

# The Involvement of God

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I have called this paper 'The involvement of God' because I want to take part in a discussion about such questions as whether God suffers with the sufferings of his creatures, in order to ask how far God is involved in his world. I shall first try to defend what I take to be the classical doctrine of God derived from Augustine and Aquinas: that it is not in the nature of God to be involved in the suffering of the world as spectator, sympathiser or victim, but that it is in God's nature nonetheless to be involved with his creatures more intimately than any creature could be involved with any other. Secondly I shall argue that the Christology of Chalcedon does make sense of the notion that God suffers and indeed was tortured to death; indeed, in large part it just *is* this notion. Thirdly, and a bit more tentatively, I shall suggest that a sacramental interpretation of Chalcedonian christology yields the whole of the doctrine of the Trinity.

## I

The subject of God's suffering is so popular amongst theologians today that I am quite incapable of even beginning to give a survey of recent literature—this is partly because I haven't read enough and partly because I don't want to misrepresent authors by isolated quotation. I shall quote very little; I am concerned with certain ideas, how they hang together and how they fall apart.

There is, of course, today a strong and respectable tendency to criticise what is taken to be the traditional notion of God, essentially on the grounds that it fails to take the measure of the biblical revelation of God, and fails because it is blinkered by what are thought of as 'static' Greek philosophical categories of thought. The God of metaphysics is a Greek intrusion on Hebrew revelation, it is claimed. This is not, of course, a modern idea—it was very familiar to Luther—but it has been given, I think, a new lease of life by the

revival of process theology and especially by the arrival of liberation theology. (Don't get me wrong here, incidentally. The *praxis* of liberation theology, that unity of theory and practice taking place in base communities and elsewhere, especially in Latin America, seems to me clearly the most important thing going on anywhere in the christian movement today—much too important to get entangled in an incoherent theology of God.)

In spite of all my good intentions I shall begin with a quotation, from Moltmann. He is speaking of Aquinas's Five Ways:

'The cosmological proof of God was supposed by Thomas to answer the question *utrum Deus sit*, but he did not really prove the *existence* of God; what he proved was the *nature* of the divine ... Aquinas answered the question "What is the nature of the divine?", but not the question "Who is God?".'<sup>1</sup>

This remark will seem very peculiar to those of us who remember that the next sentence but one after the Five Ways begins: 'But because concerning God *we cannot know what he is* but only what he is not...' *scire non possumus quid sit*. It seems improbable that Aquinas had so quickly forgotten what he had just been doing or that he misinterpreted himself so radically. Readers of Aquinas, however, including some of those who see themselves as his disciples, have the utmost difficulty in taking him seriously when he says that we simply know nothing of the nature of God. And this, I think, is where the misunderstandings of the tradition begin.

If I may very briefly summarise what I have said so often elsewhere: Aquinas's Five Ways, as I read them, are sketches for five arguments to show that a certain kind of *question* about our world and ourselves is valid: 'Why the world, instead of nothing at all?'. This is a question, in Aquinas's jargon, about the *esse* of things, their being over against nothing, not just their being over against some alternative or over against potentiality. Aquinas wishes to say two things: (1) that here we have a valid question, and (2) that we do not know how to answer it; or (1) God exists and (2) God is an incomprehensible mystery.

Of course, there are plenty of philosophical reasons for thinking that the question is not a valid one, not one we could possibly ask,—that we may say the words but, when we do, we are not asking a real question. It is by no means *obvious* that the question is valid, and it is precisely the point of the Five Ways to try to establish that it *is* a valid question for it is one which, for one reason or another, we are impelled to ask. Whether any of these arguments, or any others, are convincing is not my present concern; I merely want to show what Aquinas thought he was doing. He thought he was validating a specifically Judaeo-Christian activity (which has since become a quite

common general human activity) of asking in some form: 'What does it *all* mean?' or 'Why *anything* instead of nothing?' And he thought he was validating the questioning even though (or perhaps because) he provides no answer. We do not and cannot in this life know the answer but we label it 'God'—*et hoc omnes dicunt Deum*.

