

Farrer, Feuerbach and Process: The Divine Human as paradigm

The Incarnation of Christ stands at the centre of Christian theology as symbolising and confirming God's relationship with his creation. It is undoubtedly a powerful image, and one which has stood for almost 2000 years as a guiding principle in western theology and thought. This in itself makes the Incarnation a matter of profound human interest, irrespective of individual standpoints with regard to theistic belief.

Of the many perspectives through which the subject can be approached, I propose to explore three particular models which suggest themselves as allowing the fact of the Incarnation to stand whilst providing scope for substantially different interpretations of meaning. These are:

- that the Incarnation stands properly as evidence of God's relationship with creation (as proposed by Austin Farrer);
- that the Incarnation is an idealised projection reflecting a stage in the development of human consciousness (as proposed by Ludwig Feuerbach);
- that the Incarnation is an exemplar of human potential (as extrapolated from Process philosophy).

A common thread running through each of these propositions is that theistic concepts must necessarily relate to existing forms of human understanding in order that they remain meaningful, and not mere abstractions that serve no function. If God is to mean anything to us, it is within the realm of possible and human experience that it will do so.

It was this need to meet God in a relational mode that drove the metaphysics of Austin Farrer. For him, Incarnate Christ was the confirmatory feature of a personalist metaphysics in which the God-as-Creator interacted with finite creation in the manner,

dealt with analogically, of personal intercourse. As he said in *Saving Belief*, 'Theology of the Christian type is cosmic personalism' (MP, 23).

His method was to explore the nature of our relationship with God, and his aim was to develop a model sufficiently coherent so as to establish in us a strong inference of God's reality. He sought, in *Finite and Infinite*, to describe a defining mode of operation through which an Infinite God could meaningfully interact with finite creation; and subsequently, in *Faith and Speculation*, to remove from our conception of God the limitations imposed by Aristotelian notions of 'utter transcendence' and 'removal from effect'.

The central formulation developed in *Finite and Infinite* was that of *esse est operari* ('being through action'), a notion of agency which carried through into *Faith and Speculation*. Aristotelian conceptions of God as transcendent, unchanging and self-sufficient 'Being' had created an unbridgeable gulf between God and creation. Farrer sought to forge a meaningful connection between the two, and he did so via the use of analogical extensions of human activity. The 'action' formulation establishes 'being' as goal-driven, where – as in Process concepts – actuality changes during and following experience. Interactive co-development overcomes the disjunction between finite and Infinite, as 'actions beget interaction' (MP, 33) and necessarily bring the finite and Infinite thematically 'closer' together.

An examination of our own nature showed 'being' to be more than static existence: we are known, and know ourselves, by our actions. Farrer argued, therefore, that our knowledge of God must similarly be based on mutual interaction, that 'the disclosure of God must lie in the exercise of a relation with God' (FS, 36) and that 'The due relation between man and his Creator establishes a positive rapport between activity on both sides' (FS, 55). The latter statement reveals, in particular, a determined attempt to break with Aristotelian 'fixity'. God is thus both active *and* reactive.

The concepts of 'relation' and 'positive rapport' are, in Farrer's model, drawn from human intercourse and it was therefore natural for him to determine the human relationship with God in a personalist form, a development which could only be strengthened by the centrality of the Incarnation in Christian belief. This, he stressed, was an analogy: 'God is not a man, except by his act of condescension in the saving incarnation' (FS, 50); and one which delivers Christ from the demands of all-powerfulness by its suggestive interpretation of Christ as a specifically humanised demonstration of God's grace. Nonetheless, our 'relation to God is so far comparable with the relations we cultivate towards our neighbour' (FS, 143), a mode of relating which offers development and discovery as well as a sense of mutual dependency in which both participants contribute an affective principle. To retain the distinction between the human and the divine realm, Farrer utilised 'a scale of agency which spans creation and, in its upward reach, points on through man to God' (FS, 134). This allowed human concepts to be attributed, in maximal form, to God. He further recognised that the act of knowing is relational and dependent on experience, and in this his inclination to reject Aristotelian absolutism is evident: a relational God must, to some degree, be contingent on creation by reason of that relationship.

