



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The sacrifice of the Holy Christ in an unholy world

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## Abstract

In much modern christology, the notion of the incommensurate governs the relation of divine to human in Jesus Christ. In christologies influenced by Austin Farrer, and more distantly, by Nicholas of Cusa, the incommensurability of the infinite to the finite makes the idiom of paradox congenial, even necessary. Such demanding and unrelenting emphasis upon diastasis echoes a more ancient preoccupation with holiness in a fallen and unholy world. In Israel's scriptures, and in their lasting influence in the patristic era, the transcendent holiness of God threatens to prohibit the presence of the Holy One in the midst of unholy people. A record of this threat can be seen in the alien, fragmentary and unrecognisable Gospel portraits of the holy Christ to a sinful world. Yet the doctrine of the incarnation demands a divine presence to sinners and a sinful cosmos, a 'making flesh' as well as an 'assuming flesh'. The concept and practice of sacrifice is proposed as a form of relation between deity and humanity such that the holy Christ can dwell and abide in an unholy world.

**Keywords:** christology; Gospels; holiness; hypostatic union; incarnation; sacrifice

'You shall be perfect', our Lord Christ teaches, 'as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5:48). In this terrifying *logion* from the Sermon on the Mount, Christ reworks and consummates the commandment given by Almighty God to the prophet Moses: 'You shall be holy ... for I the LORD am holy' (Lev 20:26). The matrix into which christology fits, the ocean depths in which it moves, is this cascade of terms for the perfect: the holy, the complete, the whole, the consummated, the realised, the good. Everything that speaks of our Lord Christ is magnetised by this realm of the holy, the complete and the perfect. The teachings and healings, the commandments and counsels, the fierce encounter with critics and with friends, the exorcism of legions of demons, rending the air with their cries of powerless expulsion, the relentless pull of Golgotha upon this Son of Man: all of these familiar elements of the Gospel record tell us of the Holy Child of God confronting and consorting with an unholy world. I want to underscore the latter pairing – confronting and consorting with – as the holy Christ in his perfection unsettles our expectations about holiness and its prosecution through the world.

Christ enters an unholy world; the Gospels are plain on this point. The birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke disclose the world we know, the unholy world we build. Here is a realm in which women who are thought to be unfaithful should be

stoned, and the men of those tormented women come to be tormented by shame and are quick to spark a cycle of revenge – all these threats lie just in the near backdrop to the Christmas stories. The rape and abuse of Dinah, of Tamar, of Susannah in her secluded garden – these narratives of violence against women ring out of the pages of Israel's scriptures and serve also as the terrible scenery for the sudden rush of angel wings into a quiet room in Nazareth. Holy scripture makes certain that we see the world in its full cruelty, all in the midst of this angelic proclamation of peace on the earth. Herod speaks in full measure of the suspicion, the violence and the fear that is earthly power. The Slaughter of the Innocents belongs directly to the creche, the manger, the shepherds called in from the fields by night. This death campaign is the sign of a monarchy jealous of its prerogatives and uncertain of its hold on the throne, an all-too-human expression of power we recognise in our fractured and bitter world. In the midst of this unholy violence, the Holy Child becomes Israel, seeking a refuge in Egypt, long years spent in vigil for the day of return when the LORD God will call His Son out of Egypt, a refugee among the world's millions seeking shelter and homeland. The Gospels underscore that holiness invades and occupies unholiness.