To say that we have a valid question (one with an answer) is to say that God exists; for what we mean by 'God' is just whatever answers the question. Apart from knowing this, says Aquinas most insistently, all we can do is point, as systematically as we can, to several kinds or categories of things that the answer *could not be*. For one thing, whatever would answer our question could not itself be subject to the question—otherwise we are left as we were, with the same question still to answer. Whatever we mean by 'God' cannot be whatever it is that makes us ask the question in the first place. So perishability, decline, dependence, alteration, the impersonality that characterises material things, and so on—all these have to be excluded from God. This means that suffering is excluded.

Now, as I have said, it is extremely difficult for readers of Aquinas to take his agnosticism about the nature of God seriously. If he says 'Whatever God may be, he cannot be changing' readers leap to the conclusion that he means that what God is is static. If he says that, whatever God may be, he could not suffer together with (*sympathise* with) his creatures, he is taken to mean that God must by nature be unsympathetic, apathetic, indifferent, even callous. It is almost as though if Aquinas had said that God could not be a supporter of Glasgow Celtic, we supposed he was claiming God as a Rangers fan.

It is supposed that there must be lurking there *some* notion of what God is—frequently characterised as a 'Greek' notion. Not everyone misreads Aquinas quite so blatantly as Moltmann in the passage I quoted, but we do find it hard to admit that he really did mean what he said.

The people collectively known as 'Greeks' in this context did not, of course, have any notion of creation. That is to say they did not ask the typically Jewish (and thus Christian) question about the *esse* of things, the ultimately radical question that, for Aquinas, points us towards the unknown God. I should add at this point, perhaps, that the revelation of God in Jesus in no way, for Aquinas, changes this situation. By the revelation of grace, he says, we are joined to God as to an unknown, *ei quasi ignoto coniungamur*<sup>2</sup>. God remains the mystery which could only be known by God himself, or by our being taken up to share in his own knowledge of himself, a sharing which for us in this world is not knowledge but the darkness of faith. For Aquinas, the distinction that Moltmann attributes to him would be senseless: we shall not, and could not, know the nature of the divine until we know *who* God is.

The Christian use for the word 'God', according to this tradition, depends on what I would call the 'creation question', and it seems to me that Schillebeeckx has it exactly right when he says:

Enthusiasm for Jesus of Nazareth as an inspiring human being, I can appreciate—at the human level that is quite something in itself. But it entails no binding invitation, can bear no stamp of the universally human, unless it can be shown that 'the Creator, the monotheistic God of Jews, Muslims, Christians and so many others, is personally implicated in the Jesus event.'<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the 'creation question' has to be a prior to the fullest understanding we can have of Jesus. Our use for the word 'God' does *not* begin with christology. To put it at its simplest, we cannot ask the question: 'In what sense is Jesus to be called Son of God?' without some prior use for the word 'God'. And, of course, the New Testament did have such a prior use. The NT is unintelligible except as the flowering of the Hebrew tradition and the asking of the creation question that became central to the Jewish Bible.

One of my first claims, then, is that the God of what I have called the 'tradition', the God of Augustine and Aquinas in the west, is precisely the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who is not a god, not a powerful inhabitant of the universe, but the creator, the answer to the question 'What does it all mean?', 'Why anything anyway?' This was essentially the question asked by the Jews, at least from Second Isaiah onwards, the question which, once asked, could not be unasked (except with great philosophical ingenuity), and this is the question which for mainstream christian tradition gives us meaning for the word 'God'.

One of my worries is that by contrast with this biblical God, the God spoken of by those who insist on God's participation in the history of his people, sharing their experiences, their sufferings and triumphs, is perilously like one of the gods. This is particularly worrying when it is found amongst liberation theologians because it is the God of the Hebrews (who in the Jewish interpretation comes to be seen as creator) who is hailed in the decalogue as liberator; it is the gods (parts of history) and the whole religion of the gods that is seen to stand for alienation and dependency. 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of slavery; you shall have no gods'.

God the creator, who is not one of the participants in history but the mover of Cyrus and of all history, is the liberator fundamentally *because* he is not a god, because there are no gods, or at least no gods to be worshipped. This leaves history in human hands under the judgement of God. Human misery can no longer be attributed to the gods and accepted with resignation or evaded with sacrifices. The long slow process can begin of identifying the human roots of oppression

and exploitation, just as the way now lies open for the scientific understanding and control of the forces of nature. The doctrine of creation which begins as a Hebrew insight makes human science possible, including the scientific examination of human society and the forces that govern it and guide its history.

It seems to me a disastrous error to suppose that, just because Aquinas and the medieval schools took over with delight the instruments of Greek classical and post-classical thought and used and developed their logic and their language, they were therefore thinking in the way that, say, Plato or Aristotle thought. Aquinas, for example, takes words like 'substance' and 'accident' and uses them in his Eucharistic doctrine to say something that Aristotle would have thought unintelligible nonsense—about the change of a piece of bread not into another kind of thing, but into another individual. The technical word that Aristotle would have found so alien is Aquinas's word 'esse' (It is the 'esse' of the bread that becomes the 'esse' of the body of Christ, as its accidents lose their accidental role altogether and become the symbols by which Christ is sacramentally present). Here is a change below the level of substantial change, as creation is deeper than substantial change, a change which is not a *mutatio* at all. 'Esse' in Aquinas's jargon belongs to the doctrine of creation, of which Aristotle had no notion at all. He is content to deny, as does Aquinas, that the world could be *made*, generated. He does not, as Aquinas does, ask the Jewish question, the question of 'esse', of the existence of things not over against potentiality but over against nothing.

The notion that the adoption of Aristotelian categories, concepts and language, arguments and insights means that nothing will be said that Aristotle would not approve is on exactly the same level as the notion that the adoption of marxist categories, arguments and insights means that liberation theologians will or should say nothing but what is approved by Marx. Luther was, perhaps, the Ratzinger of his age.

Aquinas's Five Ways, then, which are, of course, a part of his theology, are an attempt to validate what I have called the Jewish question, the creation question, using the categories of Aristotelean and, to some extent, Platonic thought. Whether or not these attempts are much use to people who have moved to different ways of seeing the world, the *question* seems to remain, together with the challenge of validating it in the face of, for example, claims that such metaphysical talk cannot be thinking. But in any case this metaphysics of being arising from the notion of a creator God is a Jewish and not a Greek discovery.

To lose sight of the Jewish creation question is, it seems to me, to settle for worshipping an inhabitant of the world, to betray the biblical inheritance and to regress to a worship of the gods; it is a form of idolatry.

If, on the other hand, we accept the creator God, then he must be in no way passive with respect to the world and this must mean that God does not learn from or experience the world and, in general, cannot be affected by it. It is this that worries people. If the creator is really incapable of experiencing suffering, what are we to make of God's compassion, or his wrath? Are we not in danger of making him indifferent? Even if we acknowledge that words like 'compassion' and 'wrath' are used metaphorically (because animal passions cannot be attributed to what is not material), still they seem to imply some kind of reaction to what is taking place. Must we deny this of God?

As with Celtic and Rangers, it does not follow that, if God is not affected by, say, human suffering, he is indifferent to it. In our case there are only two options open: we either feel with, sympathise with, have compassion for the sufferer, or else we cannot be present to the suffering, we must be callous, indifferent. We should notice, however, that even in our case it is not an actual 'suffering with' that is necessary for compassion, but only a *capacity* to suffer with. Sharing in actual pain is neither necessary nor sufficient for compassion, whose essential components are awareness, feelings of pity and concern. I can have all these three without myself suffering from the pain or tragedy that afflicts my companion, and conversely I may be smitten with exactly the same kind of pain without experiencing any compassion at all.

Compassion is clearly a feeling (and not simply an intellectual awareness of another's pain) but it is not the same feeling as the pain itself. But the creator God cannot even be said literally to experience this feeling of compassion.

Our only way of being present to another's suffering is by being affected by it, because we are outside the other person. We speak of 'sympathy' or 'compassion', just because we want to say that it is *almost* as though we were not outside the other, but living her or his life, experiencing her or his suffering. A component of pity is frustration at having, in the end, to remain outside.

Now, the creator cannot in this way ever be outside his creature; a person's act of being as well as every action done has to be an act of the creator.<sup>4</sup> If the creator is the reason for everything that is, there can be no actual being which does not have the creator at its centre holding it in being. In our compassion we, in our feeble way, are seeking to be what God is all the time: united with and within the life of our friend. We can say in the psalm 'The Lord is compassion' but a sign that this is metaphorical language is that we can also say that the Lord has no need of compassion; he has something more wonderful, he has his creative act in which he is 'closer to the sufferer than she is to herself'.

What is true of compassion has to be more generally true of all

experience and learning. Unless we learn, we are ignorant, but it is not the case with God that he would be ignorant if he did not learn, And our learning and experience is a feeble shadow of God's understanding of the world which he makes both to be and to be intelligible.

Whatever the consciousness of the creator may be, it cannot be that of an experienter confronted by what he experiences. I think that James Mackey does not choose his words carefully enough when he says of Aquinas:

He further distances from our world all discussion of real divine relation by stating quite baldly, 'there is no real relation in God to the creature'. Creatures, that is, may experience a real relationship of dependence on and need of God, but God experiences no such relationship to his creatures.<sup>5</sup>

For Aquinas, of course, the question is not one of experience. God simply does not have any relation of dependence on his creatures but he understands, with an understanding more intimate than any knowledge from experience, the truth about the dependence of creatures on his knowledge and love.

The point about the lack of real relation on God's part is simply that being creator adds nothing to God, all the difference it makes is *all* the difference to the creature. (Indeed, the gift of *esse* is too radical to be called a 'difference' since clearly the creature is not changed by coming into existence.) But it makes no difference to God not, of course, because God is indifferent or bored by it all, but because he gains nothing by creating. We could call it sheerly altruistic, except that the goodness God wills for his creatures is not a separate and distinct goodness from his own goodness. The essential point that Aquinas, surely rightly, wants to make is that creation fulfils no need of God's. God has no needs.

I am repeating at too great a length the familiar point that the God of Augustine and Aquinas, precisely by being wholly transcendent, '*extra ordinem omnium entium existens*',<sup>6</sup> is more intimately involved with each creature than any other creature could be. God could not be *other* to creatures in the way that they must be to each other. At the heart of every creature is the source of *esse*, making it to be and to act.<sup>7</sup> As is well known, Aquinas carries this through to its logical conclusion and insists that it must be just as true of my free acts as of anything else. To be free is to be independent of others. God is not, in the relevant sense, other.

So I think it makes perfect sense to say both that it not in the nature of God to suffer and also that it is not in the nature of God to lack the most intimate possible involvement with the sufferings of his creatures. To safeguard the compassion of God there is no need to

resort to the idea that God as he surveys the history of mankind suffers with us in a literal sense—though in some spiritual way.

## II

Here I come to my second argument. I think that the temptation to hold that it is in the nature of God to suffer arises because of a weakening hold on the traditional doctrine of the incarnation.

If, in accordance with the doctrine of Chalcedon, we say that the one person, Jesus, is truly human and truly divine, we can say quite literally that God suffered hunger and thirst and torture and death. We can say these things because the Son of God assumed a human nature in which it makes sense to predicate these things to him. In other words, the traditional doctrine, while rejecting the idea that it is in the nature of God to be capable of suffering, does affirm literally that God suffered in a perfectly ordinary sense, the sense in which you or I suffer.

If, with certain theologians, you regress from Chalcedon and affirm that Jesus is not literally divine, you at once block the way from saying that *Jesus* suffered and died to saying that *God* suffered and died. Nevertheless, since there is a profound christian instinct that the gospel has to do with the suffering of God, these theologians are constrained to say that since God did not literally suffer in Jesus, God must suffer in some other way; as, for example, he surveys the suffering of Jesus and the rest of mankind. One consequence of this, of course, is that whereas a traditional Christian would say that God suffered a horrible pain in his hands when he was nailed to the cross, these theologians have to make do with a kind of mental anguish at the follies and sins of creatures.