Working strictly within a framework of human comprehensibility, Farrer had thus proposed a God whose very 'being' could be understood only by his action within the world. As he wrote: 'we take activity to be the character basic to all existence we can meaningfully conceive' (FS, 115). The danger in this view is a reductionist tendency to then regard God as equated with natural process. It was to bridge the gap between finite and Infinite, whilst maintaining at the same time a real distinction between the two, that Farrer went to the heart of his theological roots and inserted moral agency into the argument: 'Grace is an action of the Creator in the creature' (FS, 67). This retained God's primacy (through the mechanism of being the source of moral deliberation) but required a

human co-agent to become realised within the world. A moral act is a human act, but one which carries with it (in the moment of acting) a response to God's 'urgings'. By allowing God this vital influence, but not the role of omnipotent director of all human activity, Farrer retained both God's supremacy and human freedom.

The function of Christ within the mythos is clear: 'he [Christ] is the self-enacted human parable of Godhead... God must be in such a sense a personal agent that he can be said voluntarily to adopt and really use the human forms of life and action' (FL, 98). Thus, in Farrer's system, God is both Creator and co-participant; and Christ is both a marker of God's immanence, and paradigm of the human condition and of faith: 'Would he [God] have done better so to relate us to himself as to put faith less upon the stretch, so that... Christ's "learning obedience by the things he" (unpredictably) "suffered" would cease to be the paradigm of faith' (FS, 57-58).

Farrer, it must be remembered, was first and foremost a theologian, a believer. His concept of moral deliberation and co-agency is strikingly persuasive in reasoning for good (human) action, and his formula of 'being through action' is eminently sound and successfully counters much of the Aristotelian 'leaven' of scholastic thought. The weakness in which he betrays himself, philosophically, is in resting much of his empirical and anthropological argument on the notion of a scale that, necessarily, has God at its uppermost end as Sovereign Will (a formulation to which I will return later). It was against just such an elevation of God, with its natural corollary of reducing the status of humans, that Feuerbach argued so passionately in *The Essence of Christianity*.

In like manner to Farrer, Feuerbach rejected much of the traditional way of thinking of God. Like Farrer, he regarded *actions* as of primary importance; and likewise he saw that religion — if it is to mean anything — must be meaningful on a human scale. Thus, as Farrer looked to human relationships to develop an analogical concept of God, so

Feuerbach looked to religious activity and belief to explain the nature and progress of human development. Where Farrer sought to join the Infinite with the finite in mutual action, it might be said that Feuerbach sought to absorb (or better, *re-absorb*) the idea of Infinite into the finitude of human existence (thereby transforming human endeavour into an open-ended exploration of experience). Central to the theme he developed in *Essence...* is that 'Man is himself at once I and thou' (EC, 2). It was this recognition that human consciousness is able to stand apart from itself, is able to engage in an inner dialogue and project ideas and hold them as ideals, which allowed Feuerbach to suggest that religious conceptions are displaced aspects of human consciousness. That is, when we regard God we are regarding objectified aspects of our own subjective consciousness.

Feuerbach argues that the structure and form of religious belief is a reflection of human development: 'the historical progress of religion consists in this: that what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognised as subjective; that is, what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something *human*' (EC, 13). It is important to recognise that Feuerbach was not denying a meaningful comprehension of God by this statement of apparent rejection. He accepted, for example, that God, in so far as 'God' has meaning for humans, has 'attributes': 'A being without qualities is one that cannot become an object to the mind... To the truly religious man, God is not a being without qualities, because to him he is a positive, real being' (EC, 14). Religious truth, in Feuerbach's hands, becomes something moveable, capable of reformulation as human consciousness develops and earlier conceptual projections are absorbed.

When Feuerbach writes that 'The Incarnation is nothing else than the practical, material manifestation of the human nature of God... [that he] became man out of mercy' (EC, 50), he comes close to expressing Farrer's idea of the 'self-enacted human parable of

Godhead' (FL, 98); but his intent is very different. Farrer's incarnated God is necessary for our comprehension *and* indicative of God's relationship with us; but Feuerbach takes the view that 'the descent of God to man is necessarily preceded by the exaltation of man to God' (EC, 50). Feuerbach's formulation is dependent, at least in part, on his observational understanding of the internalised I/Thou relationship. Humans are distinguished by the ability to conceptualise internally, but what is conceived is necessarily structured according to human sensibilities. To conceive of God it is necessary to project as yet unattained ideals, a process which in Feuerbach has a suggestion (when factored into religious projections) of emptying out the finest in human attributes, and granting them unto God: 'To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing' (EC, 26). This bears comparison with Farrer's view, cited by Charles Conti, that 'nothing is to be denied God which is "highest and best" in persons' (MP, 23); although it must be allowed that, in Farrer, the mutuality of divine and human action, through the mediation of grace, significantly raises in value the human part of the equation.