This is not a ready conclusion we might draw about holiness or perfection. For it is a leading attribute of the holy that it cannot consort with or content itself to be set down in our world. If we follow the great structuralists, such as Mary Douglas, when they turn to traditional cultures – or in Douglas' case, our own deracinated and commercialised culture – the holy is that which is marked off from the profane. The fundamental structure of the world is organised by this great division that forms a deep fissure in the midst of society: the raw and the cooked, the chaotic and the ordered, the outer and the inner, the holy and the profane. And truth to tell, there is much of this radical distinction in the Holiness School of ancient Israel. Holiness pertains to the Tabernacle, and it grows in intensity as it becomes more remote, more sealed off from the world. The innermost sanctum of the Tabernacle is Most Holy, in the emphatic form of biblical Hebrew, the Holy of Holies, *qōdeš ha-qōdešim*. No one except Aaron and the sons in his line can enter such a preserve; and then, only on the holiest day of the year, the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The annihilating death of the sons of Aaron, Abihu and Nadab, springs from their approaching the holy places with unholy – alien – fire, and the Holy God consumed them with the fire of his own glory. Just so is the Tent of Meeting set apart from the rest of Israel's camp. It is the menace of holiness overspreading the camp – a menace that will become a terrifying fire – that makes the people cry out in fear that Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. The Book of Numbers makes vivid the stark divide between the holy and the profane, and the Book of Leviticus draws an even sterner line between the camp and the profane wilderness that stretches out beyond Israel's borders. The holy, in this sense, just means that which is set apart. This is not the whole story about Leviticus and the Holiness School; not by a long measure! But it is one distinct element, and it places squarely before our eyes the prospect of a holiness that cannot dwell with uncleanness. This after all is one entire theme in the holiness prescription – 'you shall be holy ... for I the LORD am holy' – that the Almighty Holy One can only remain as covenant LORD of Israel if Israel remains and becomes holy. The stark exit of the Holy Spirit of God from the Temple in the Book of Ezekiel may be read as confirmation of this demand: the sins of Israel make the Temple uninhabitable by a Holy God.

As inheritors of holy scripture, we Christians have developed a heightened instinct for the alien nature of the holy that drives us to believe that holiness or goodness cannot actually bear, endure or enter deep into this world of ours. The great Fyodor Dostoevsky

seemed haunted by a vision of holiness that must be preserved from defilement. The profound enigma that is Prince Miskin in *The Idiot*; the troubling encounter between the Holy Christ and the Holy Inquisitor; the nightmare of defilement in *The Possessed* or *Crime and Punishment*: all these seem to point to a goodness that cannot in truth belong to the world of the profane. Even Dostoevsky's haunted suffering, his epilepsy, his harrowing brush with execution, his devastating gambling, all seem agonised embodiments of a defilement that longs for holiness but cannot endure it. How much more might we think of the Holy Christ in the Gospels as alien to an unholy world! And there are many reasons to be found in the Gospels which teach a Holy Christ who cannot actually belong to our unholy world.

Consider how alien Christ appears to his contemporaries. Albert Schweitzer, at the close of his memorable historical survey, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, wrote that even now Christ comes to us 'as One unknown', calling us to his demanding service.<sup>1</sup> But it is not simply our modern condition, with its full measures of historical scepticism and agnosticism, that makes Christ seem a stranger in this world of ours. It is also the Gospel record, the strong impress upon the evangelists of a Majestic One in their midst they could not grasp. The Gospels are filled with exchanges that reveal a complete confusion about the identity of this man from Nazareth. After filling their mouths with praise for the young rabbi who spoke so well in their synagogue, the Nazarenes suddenly revile Christ and question just who he is (or thinks he is) and threaten to push him over the cliff to his death. When Christ delivers the young man, lost among the tombs, from demonic possession, the Gerasenes plead with him to leave town and just leave them alone. When Christ enters the house of dying child, to raise her to life – a great foreshadowing of his own mighty, life-giving resurrection – the mourners in the house laugh at him. That laughter will soon turn to mocking and reviling; but even now, in the early days of Christ's ministry, his presence seems strange, unsettling, unwelcome, risible. His own mother and kin consider him mad. The Pharisees who resemble him most closely find his behaviour, as a holy man of God, deeply puzzling and offensive: he defiles himself with collaborators and prostitutes. All these elements, so prominent in the Gospel accounts, are often classified as 'conflict stories', the ominous gathering storm clouds that will break over a hill set outside the city wall. But I think we might read these narratives in another, more christological fashion. There is something about the Person of Christ, his own unshadowed holiness, that makes him untethered, unrecognisable in a sin-sick world. Flannery O'Connor in her rich scriptural literary imagination, portrays the Christ figures in her novels and stories as grotesques, misfits, aliens to a world of callous bigotry, pride and shallow self-absorption. I think this is one side of this entire phenomenon of the Holy: it makes its bearer strange.

