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Embodying Christ in Our Culture: Challenge for Christians Today

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Abstract: How is Jesus alive today? How are the two central events of Christianity (Christmas and Easter) related? How can we make sense of Jesus embodied presence among us today? In trying to articulate a response to the above questions, we first reflect on the embodied nature of Jesus. Then we explore how the disciples of Jesus embody God and Jesus in our culture. Finally, we look at some of the eschatological implications of this experience. And when Paul speaks of "the spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44), he is not using an oxymoron but simply referring to the eschatological reality of our bodies.
Keywords: Body of Jesus, Spiritual Body, Disciples as *imago Dei*, Eschatology as Being Beyond Totality

How is Jesus alive today? How are the two central events of Christianity (Christmas and Easter) related? How can we make sense of Jesus embodied presence among us today? In trying to articulate a response to the above questions, we first reflect on the embodied nature of Jesus. Then we explore how the disciples of Jesus embody God and Jesus in our culture. Finally, we look at some

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of the eschatological implications of this experience. In this way, we are challenged to live the Easter message during Christmas season and all the historical time, since "when man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history." So we are called to experience "the spiritual body" that St Paul refers to.

The Body of Jesus

The ascension of Christ made a real absence of his body. The four evangelists are acutely aware of the absence, they write his story and make his body which is the body of the text to touch and read. Their gospels were the logos embodied in language. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John all acknowledge the primacy of Mary Magdalene as a witness to the Resurrection, while Paul, significantly, omits all reference to her: "he appeared first to Cephas and secondly to the Twelve." (1 Cor. 15:5). Magdalene is honoured by Peter Abelard with the title: "apostle to the apostles" (Johnson, 1999: 146-50).

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That Mary was chosen as the first witness was something that a number of Church fathers felt needed explanation. Ambrose, for example, considers the event according to the typology of the "Second Eve". The Gospel of John ends with the two witnesses who adamantly want to verify His body namely Mary Magdalene and Thomas. He allows Thomas to touch and tells Mary not to hold him back. The Gospel ends with the search for his body. Mary is the only witness who is ready "I will take him away" (Jn.20:15). It is only in John 21, considered by a large number of biblical scholars to be a later appendix. Does Chapter

21 of John's Gospel represent an accommodation between Johannine Christianity, which has seen Jesus' 'own' entrusted to the beloved disciple (19:16-27) and the Petrine authority recognized in other Churches. Is Mary displaced by Peter? In John there is no institution narrative whereas for other evangelists the church is making his body in the commemoration of the Eucharistic act. Christ absence is overcome by the church by making present the body. The incarnation signals an alliance that manifests in flesh becoming word. The logos becomes dialogic. The Gospels did that miracle.

Disciples *Imago Dei*

Language is that which structures our consciousness of the world. The linguistic understanding of language is a process of naming and representing a reality that has become absent. The structure of language itself produces "reality" and that our perceptions of reality are framed and determined by the structure of language. The Christian understanding of the *imago Dei* should be founded in the incarnation, in the life, and example of Jesus himself. The gospels depict a Jesus in His ministry as one of inclusivity. This inclusivity appears to be reflected in the early baptismal formula cited by Saint Paul, which states that in Christ: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). The principal focus of this passage is the abolition of all hierarchical binary relations in communion with Christ. Communion in Christ marks a return to the original *imago Dei* which has become distorted and obscured through sin. To be in communion with him is itself the carrying away his body. The incarnation is the deep insertion and immanence in our human reality of the divine. She as well as Thomas and the rest carry him away and are possessed of him. Christianity is a religion of touch. Within Christianity the idea of the imago Dei is rightly affirmed and reinforced by the doctrine of the incarnation. With the incarnation, the eternal image of God becomes "this" man Jesus, whom John's Gospel has declared: "To have seen me is to

have seen the Father". (John 14.9) The incarnation is an event of the most profound significance, and yet it remains to be seen just what impact, if any, it has had on our idea of humanity as *imago Dei*, image of God. The body as it is represented in culture, constituted as meaning, is the only body to which we have access. His death and disappearance are more powerful. He lives in those who carry his body and those who embody him.

His possession is not as of Hamlet. Nothing oppresses us more than the weight of an irrevocable past. The past, like a shadow, follows us and grows on us and we are unable to avoid it. The present fascist tendencies of homecoming where the home is in the origins of birth of caste, nationality, religion or colour. It is only in the Church, that we are not who we have been but who we *will* be. It is the process of becoming. The reason for our society's obsession with the past is the fact that our epistemology is entirely retuning to the past. In other words, our knowledge is based by necessity on experience and experience is always experience of that which has been and has come to pass, that which, in other words, can be measured, observed and written down in files and records. In everyday life, we reason according to the experience of past. A careful examination of the violence directed toward the Other (in the many forms of racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc.) would reveal that at the root of such violence lies the simple prejudice that gives priority to what has been, either in terms of a biological beginning (nature, essence) or in terms of one's own history. It is the beginning, after all, that determines the end and not the other way around. It is not at the beginning that is in the morning of consciousness and at the dawn of history that man is truly himself. The beginning determines humanity and history only in so far as it "remains an advent." Meaning comes at the end. In this respect, eschatology

is *anarchic* through and through, for it alone can effect such a radical subversion of the *arche*, of principles and beginnings.

Towards Eschatological Fullness

Eschatology reverses naturalistic, essentialist, and historistic models by making the seemingly improbable claim that I am not who I am, let alone who I was and have been, but rather, like the theophanic Name.

Eschatology reverses naturalistic, essentialist, and historistic models by making the seemingly improbable claim that I am not who I am, let alone who I was and have been, but rather, like the theophanic Name of Exodus (3:14). I am who I *will* be. Eschatological theology is deep down a liberation theology. Moltmann, after going through a list of similar apocalyptic visions and prophesies, concludes: "All these ideas and fantasies are certainly soundly apocalyptic, but they are not Christian. The Christian expectation for the future has nothing at all to do with final solutions of this kind, for its focus is not the end of life, or history, or the world. It is rather the beginning." (Moltmann, 2000: 130) As Levinas writes, "eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history. It is a relationship with *a surplus always exterior to the totality*" of history (Levinas 1969: 22). He writes later, "When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history" (Levinas 1969: 52). Eschatology is in essence a "liberation" theology (freeing us from the moralistic and sociological constellations of this world) and that, it has real, practical, day-to-day consequences for the ways we conduct our lives and our relationships with others. Nothing oppresses us more than the weight of an irrevocable past. In front of the past we are powerless. We simply are not our past. This archival orientation is best illustrated by the example of the shadow: The past, like a shadow, follows us and grows on us and we are unable to avoid it. It is only in the Church that we are not who we have been but who we will

be. In place of the archaeological logic described above, the church offered a new logic – the logic of the new, the *novum*, the doctrine of *de novissimis*. In Revelation (21:5), the "new things" coincide with the last things and together they form what is known as eschatology. Against the things-themselves stand the things-to-come. The things-themselves are precisely not the things-to-come. I am not who I am, let alone who I was and have been, but rather, like the theophanic Name of Exodus (3:14), I am who I *will* be. The kingdom of God does not coincide with the culmination of history, that is, with a totality, but it signals a breach in the body of history, a rupture occasioned by the encounter with the Other. By placing the coming of the kingdom either after history or within history, we avoid identifying it with history. By avoiding such identification, we guarantee history its own freedom. History is then allowed to unfold in its own ways – without being constrained by a predetermined route leading to a predestined outcome.

Conclusion

History has no program, and even less a program already known and given before the ages. That idea would condemn God to boredom and humanity to fatalistic passivity of the fundamentalists who are riveted to the past origins of caste, colour, and nationality. As Levinas says "When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history" (Levinas 1969: 52) or as Balthasar wrote, "The Incarnation is the eschaton and, as such, is unsurpassable" (von Balthasar 1998: 301-2) The "kingdom of God" is theologically synonymous with "the Spirit of God." And when Paul speaks of "the spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44), he is not using an oxymoron but simply referring to the eschatological reality of our bodies.

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