May I be so impertinent as to remind this gathering of Aquinas's treatment of Chalcedon. I shall be brief. First a word or two about language.

Simple indicative sentences very commonly have two parts we call subject and predicate. Words in the subject place are used to refer to what we want to talk about and words in the predicate place are used to say something about it. Which words are in which place is not to be decided by looking at the sentence but by wider considerations. (Thus, for example, Raymond Brown argues convincingly that in 1 John 2, 22 'he who denies that Jesus is the Christ', we should realise that 'the Christ' is the subject phrase of the clause).

We can very often vary the subject phrase, using another of a different meaning, but so long as both refer to the same subject the truth of the statement made with the sentence will not be affected. Thus the phrases 'The pope following Paul VI' and 'The pope preceding John Paul II' have quite different meanings, but they can



both be used to refer to the same person, so that, whichever one we attach to the predicate 'reigned for a very short time', we get an equivalent statement.

If, however, we put between the original subject and predicate phrases the additional words 'as is only to be expected' we get quite different statements: 'The Pope preceding John Paul II, as is only to be expected, reigned for a very short time' expresses a quite different innuendo from the other one. Similar changes will occur if we put the words 'as such' in the same position. As Aquinas puts it, the particular meaning of the subject phrase is thus drawn into the predicate and makes the whole thing a different sentence. Thus it is one thing to say 'God was nailed to the cross' but quite another to say 'God, as is only to be expected, (or as such), was nailed to the cross'.

Thus while, since both 'Son of God' and 'Son of Mary' can be used to refer to Jesus (for he was *ex hypothesi*, given Chalcedon, both divine and human), we make equivalent statements when we say 'The Son of God died on the cross' and when we say 'The son of Mary died on the cross'. But we do not make an equivalent statement if we put 'as such' in the sentence. Moreover, given Nicaea, if we can say 'The Son of God died on the cross' we can say 'God died on the cross'. Although 'God' here signifies the divine nature, it does not here, in the subject place, refer to that nature, it refers to what *has* this nature; in this case the man Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that Jesus was human means that there is a whole range of predicates such as 'was hungry' or 'was amused' or 'was tortured' which we can sensibly attach to the subject 'Jesus' to make ordinary literal propositions that may be true or false. I mean we can sensibly apply these predicates to Jesus in the way that we couldn't apply them to a piece of butterscotch or a star. Similarly, the fact that Jesus is divine entitles us to attach another range of predicates such as 'is creator', 'is eternal son of God', 'is omnipotent', and so on. The traditional doctrine of the incarnation is simply that both ranges of predicates apply to the same person referred to by the subject term 'Jesus'.

It is, of course, profoundly mysterious that this should be so, but it is not flatly contradictory, for the human and the divine, because they do not occupy the same universe (the divine does not occupy any universe), do not exclude each other in the way that two created natures would do. The divine omniscience of Jesus, for example, does not conflict with his human ignorance, for divine knowledge is not in the same universe of discourse as human knowledge. For Jesus to be omniscient is nothing other than for him to be divine; it is not a question of being better informed than a non-omniscient being.<sup>8</sup>

Chalcedon, then, does allow us to say that God suffered, and suffered quite literally (and not even analogically) as we do. It is the doctrine that God is involved in the whole human condition not

simply as creator but as having a created nature. It also means that there are certain things that we suffer that God did not suffer, like overhearing transistor radios or drinking coke.

As I say, I think it is the loss of this doctrine by those who fear that to confess the divinity of Jesus would be to diminish his humanity that has led to some of them to attribute suffering to God as such.