There's more, too. Recently biblical scholars have been drawn to the parallels between the Gospels and Roman popular biographies. The genre of Gospel, once considered *sui generis*, is now often regarded as belonging to a genus, that of the biography of elevated figures. That may well be the closest parallel in the ancient world; but I am struck in the Gospels by how little, after their close study, we know about the identity of this central character, Jesus of Nazareth. Consider how difficult it is, really, to say just what manner of man this actually is. What is he like? What are his character traits, his leading personal habits and inclinations? If you agree with Thomas Nagle that there is a category, 'being like something', you might say that it is exceedingly hard to say what

<sup>1</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911), p. 401.

'being like Jesus of Nazareth' really is. The wonderful historian of Second Temple Judaism, E. P. Sanders characterised Jesus as a 'kind and generous man'.<sup>2</sup> Well, yes; we can all think of Gospel stories that bear that out. He gathers little children in his arms and blesses them; he refuses to throw the first stone at the woman taken in adultery; he calls Matthew to his service, scorning the contempt heaped on such tax-gatherers; he heals the sick who crowd around the door, hour after hour, long into the night, healing all who came; and he fed hungry crowds, hungry for his words, hungry for his bread of life. But that's not the whole of the Gospel portrait, is it? In fact, we might say that this is a slender selection, perhaps driven by sentiment over clear-eyed assessment. For just who is this Christ who withers the fig tree, even out of season? Who is this who terrifies the disciples as he walks ahead to his scourging, rejection and death? Who is it who condemns his scribal and Pharisaic enemies with scorching abuse and anger? Who declares he comes not with peace but with a sword? We cannot seem to hold together these two portraits, not find a single integrated sketch out of these opposing fragments. And there's still more.

Think how often Christ is simply not recognised. It seems that he can't actually be *seen*; he is that alien in our landscape. Have you not felt how strange it is that the disciples do not recognise him as he comes to them across the water? Or how deeply puzzling it is that St Peter falls to his knees before Christ, his deliverer, with this wrenching cry: 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' (Luke 5:8)? What is this fury that overtakes the apparent Christ of love that makes him charge into the Temple precincts and leaves the Gospel writers with the conviction that zeal for the LORD's house has eaten him up (John 2:17)? As Christ's holiness seems to radiate outward, more and more luminous, dazzling, he seems less and less recognisable. The inner band of the disciples are terrified when Christ is transfigured before them; they do not even know what they are saying. He seems dangerous, ominous, this Holy Child of God. He tells parables that grow darker, more menacing at every turn, and at the great teaching about his sacred flesh, the evangelist John tells us, many ceased following after him. 'Who is this Son of Man?' the accusers ask Christ after He heals the man born blind (John 12:34); where does he come from? After long months of teaching, of prayer and signs and wonders, Phillip can ask, 'Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied' (John 14:8). How little they knew this Holy One in their midst! Even in His resurrected glory, Christ will remain unrecognisable to his disciples. The travellers to Emmaus seem to know all about this Son of Man, yet cannot see him as he walks along the way with them. Time and again, Christ must announce peace when he appears in his risen flesh to the disciples: it is I; fear not, he says to a terrified band (see Matt 28:10; cf. John 6:20).

There is something irremediably fragmented, incoherent and unassembled about the Gospel portrait of Jesus Christ. It is not simply that he is more than just one thing. Of course, this is true; but true of us all. Rather there is something here in the Gospel record that makes the evangelists turn to the enigmatic Servant of God, the '*ebed 'adonai*, whose visage is marred past all recognition, a beauty long since scoured away by suffering. It seems that the Gospels, each after their own fashion, aim to show us a Holy One who cannot be melded into the frame of our world, and whose radiance casts only scattered patterns on the earth, unrecognisable, strange. This is a holiness that can only be set apart, well apart, from the profane.

