to misjudge the particularity of their own position as something over which the truth claims of Christianity must echo and resound, or as something that discredits the truth claims of Christianity in advance, but rather as irreducibly constitutive of the truth of the Christian faith. Neither the inclination to universalize the truth claim (exclusivism and inclusivism) nor the pluralistic negation thereof (pluralism) is of much use. It is precisely in the combination of maintaining both their particularity and their truth claim that Christians are able to enter into interreligious dialogue, looking forward to the moment when Jesus Christ reveals himself in such a dialogue, as he continues to do “in the least of these.”

Neither dialogue with the Enlightenment nor the contemporary confrontation with religious plurality can provide us with incontrovertible evidence in support of the Christian faith. Indeed, nothing distilled from such a dialogue can make Jesus God. It is only in faith that Jesus leads to God. The reconsideration of this faith in the contemporary context of religious plurality, however, can lead men and women to the boundaries of the faith, to the point where faith begins, but the next step in the process is the step of faith, both chosen and received.

Moreover, the same process of reconsideration locates Christians in the midst of the public debate over the society of today and tomorrow. At a time when the master narratives of modernity have lost their plausibility, and the influence of the market and the media have come to dominate the public forum, it might appear that the Christian appeal to see the truth in the concrete and the particular has little to offer—unless it is understood as a point of departure whereby Christians together with others are able to criticize the said processes of globalization and relativization and draw attention to the “unimportant” other. Considered in this fashion, it would appear that Christianity still has much to offer contemporary society.⁶

⁶ I would like to thank Dr. Brian Doyle, who translated major parts of this article, as well as gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO) and the KULeuven Research Fund.

PART FOUR

RESPONSE TO ANTHONY GODZIEBA AND LIEVEN BOEVE

MICHELE SARACINO

TOGETHER, ANTHONY GODZIEBA AND LIEVEN BOEVE clearly maintain that Catholic theology must engage issues around corporeality if it wants to defuse the current polemically charged, theo-political context and progress beyond it. Their essays challenge theologians working not only within the areas of theological anthropology, eschatology, and interreligious dialogue, but also those who explore issues of sin, evil, and salvation. Whether on the theoretical or the practical level, no Christian can escape the impact materiality has on living in the image of God.

Godzieba's essay calls to mind his earlier "Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies: What Should Post-Postmodern Catholic Theology Look Like?"¹ There, he emphasizes the vulnerability associated with being human, and sets the stage for arguing that corporeality is a central theological axiom of human existence. Pushing previous claims about human frailty, Godzieba argues in the essay under discussion here that the Incarnation is the ground of all theological inquiry. He begins by asserting that Catholic theology must be both incarnational and eschatological—a point that, he admits, portends the obvious. Further consideration, however, could lead one to contend just the opposite. How to keep the Incarnation wedded to the eschaton in any theological schema is far from evident or easy. It is much less troublesome to take only one of these trajectories and expound on it. For Godzieba, separating the immediate implications of God becoming human from Christian hope about the future is exactly the problem.

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¹ Anthony J. Godzieba, "Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies: What Should Post-Postmodern Catholic Theology Look Like?" *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003) 217–31.

The presence of the Incarnation and the promise of the eschaton need to be engaged simultaneously. They must be held in tension. Thematically, Godzieba delineates the Incarnation through an already-present, sacramental motif and the eschaton in a not-yet, contingent, messianic trajectory. The Incarnation is oriented to the here and now, whereas the eschaton is delayed and absent. Negotiating these two, Godzieba avoids the trap of postmodern critiques of presence, which for him seem to leave no place for the material implications of the Incarnation; at the same time he time rejects overconfident attitudes in what Bernard Lonergan might call the already-out-there-now-real, thereby leaving no place for the prophetic.² The Resurrection, for Godzieba, is the event that prohibits one from fixating on only one of these positions, on either the here and now or the hereafter, as Jesus' rising from the dead conflates the nearness of corporeality with the distance of the eschaton. Godzieba's project transcends theology and philosophy and moves into the field of esthetics in that all sorts of "texts," including God, human beings, art, and even space, are made more interesting and complex when read within a Catholic sacramental imagination that is not merely about hereness or thereeness, but about the constant negotiation between the two. Godzieba's work seems to suggest that theologians have lost sight of the evocative implications of upholding the priority of both the Incarnation and the eschaton in Catholic thought and culture. Whether one has fallen prey to the spells of either deconstructionism or radical orthodoxy, a fuller and more open incarnational hermeneutic is required.

The material liminality of the Resurrection, that is, the corporeal in-between-place, has serious ethical implications. Even though Godzieba does not highlight these, from his essay one can fill in the gaps. His validation of theological anthropology in addition to his reference to Raymond Brown's notion of the transformative power of Christ's resurrection leads one to think that adopting an incarnational hermeneutic will have something crucially important to say about how Catholics ought to live with others. Specifically, it will influence how bodies are conducted in relation to one another. How bodies are scaled and manipulated for power, love, adoration, and God must be called into question.³ Related to incarnational

² Bernard J. F. Lonergan wrote extensively on knowledge, consistently asserting that knowing depends on more than just taking a look or what he called picture-thinking. Moreover, genuine knowledge is the culmination of a dynamic process involving experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, while being attentive to how meanings and values shape one's experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. See *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997).

³ For more on the process of scaling one's body for power, see Iris Marion

ethics is the uncertainty of the limits or boundaries of bodies. Where does the embodied process of living in the image of God begin and end? Today, scientists are contouring the body in ways theologians never could have imagined in the past. Discoveries about the body and mind undoubtedly will complicate any conversation about the Incarnation serving as a hermeneutic for theological inquiry. Corporeal borders are crucial to pursue here in terms of the boundaries of not only the human body but also of land, time, and narrative. (Lieven Boeve's essay begins to think about borders among religions—an area of research that will be investigated in more detail shortly.)

Godzieba proposes a significant and necessary contribution to Catholic theology. Aside from his call for an embodied eschatological theology, what is equally striking is the language he uses to describe his project. His discourse becomes embodied, adding a performative quality to his work. Reading his essay, one is left with the impression that reconnecting the Incarnation to eschatology reinvigorates how one imagines what it means to be human in the image of God. It is a dynamic performance, moving forward not linearly, but in a radical openness and embodied yes to a materially and sacramentally charged journey. As Godzieba invokes common theological language—including “kingdom of God” and “dwelling,” terms often heard rather innocuously—the embodied and eschatological implications of such ideas come to life and call Catholics into question.

On matters of theory and language, then, one should be more than satisfied by Godzieba's work. Left wanting, however, is something concrete to hang onto, to sink one's teeth into about the particularity of embodiment. Although Godzieba writes of this individuality in terms of meanings and possibilities, the nuance of such phrases remains unclear.⁴ Could black, womanist, feminist, mujerista, and queer theologians use his framework to speak of their own particularity, or is there something more purposely open about Godzieba's theology? How is his project different—for it seems to be—from theologies that speak to particular embodied identities? Could one read Godzieba as presenting the theoretical basis for liberationist perspectives? Would he be comfortable with such a theological move, especially since an incarnational and eschatological hermeneutic, as he puts it, has the potential to bridge Catholic intellectual camps, rather than further entrench them?

It is also important to probe Godzieba's depiction, or nondepiction, of the particular bodies of his theology. I am left wondering whether, for

Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1990).

⁴ Godzieba, “‘Stay With Us . . .’ (Lk 24:29)—‘Come, Lord Jesus’ (Rev 22:20): Incarnation, Eschatology, and Theology's Sweet Predicament” 789–90.

Godzieba, all types of bodies are sacramental. To sharpen this point, let me return to his text. He writes: "Embodiment thus becomes a fundamental theological principle, and theological anthropology becomes fundamental theology."⁵ Two issues arise in relation to this statement. First, it is important to at least suggest that this type of thinking, which pushes for the primacy of theological anthropology, represents the pinnacle of Enlightenment thought—a turn to the subject with an extreme embodied make-over. If this is the case, it is necessary from an ethical standpoint to protest against the implications of the unbridled valorization of human beings. Again, questions arise. Does the human body take precedence over and against nonhuman embodiments? Should theologians living in a world plagued by environmental crisis be attentive to such a hierarchy and ultimately reject it? Assured that Godzieba is not advocating crimes against animals or any other creatures, a second and more pressing question raised by his thought is whose body in particular theologians are called to make over. Should one have an image in mind? Put differently, what does a "post-postmodern" embodied person imagined by Godzieba's "post-postmodern theological anthropology" look like?⁶ To be fair, it does not seem that his mission is to flesh out this anthropology. His work calls for a respect of "each particular life, each particular situation, each particular relationship."⁷ Still, one searches for something tangible regarding what types of bodies he has in mind. If he is speaking to all particularity, thereby arguing that all creation is sacramental, then Catholics have a lot of work to do, a lot of relationships to which they must attend.

At this point, I must turn to Boeve's text. There is no mistaking the body that Boeve has in mind. He writes about the paradigmatic corporeal interruption for Christians—the Incarnation. For him, God becoming human is the crux of Christianity, what makes it distinctive, consequently a stumbling block when speaking both inside and outside Christian communities. The particularity of the Incarnation as a moment of disruption challenges the universalizing tendencies of those who call themselves Christian, especially those Christians who dare to enter into interreligious dialogue.

The title of Boeve's essay, "Resurrection: Saving Particularity," is clever. It encapsulates his notion of saving not only in terms of the hereafter, but also in terms of a redemptive openness to all the ambiguity of corporeality. Salvation can be read on another level as well, in that Christians need help, that is, must be saved in their encounters with other religions. For Boeve, Christians entering into interreligious dialogue and exchange need to be saved from two traps. The first and the most obvious trap is destroying the alterity of the other by making transcultural, universal, and death-dealing

⁵ *Ibid.* 791.

⁶ *Ibid.* 795.

⁷ *Ibid.*

claims against them. The second, and arguably most insidious, trap is pretending that the other is not all that different, and watering down one's own religious particularity in order to embrace the other. Boeve clearly argues that the Incarnation and Resurrection save Christians from either strategy for dealing with religious differences by serving as moments of interruption in any universalist narrative that could either destroy or ignore the other. The alterity of the Incarnation or of the Resurrection is not to be used as a triumphalist weapon against hearing the radically different perspectives either within one's own faith tradition or within that of the other. On the contrary, the particularity of God becoming human disrupts any attempt to universalize faith. For Boeve, the violence of universalization takes place in all types of approaches to interreligious dialogue—in pluralism, exclusivism, and even inclusivism. It is not surprising that he wants to obviate this universal-vs.-particular binary, as he asks: "Do I not do an injustice to the specificity of theological truth by capturing it in an asymmetrical opposition between particularity and universality? Furthermore, is it not possible to understand incarnation in an opposite sense, namely by insisting that, if truth exists, it is to be found in the concrete, historical, and particular?"⁸

So what is the Christian to do? One cannot avoid otherness in today's global context. Following Jesus' model of openness, appealing to others with care and compassion is an imperative. But what about the Incarnation? Is it not divisive rather than unifying, especially when read within the context of interreligious dialogue? That is Boeve's point. The Incarnation must be claimed and embraced in all its complexities when speaking with non-Catholic Christians or with persons of other religions. It cannot remain imprisoned in an all-or-none binary. Again, as in Godziewa's essay, there is a performative demand to Boeve's argument. He encourages Christians to become participants in dialogue by understanding—and, one might add, by being honest about—the particularity of one's tradition. In fact, the tradition is based on particularity, which refuses to be universalized in narrative or in performance. It is precisely because of the Incarnation that the Christian has something distinctive to say to the other. It is the reason for dialogue in the first place. This point evokes Emmanuel Levinas's argument that it is alterity that causes the subject to speak.⁹ The particularity of the Incarnation demands that we bear witness to it.

Given Boeve's premise here, no one should think that corporeal encoun-

⁸ Lieven Boeve, "Resurrection: Saving Particularity" 801–2.

⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1998). Relying on scriptural references to call and response, Levinas explores the gravity of witnessing to alterity through speech; specifically it is the other who calls the subject into being a witness (142–53).

ter of this kind will be easy or pretty. It may at first offend and even alienate the partners it seeks to engage. Nonetheless, Christians have no choice, as God's enfleshment is the fundamental principle of their faith. Anything less than an embodied, affective honesty will do a disservice not only to one's own religious integrity, but also to that of the other. The Christian must trust the other enough to expose his or her corporeal beliefs to the other. Heeding Godzieba's suggestions, I see an eschatological component to Boeve's work. Being open to saving particularity frees Christians from having any easy answers in dialogue and creates the possibility of feeling anxious, and even of being wrong. Witnessing to particularity fosters a dialogue built on trust, rather than achieving an outcome.