### III

But there is more, much more, to be said than this and I am sorry that time will not allow me to say it as clearly and as fully as I would like. I shall just have to summarise it, perhaps enigmatically, perhaps unconvincingly. I want to argue that the doctrine of the incarnation is such that the story of Jesus is not just the story of God's involvement with his creatures but that it is actually the 'story' of God. There is one sense in which we must say that God has no life-story—and it is essential to my thesis to insist on this, as we shall see—but there is also a sense, the only sense, in which God has or is a life-story, and this is the story revealed in the incarnation and it is the story we also call the Trinity.

The story of Jesus is nothing other than the triune life of God projected onto our history, or enacted sacramentally in our history, so that it becomes story.

I use the word 'projected' in the sense that we project a film onto a screen. If it is a smooth silver screen you see the film simply in itself. If the screen is twisted in some way, you get a systematically distorted image of the film. Now imagine a film projected not on a screen but on a rubbish dump. The story of Jesus—which in its full extent is the entire bible—is the projection of the trinitarian life of God on the rubbish dump of the world. The historical mission of Jesus is nothing other than the eternal mission of the Son from the Father; the historical outpouring of the Spirit in virtue of the passion, death and ascension of Jesus is nothing but the eternal outpouring of the Spirit from the Father through the Son. Watching, so to say, the story of Jesus, we are watching the processions of the Trinity.

That the mission in time of Son and Spirit reflect the eternal relations is, of course, perfectly ordinary traditional teaching. What I am venturing to suggest is that they are not just reflection but sacrament—they contain the reality they signify. The mission of Jesus is *nothing other* than the eternal generation of the Son. That the Trinity looks like a story of (*is* a story of) rejection, torture and murder but also of reconciliation is because it is being projected on, lived out on, our rubbish tip; it is because of the sin of the world.

There is much to say both to try and justify this position and to bring out its implications, but just for the moment I want to look at its

bearing on the question of the 'pre-existent Christ'. It is a part of my thesis that there is no such thing as the pre-existent Christ.

The pre-existent Christ was invented, to the best of my knowledge, in the nineteenth century, as a way of distinguishing the eternal procession of the Son from the incarnation of the Son. It was affirmed by those who wanted to say that Jesus did not become Son of God in virtue of the incarnation. He was already Son of God before that. The pre-existent Christ marks the development from the 'low' christology of the virgin birth that you get in Matthew and Luke to the 'high' christology of John, with the pre-existent Word in the beginning with God. Raymond Brown's brilliant discussion of this both in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*<sup>9</sup> and in his Johannine commentaries<sup>10</sup> is, I am afraid, conducted throughout in terms of the pre-existent Christ.

I wish to reject the notion from two points of view. In the first place, to speak of the pre-existent Christ is to imply that God has a life-story, a divine story, other than the story of the incarnation. It is to suppose that in some sense there was a Son of God existing from the eternal ages who at some point in his eternal career assumed a human nature and was made man. *First* the Son of God pre-existed as just the Son of God and *then* later he was the Son of God made man. I think this only needs to be stated to be seen as incompatible at least with the traditional doctrine of God coming to us through Augustine and Aquinas. There can be no succession in the eternal God, no change. Eternity is not, of course, a very long time; it is not time at all. Eternity is not timeless in the sense that an instant is timeless—for an instant is timeless simply in being the limit of a stretch of time, just as a point has no length not because it is very very short but because it is the limit of a length. No: eternity is timeless because it totally transcends time. To be eternal is just to be God. God's life is neither past nor present, nor even simultaneous with any event, any clock, any history. The picture of the Son of God 'becoming' at a certain point in the divine duration the incarnate Son of God, 'coming down from heaven', makes a perfectly good metaphor but could not be literally true. There was, from the point of view of God's life, no such thing as a moment at which the eternal Son of God was not Jesus of Nazareth. There could not be any moments in God's life. The eternal life of Jesus as such could not precede, follow or be simultaneous with his human life. There is no story of God 'before' the story of Jesus. This point would not, of course, be grasped by those for whom God is an inhabitant of the universe, subject to experience and to history. I am not, need I say, suggesting that it can be grasped intelligibly by *anyone*, but in the traditional view it is the mystery that we affirm when we speak of God.