Such reflections bring us to a crossroads with some of the major interpreters of the identity of Christ in the modern era. It seems that our intent study of the holy has not

<sup>2</sup>E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane Penguin, 1993), p. 192.

touched the modern portrait of Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God. We can readily think of Friedrich Schleiermacher's masterwork, *The Christian Faith*, or *Glaubenslehre*, in which the character of Christ is seamlessly blessed, holy, radiant. He is Redeemer in just this fashion, that he draws the student into a deeper, charismatic relation with this magnetic Teacher, who confers his profound peace upon all those he draws to his luminous Self-Presence. Or we might consider the widely influential Yale theologian, Hans Frei, who persuaded a whole generation of scholars to see in Jesus Christ the unique, narrated identity of the One we find in the Gospels. For Frei, it is *this* particular narrative, the Synoptic account, and decidedly not 'narrativity' in general or 'history-like narratives' that preoccupies his theological imagination. He holds, I think, that the Synoptics tell one sustained, coherent narrative, the singular identity of the Son of Man who acts in the stead of God, and impels himself into danger, to the cross, the grave, the empty tomb. It is not a simple narrative, by any means, but I do think Frei would say it is a recognisable character-study, this very One who is known in the confluence of deed and circumstance that just is the life of Jesus Christ.

So, too, I think we could group in this catalogue of modern interpreters the great Karl Rahner, the finest systematician, I believe, in Catholic realms in the modern era.<sup>3</sup> Rahner can give a sweeping coherent and consistent portrait of Jesus Christ as 'Absolute Savior', the Truly Human One, whose conscious dependence on the Mystery who is God is met by the gracious self-offer of his transcendental origin, such that he simply is the Son, the enfleshed Second Person of the Trinity. All these theologians, in strikingly different idiom, are united in their conviction that we can speak of a single, self-consistent and recognisable portrait of the New Testament Saviour, and though we may struggle with particular passages of scripture, perhaps many of them, we will win through to a unitary portrait of the One proclaimed by angels. Everything I have argued in this essay says that it can't be so – or so easily so.

The larger, and more dogmatic point I want to register here is this: the marked brokenness, inconsistency and alien nature of the evangelists' account of Christ is a sign of the unrelenting struggle to bring into view holiness, a Holy Person, into the mire of our world. This is a statement, in biblical idiom, I say, about christology proper, about the reality and person of the incarnate Word. What we might be seeing in the Gospel record, that is, is the refraction of the holy, Eternal Son as he assumes sinless flesh in our fallen world.

Time and again the letter writers of the New Testament speak of the nearness of Christ to our own temptations and sufferings; yet always with this warning: he is the sinless One. In the loud cries and groans that the Son must utter as he learns obedience, the author of the Book of Hebrews tells us, he remains without sin (Heb. 5:7; 4:15). To speak not in the varied and many ways in which God spoke through the prophets of old, but rather in and through the Son appears to demand an unstable mixture of ingredients in the profane sufferings of this aeon, all the while remaining unstained and undefiled from the world. And it is one of the continuing enigmas of christology to set forth – even to begin to conceptualise – how One is truly tempted, genuinely tested and broken to the yoke of obedience, yet all the while remaining without sin. It is this mystery, I believe, that the Apostle Paul aims to summarise in his famous and much debated *logion*, that God 'made him to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor 5:21). The

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, as attentive readers know by now, I can't be persuaded by all that Rahner says; and at times by little that he says. But I believe the systematic power of his work remains unmatched and stands always as a counter-stroke to the christology I aim to confess and to develop.

*crux interpretum* that this verse assumed in the early church – indeed still sports this dress – seems to me to echo and transpose this entire problematic we have before us. Just how is the holy to be present, truly present, in the profane?

If we take this problematic into the register of dogmatic christology, we arrive at the Cyrillian notion of the ‘hypostatic’ or ‘personal’ union of the divine Son with the flesh assumed. Can we in truth bring the Holy God into real and intimate relation with the mortal and decidedly worldly things of this earth? Can we actually conceive of the joining of Creator and creature in this One Son such that there is in thought and being One Person, One Son, One Lord Jesus Christ? It seems that the very holiness of God forbids this. Modern theologians, though remarkably amiable toward a unitary portrait of the man Jesus, have taken a decidedly unfriendly turn toward the unbroken unity of Christ’s person. Paul Tillich took up language from Kierkegaard to underscore the relation of deity to humanity in Christ as one of unrelenting *paradox*: the Ground of Being can be related to the creature only in contradiction, the antinomy of thought, expressed through the medium of symbol. I cannot but think that the notion, brought forward so forcefully by Duns Scotus, of infinity as the chief Attribute of God, lies behind much of this conceptual struggle with the hypostatic union.