Feuerbach's position benefits from a certain flexibility, when regarded in terms of religious development. Belief is given room to develop, not only in its explication but also in its functional reality. Philosophically, this offers the significant possibility of non-absolute truth; that is, truth is functional within its context, but is not set down as the unchanging ground upon which all else must sit. A clear distinction can be drawn here between Farrer and Feuerbach, not only in the particulars of their view of Christ and God, but more especially in their approach to the philosophy of religion. Farrer sought to conjoin the Infinite with the finite in activity, but always regarded the two as separate, as Creator and creation: God exists and what is at issue is the language and description we can use to best explore that truth. Farrer regarded earlier conceptions of God as partial, or contradictory; but he retained a certainty that this was a problem of description, and one capable of resolution by correcting misplaced Aristotelian ideas of perfection and

unchangeability. For Feuerbach, the issue was one of human progression, and the conception of God was therefore regarded as empirical evidence of (human) consciousness: how God is regarded from the human perspective reflects the state of the human consciousness doing the regarding. Christ, for Feuerbach, is not indicative of the humanising of God, but rather of the divinising of the Human.

The projection of human ideals into, or *as*, God offers a number of distinct outcomes:

- that God is truly the Creator, but conceivable only through human thought structures. The projection is an attempt to reach across to that reality (Farrerian);
- that God is not real (in the sense of being other than a projection of human thought), but the projected conception of God serves as a target towards which humanity can strive in order to realise human potential more completely (an adaptation of the Feuerbachian idea, with the added strand that the projection is more than descriptive of the human condition and constitutes a properly functional and paradigmatic — though strictly contingent— role in human development);
- that the act of projection is capable of more than theoretical or idealised ‘reality’: the resultant concept is capable of achieving objective status, or concrecence. In this, the projection serves not simply as a paradigm, but as an independent and influencing agency that changes the range of future possibility.

If one takes the first of these options as (broadly) indicative of a traditional theistic position, and the second as (broadly) descriptive of an atheistic position, the third appears to take a midway point between the two; that is, it allows for the reality of God, but also human primacy. In essence though, it is rather more than a ‘middle way’. It suggests that the creative impulse is natural (that is, active ‘within nature’), and that a God so conceived

is causally contingent upon human acts. So far, this is very much a Feuerbachian position. The extension is that the projection is allowed full credibility, and its continuing existence is fully relational and not simply reactive to its causative impulse. In this sense God becomes more than a reflection of human ideals, and develops into a fully active participant in the existential self-realisation of itself and of the human subject. Using a modern metaphor, the projection transcends its original programming and becomes self-referred and self-expressive.

There are three primary components necessary to this formulation: the idea of concrescence as posited in Process thought (in order to offer the projection more than subjective existence in the mind of the projector); the functional aspect of an 'I/Thou' relationship as a creative cause; and the relationship of language to the creative act.

At the heart of A. N. Whitehead's Process philosophy is the notion of continual creative activity:

“Creativity” is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact. It is that ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively.’ (PR, 21)

I have commented elsewhere¹ that in formulating his position in this way, and noting the similarly primary role of the creative act in *Genesis*, Whitehead may be engaging as much in the art of exegesis as in a strictly philosophical argument. Process philosophy regards each moment as complete in itself, each event as derived from all previous experience and yet informed by the current moment of becoming. 'Becoming' is always regarded as a creative act. It is this movement from past into present that constitutes what is real, and its inclusion of all constituents in the 'becoming' allows for the resulting

¹ Mid-term paper 'Movable Meaning and the Philosophy of Religion'

concrecence to be shaped by consciousness: 'an actual entity may, or may not, be conscious of some part of its experience. Its experience is its complete formal constitution, including consciousness, if any' (PR, 53). Consciousness, when present, has a functional role. It is possible, therefore, to read the opening verses of *Genesis* both as descriptive of the process of God's thoughts being actualised, and as instructive with regard to the possibility of human (linguistic) expression and thought containing creative potency and concrete actuality. Taking this latter view, the Incarnation serves as an explicit reminder to interpret the acts of God in strictly human terms. Christ is the 'human fulfilled'.

Given such ideas of inclusiveness and concrecence, it is instructive to regard Farrer's personalist metaphysics and Feuerbach's projectional model through this Process lens. