

**THE INCARNATION AND
MODERN THOUGHT, A
DISSERTATION**

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The incarnation and modern thought, a dissertation by Carl Delos Case

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CARL DELOS CASE

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MODERN THOUGHT, A
DISSERTATION**

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THE INCARNATION AND MODERN THOUGHT

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(DEPARTMENT OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY)

BY
CARL DELOS CASE



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INTRODUCTION

Referring to the attitude of the Ritschlian school to the Nicene Christology, Scott, in his book on the *Nicene Theology*, says: "The burning focus of this whole controversy and of all historical criticism of it, is the Incarnation of Christ." Indeed, outside of the Ritschlian school, the central place in all Christian systems is occupied, not simply by the Incarnation itself as a fact, but by some christological explanation of the fact. The Christology of the theologian of today is the center of his scheme of Christian doctrine. It determines his view of God, man, and the universe; his theology, anthropology, and cosmology.

There is a tendency in many of the christological systems as taught today, to minimize the philosophical elements; nor is this tendency without beneficial effect. To emphasize the "ethical apprehension of Jesus," to reproduce the "moral pictures" of Christ, to proclaim thought inferior to life, to describe dogma as a human product, has helped to restore the vigor of life to theology.

One result of this tendency has been an added emphasis on the ethically correct Christian life. "Religion," says Max Müller, "is a perception of such manifestation of the Infinite as produces an effect upon the moral character and conduct of man;" but men have been more occupied in contemplating "moral character" and "conduct" than in analyzing the "perception." This is by no means an entirely new feature of Christian thinking. It was Clement of Alexandria who was attracted to Christianity by its lofty ethical teaching and by the fruits which it bore in the practical transformation of the life. Nevertheless, Clement felt that the Christian truth commended itself to his reason; and the modern Christian need not hastily pronounce a divorce of doctrine from practice.

Another result from the tendency just mentioned is the conviction that the crowning preparation for a ripe Christian belief is experience. Conviction is produced, not through argument, but through the soul's religious processes. Doctrine is rather the flower of religious experience than its root. Theological constructions are the product, not the source, of religious life. Hence it is a mistake to place as a prerequisite of the Christian life an under-

standing of Christian doctrine. The divine order is plain: "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from myself."

According to the scholastics of the Middle Ages, the order of Christian faith is: first, *notitia*, a knowledge of the biblical teachings of Christianity; second, *assensus*, an assent to these doctrines; and third, *fiducia*, a personal acceptance of the system. Insistence upon this order is the sword at the garden, to drive away thoughtful minds. Men ask: "How do I know whether these doctrines are true?" Much infidelity can be averted by the true order: first, *notitia*, a knowledge of the person, Jesus Christ; second, *fiducia*, an intrusting of the life to him by a holy confidence; and third, gradually, and not by compulsion nor by authority, an *assensus* to the doctrines as they are demonstrated by the inner life. It is not by scientific argument or speculative reason that we are to be religious, but by the apprehension or knowledge of the person, Jesus, and the requisite attitude toward him.

Again, it is more or less acknowledged that a theological superstructure cannot be based on the uncertain foundation of science. In one of the essays in *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, Mr. Royce demonstrates the failure, from the data of modern science, to describe the succession of phenomena into the infinite. As long as the term "finite" is used, the order of nature is exact and explainable; but no possible explanation can be given of the infinite series either of the past or future. Consider all of the usual arguments for the existence and being of God, such as form the introduction to so many theological textbooks—how little capable of producing religious conviction! A God to be worshiped is not discovered as the goal of a course of reasoning, or as the conclusion of a syllogism. A statement of an order of phenomena is not a disclosure of the reality behind the phenomena. It is not from man and the world to God that we can proceed. Science finds here an impassable gulf. God must be reached by a direct method, and the divine order established: from God to the world and man.

Nevertheless, scientific and religious truth are not contradictory. God is the same; the constitution of the world and the constitution of the mind are correlates. There is no schism in truth. Nor are the deliverances of science more certain than those of religion;

both resting upon faith. In the formulation therefore of religious truth, the God and Savior of revelation must first be believed and accepted before there can result individual doctrinal belief or an accepted rationale of the universe.

In view then of these manifest advantages of a purely ethical connotation of Christian truth, and of the fact that any formulation must be of a greater worth to the Christian than to the unbeliever, the *raison d'être* of a treatise on the method of the Incarnation must be found in the affirmative answer to these two questions: first, is any theological formulation of Christian teaching in regard to the person of Christ permanent, beneficial, and trustworthy; and second, if the previous question is answered affirmatively, will it be advisable to attempt any fresh formulations?

Two of the three classes that believe in Christianity today are to be commiserated. The first class believes that the truths of revelation are to be proved similarly to the determination of the composition of water as H₂O. The second class fails to find a reasonable basis for Christianity and yet adheres to it hoping against hope. Like Jacobi, its members are Christians with their hearts and infidels with their minds.

Perhaps it is with full recognition of the inherent difficulties of the subject of Christology that Christian writers have thus written: "To know Christ is to know his benefits, not to dispute about his nature;" "the Incarnation . . . can never be comprehended by human thought;" "the problem (of the Incarnation) is insoluble with our present knowledge;" "the divinity of Christ is incapable of any adequate metaphysical explanation." But all these statements are but to declare the uselessness of the attempts of the centuries—to affirm with the old rabbinic master that when man spoke, there was only one meaning, but when God spoke, there could be from five to forty-nine meanings.

The question is a practical one. If our religious ideas are but the vapor that arises from the cauldron of our heart, then it is a blunder to condense into dogma what might have been the pent-up energy for activity. If, as Professor George B. Stevens affirms in his book *Doctrine and Life*, we can, by separating the method of the Incarnation from the considerations which favor the fact, and by frankly admitting that the former is an absolute mystery,