Infinity has no relation to the finite, nor can it. This definition of deity was already in St Thomas taken as a positive perfection of God, and not simply a negative *qualia* – that is, the infinite extension of a line or a series of natural numbers, one after the other, no end in sight. Rather infinity in God – or, better, as God – is just what *deitas* is, the super-celestial nature of the transcendent God. The very idea of the infinite fascinated the medieval logicians, as it did the Attic Greeks, and we can see Nicholas of Cusa’s ‘coincidence of opposites’ as a christology built up out of the shattered fragments of the infinite as it encounters the finite, the ‘contracted’. Cusanus makes a claim that will govern much contemporary reflection upon the hypostatic union: the infinite has no proportion or common measure with the finite. They are ‘incommensurate’. Cusanus reaches for geometric figures to speak of an incommensurate infinite approaching the finite: a tangent drawing ever closer but never touching a line, a circle that is at once both circumference and centre, ‘everywhere and nowhere’.<sup>4</sup> The fertility of these ideas is unmistakable. Noteworthy is Rahner’s heavy reliance upon the ‘asymptotic line’ as it approaches the circle of the finite, or the young Karl Barth’s insistence that God is in the world like the empty crater of an exploding shell (World War I weighs heavy on him), or a canal in which the water no longer flows. ‘God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth!’ (Eccl 5:2, AV). Barth in those years said this scriptural verse summed up his whole theology, a profound struggle with the holy and transcendent God. The Anglican philosophical divine, Austin Farrer, takes up the notion of the incommensurate, and builds a doctrine of Sonship that makes the finite humanity of Christ the direct expression of the infinite Son, all the while the eternal Son remains infinite, holy, transcendent and absolute.

That this is a far more radical idea than the patristic reflections upon the mystery of the incarnation can be seen in the modern rejection of common analogies such as soul and body, two utterly different substances, composing one human person, or even the image, much beloved of Origenists, of the fire suffusing and rendering molten hot the iron bar. There is no common measure between deity and humanity, so the incarnate flesh of the Son of God must simply be the radical, fresh creation of the Word, its speech into or effect in the world of the finite. In my idiom, the holy cannot enter

<sup>4</sup>Nicholas of Cusa, *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. Germaine Heron (London: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 29.

the unholy world but must rather create a human life, speak it, such that this man simply is God's self-expression on earth. In biblical terms we might say there is no *sarx egeneto*, no *homo factus est* (John 1:14), but rather only *assumptio*, the taking of human flesh and blood as the infinite Word's own instrument and representative and expression. Aloys Grillmeier speaks of this difference as the distinction between 'making' and 'assuming' – and we are most definitely in the land here of the latter.

Two recent christologies, both major statements of contemporary wrestlings with the infinite, are Rowan Williams' *Christ the Heart of Creation* and Ian McFarland's *The Word Made Flesh*.<sup>5</sup> These are complex texts, wonderful achievements, and I don't pretend that I will have summarised them properly here. But the striking element in both is their commonality, their joint reliance upon Austin Farrer, and the confident assertion, born of Cusanus, that the infinite is incommensurate with the finite. Both these theologians speak out of and to the church; there's no holding the great confessions and dogmas of the church at arm's length, as there was so decidedly in Paul Tillich. Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and McFarland, at that time Regius Professor in Divinity at Cambridge, take Chalcedon and its refinement at the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils, with full seriousness. Williams aims to defend a Cyrillian 'single Subject' christology – a project dear to my heart – and McFarland, a thoroughgoing and, he says, 'radical' Chalcedonianism. What McFarland says in his opening salvo is arresting: when we look on Jesus Christ, he says, we see *only* the humanity, the man Jesus. Just this, he holds, is what Farrer means by the incommensurability of the infinite and finite: the Word speaks itself into creation, and the result is the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. In similar fashion, I believe, Williams holds that the hypostatic union, as presented by Cyril and interpreted by Thomas, means that the infinite Son, his creative agency, is realised in giving rise to a creature who is the 'coincidence' or 'unbroken alignment' of the Holy Son and the wholly obedient Jesus. That there is only one *esse* in Christ – one 'act of being' – means for Williams that that we do not speak properly of a 'God-man' or of 'natures, divine and human' that compose the incarnate Word. Rather, the infinite and holy Son simply gives rise to a 'bit of created stuff' that is utterly dependent upon and aligned with the incommensurate Son.

Now, all this makes the consorting of the holy God with the unholy world nearly unimaginable. Perhaps I might make my worry plainer by speaking of a loaded and not altogether happy term, that of 'presence'. Just how in modern christologies is the holy Son *present* in the unholy world? I really mean to use this term in a rather common-sense and non-theoretical way. We all know this ordinary sense of presence when we reflect on the terrible scourge of this pandemic, how it has truncated or prohibited human presence at the hours we most desperately need it: in the sick-room, and the death-bed, at the grave-side, and the marriage feast, at ordinations, at divine service, in classroom and living room. We have not been present there, and those we love have been absent from us. Perhaps you remember the first day when you entered a friend's house, or wrapped your arms around your mother, or stepped behind the podium or desk in a classroom: this is the elixir of presence that I want to conjure here. Our question here, the deepest question of christology, I believe, is whether and how the divine Son can be *present* in just this rich, rounded and ordinary sense, in his own flesh, his sacred body, to be our Judge and Lord and Redeemer. How in the conceptual furniture of our day can the holy God confront and consort with the unholy world?

<sup>5</sup>Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019).

Students of the tradition will notice that I have quietly assimilated the work of Christ to his person. I have treated, that is, the very idea of the Son's mission, his being sent into the world for us and for our sake, as able to be captured and expressed by the hypostatic union, the inhumanising of the Son of God, to borrow a timely phrase from St Cyril. This is not how our textbooks have taught us the mysteries of our Lord. They would have it that we learn first of the Triune mission of the Son, then the complex definition and relation of divine and human in the one person, Jesus Christ, and if we are traditional Thomists, of the one *suppositum* and *esse* of the Word as it assumes human nature as its very own. After this investigation of the person of Christ, we then are led to his work: his ministry among us, his teaching and healing and wonder-working, and supremely to his Passion, foretold in his Last Supper with his disciples, and inaugurated by denial, betrayal and the works of the night. His rising, exaltation and eternal reign are then unfolded as the consummation of this school of obedience for the lowly Son of Man, and our hope and our redemption is sealed by his atoning sacrifice, offered once and for all, and present – there is that word again! – on altar and in the heavenly sanctuary. This at any rate is the sequence I learned in catechism, and of course it makes perfect pedagogical sense. First, we learn who he is; then we study what he has done. But in truth, I think this kind of linear distinction in the realm of christology helps us little when we confront the nearly intractable problems that our modern conceptions bring to bear on christology. What we need, I believe, is a teaching about the presence of the holy Son in his flesh, not simply *as* his flesh, such that his person is also his work. We need a capacious christology that brings his saving acts deep within his person, such that his very constitution as the God-man, his hypostatic union, is the Holy Presence of God in an unholy world.