From the point of view of God, then, *sub specie eternitatis*, no

sense can be given to the idea that at some point in God's life-story the Son became incarnate. But I also want to question the notion of the pre-existent Christ from another point of view.

From the point of view of time, of our history (which, of course, is the only point of view we can actually take) there was certainly a time when Jesus had not yet been born. Moses could have said with perfect truth 'Jesus of Nazareth is not yet' or 'Jesus does not exist' because, of course, the future does not exist; that is what makes it future. (There are people who imagine that the future somehow does exist, perhaps in the way that the past has a certain existence—in the sense that about the past there are fixed and settled true propositions. But these people are, in my view, mistaken. They are especially mistaken when they say, as they sometimes do, 'the future already exists for God', for to say that is to attribute a mistake to God, and a philosophical mistake at that.) So, yes, Moses could have truly said 'Jesus does not exist', he could also have said with truth 'The Son of God does exist', and he could have made both these statements at the same time.

Now this fact *might* be called the 'pre-existence of Christ', meaning that at an earlier time in our history (and there isn't any time except in history) these propositions would both have been true: 'Jesus does not exist' 'The Son of God does exist', thus apparently making a distinction between the existence of Jesus and the existence of the Son of God. But the phrase 'pre-existent Christ' seems to imply not just that in the time of Moses 'The Son of God exists' would be true, but also that the proposition 'The Son of God exists *now*' would be true. And this would be a mistake. Moses could certainly have said 'It is true now that the Son of God exists' but he could not have said truly 'The Son of God exists now'. *That* proposition, which attributes *temporal* existence ('now') to the Son of God is the one that became true when Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary. The simple truth is that apart from incarnation, the Son of God exists at no time at all, at no 'now', but in eternity, in which he acts upon all time but is not himself 'measured by it', as Aquinas would say. 'Before Abraham was, I am'.

So, like those who speak in what I regard as a muddled way about the 'pre-existent Christ', I too wish to adopt John's high christology and say that it is not the incarnation that brings about the divine sonship of Jesus; but I suggest that the incarnation and the whole life of Jesus is the sacrament of divine sonship; it just is the divine sonship *as story* as manifest in history.

I would be much happier in an odd way with the notion of a 'pre-existent Jesus' in the innocuous sense that, as I said, the entire bible, spanning all history, is all of it, the story of Jesus of Nazareth ('Moses wrote of me'). But that merely tells us how to read the bible, it does

not make any claims about the relationship of divine and human in Jesus.

So, in conclusion: I have been arguing three things. First, that the traditional notion of God, far from being some allegedly 'Greek' idea of a remote indifferent God, is a doctrine of the everpresent active involvement of the creator in his creatures; on this point I also claimed that the creator is a metaphysical notion of God and that we owe this metaphysics not to the Greeks but to the Jews and their bible. Secondly, I suggested that the temptation to attribute suffering to God as God, to the divine nature, is connected with a failure to acknowledge that it is really God who suffers in Jesus of Nazareth. Thirdly, I suggested that the traditional doctrine of God, especially of the eternity of God and the incarnation, is at least capable of development to the idea that the whole set of stories narrated in the bible is nothing other than the interior life of the triune God visible (to the eyes of faith) in our history.

I don't think you could have God more involved than that.

- 1 J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London 1981) p. 12; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 2. 3.
- 2 *S.T.* 1a. 12. 13. ad 1.
- 3 *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (London 1979) p. 12.
- 4 See my discussions: 'God: II Freedom' and 'God: III Evil', in *New Blackfriars*, Nov. 1980 and Jan. 1981.
- 5 J. Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (London 1983) p. 182.
- 6 *In Peri Hermenias* I. Lect. 14. 197.
- 7 *S.T.* 1a. 8. 1.c
- 8 I have argued this more fully in 'The Myth of God Incarnate', *New Blackfriars* Aug. 1977.
- 9 *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London 1979).
- 10 *The Anchor Bible*, vols 29, 29A, 30.