In studying Boeve's work, readers may feel their own anxiety rising at these words: "For us as Christians, the mystery of Christ constitutes the perspective from which we speak about religious salvation and truth We can only follow one path at a time—trusting that all humanity is ultimately saved in Christ."¹⁰ In some ways, the boldness of this statement is troubling, in that many of us have been taught that its echoes may offend those who overhear such proclamations, especially those from other faiths. However, trusting that all humanity is ultimately saved in Christ is Boeve's point and the central theme of the Christian tradition. Christian faith rests on embracing the particular drama of the human person whom Christians call the Christ. One must be brave like Boeve and abandon both the inclusivist and pluralist paradigms. Even as there is security and a collegiality in them, they fail to engage and respect the alterity of both the Christian and the other. Hence, Boeve is calling Christians to move beyond their comfort zones; he is asking them to engage in interreligious dialogue, much like Jesus' disciples did, who encountered the empty tomb and the resurrected Lord with both a certainty of their love for him and an openness to finding out where that love might lead them. This dance between presence and promise interestingly resonates with Godzieba's call for an incarnational and eschatological hermeneutic.

What is really at stake in Catholic theology and is elicited by both essays is the issue of how borders affect identity, alterity, and the myriad relationships in between. Borders are an implicit part of the hermeneutic that both Godzieba and Boeve put forward, regardless of how murky the borders may be. For Godzieba, it is not too strong to suggest that borders are connected to his discussion of embodiment. For Boeve, the effects of borders are more obvious. He asks Christians to protect, even patrol their borders, not in an attitude of greed, mean-spiritedness, superiority, or even entitlement, but because they signify and witness to alterity. Borders interrupt the façade of sameness which commonsense applications of plural-

¹⁰ Boeve, "Resurrection: Saving Particularity" 804.

ism, exclusivism, and inclusivism betray. The Christian's obligation is to protect the borders of particularity while forgiving those who trespass them. This is dangerous business, not only because upholding borders can lead to violence, but also because it often leads to emotional turmoil between self and other, Christian and non-Christian. This affective risk is an unstated consequence of the saving particularity to which Boeve points.

Both these scholars set an urgent agenda for theology in the 21st century. Here are just three of the many issues addressed above. First, bodies matter. This is a turn on Judith Butler's work, *Bodies that Matter*, on performative and gendered subjectivity.¹¹ Long before Butler, however, Catholic theology illustrated this truth. Bodies are so important that they can be found involved everywhere in the saving tradition—the mutilated body of Jesus, the Eucharist, the relics of saints, ordinary human bodies, and so on. When something is so entrenched in one's everyday experience, it is often difficult to get a handle on, understand, and even critique it. This is the predicament for Catholics, as embodiment is so significant and prevalent in their religion that, paradoxically, it has been misunderstood and even avoided through dualistic theology and practices. Both Godzieba's and Boeve's thought show how this unhealthy approach needs to change if Catholic theology is to meet the challenge of the times.

Such changes toward integrating embodiment both in theology and in practice will result in having to grapple with a second issue: ambiguous feelings. Affective dissonance will emerge in any and all discussions of corporeality. Embracing an incarnational hermeneutic will cause people to think about their own embodied being in relation to others. Encountering alterity may bring about all types of feelings related to both egoism and altruism. Theology must be attentive to the affective overflow associated with such a hermeneutic and be sure not to avoid or rationalize it.

Finally, talk about the body is impacted by the global landscape. How Catholics relate to other Catholics as well as to other believers hinges on how they engage the doctrine of God becoming human. Debate about the Word made flesh is complicated by the global political tensions between shifting and (often) illusory categories of left and right, orthodox and relativist, traditionalist and liberationist, and/or pluralist and totalitarian. An incarnational hermeneutic, such as that proposed by Godzieba and Boeve, can heal these divisions, which are often based in dualistic understandings of the human person. Moreover, this hermeneutic has the potential to make Christians more honest about why bodies and feelings matter from a theological perspective, and how Catholic beliefs are connected to beliefs of others, both inside and outside the Catholic tradition.

¹¹ Judith P. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).