I would like to propose the ancient notion of *sacrifice* as the final mystery of the Word made flesh. Of course, if we consider the religions of the ancient world, indeed across our global cultures, sacrifice – making holy – just *is* religion, and it is what our religious ancestors *did*. This is the religion of pious Aeneas, the religion of tragic Dido, the sacred rites of doomed Carthage, of Agamemnon and the terrible sacrifice of Iphigenia, of traditional societies in every land, and of every temple precinct from ancient Thebes to the ball courts of Palenque to the shrines of the Middle Kingdom. To slaughter animals, or even human captives, to flay and roast them, to offer up birds of many kinds and of grain, the food-stuff of antiquity: all this is the *act* of religion, the making sacred of the polluted and defiled world. Ancient Israel is no exception. We see there the same conviction that blood is the sacred commerce of piety, blood of animals and birds, poured out on altars, sprinkled over hands and heads, dashed against the unclean: this was the cultus of Israel, enshrined by Moses, taught in elaborate ritual in the Books of Exodus and Leviticus, and placed at the heart of Israel, the very centre of the earth, in the House of God, the Temple where atonement was made. Just this made holy a people for the holy God, the terrifying glory of God's sacredness reconciled with a covenant people obedient and eager to do God's will, but disobedient too, and wayward in their hearts. Jesus Christ was born into a sacrificial world, and He too observed the festival days, and knew the smokey tang of incense and roasting flesh that perfumed the Temple courts. As he learned obedience to his parents, Christ learned sacrifice as a sacred act, a commandment or *mitzvah* that hallowed the people Israel before their holy God. Indeed, we might say, echoing many ancient hymns and anthems, that *his* whole life is a continual sacrifice; and that Golgotha consummates just such a holy life.



So it is odd, really, to speak of sacrifice as who Christ is, rather than what he does. But I want to hazard, in my closing, that it is just this movement of sacrifice, back from deed into person, that will join heaven and earth, and make an unholy earth sing. I want to suggest that the hypostatic union just is *sacrifice*: the relation of deity to humanity in Christ is one of continual and fiery hallowing. The presence of the holy Son to his own sacred body and soul is sacrificial, a terrible joining of Creator and creature in a consummation that is sacred fire. I said earlier that the furniture of the modern mind was arranged in such a way that the presence of God to the world, his consorting with it, was rendered unthinkable, conveyed, if at all, by symbol or *mythos*. Such convictions led theologians as diverse as Rahner and Williams and Farrer to speak of the relation of God to the world as ‘non-competitive’: it could not be, they said, that when God acted, creatures could not, or even less, that when creatures willed or acted, God was rendered passive. No, it must be, they said, that God could act in the world in such a way that the creature could still act, and all this without the creature becoming divine. Oddly, this is the outworking of a notion of ‘incommensurability’: if there is no common measure, there is no conflict, but rather distinct ‘sovereign domains’, to borrow the happy phrase of Stephen Jay Gould, used for other purposes.<sup>6</sup> We have seen the cost of such ideas in christology. I propose that sacrifice is where a kind of common measure, a divine one, to be sure, is brought to bear on an unholy world. It happens in one place, that one place only: the incarnate Word, the Holy Child of God. Jesus Christ is the name of Begotten Holiness that consumes his own flesh in fire. His destiny is ash. The divine and human are joined in the exceeding mystery and darkness of this divine counsel, that One of the Trinity will suffer in the flesh, a sacrifice for the whole world. The holy God *is* present, in confrontation and solidarity, with creatures in this one life in a unique and terrible and gracious fashion, that he would in his person be an altar, where the sacred fire of the glory who is God would create and consummate the humanity, a living enactment of Israel’s cultus, now in a Temple not made by hands. Of course, the life of such a one will strike the eye of the beholder as alien, strange, terrible! Of course, the records of his deeds will be fragmentary, oddly disjunctive, misshaped, discordant. It is holiness in person, and the scorching heat warns, at times warms, at times scalds all those who draw near. Just this is what it means to call Christ *Lord!* It is not simply that he directs our ways, though to be sure he does this; and not simply that he dies, the godly for the ungodly, though wonderfully he does this too, but also that in his person he is the sacrifice that hallows, at utter and bitter cost to his own flesh, and as judge and grace to us, the creatures of an unholy world.

I do not think such a vision solves all problems in christology; I most certainly could not perform such an Olympian feat! But I want to suggest to you that holiness in the midst of unholiness is the matrix against which christology stands out as the singular and lofty and stern solution of a holy God who will not let us go. Just this is what it means to say God is love. Now, I have had my say here, a long one, and now I am eager to hear yours.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>This article was originally presented as the 2021 Dunning Memorial Lecture at St Mary’s Seminary and University, Baltimore, MD.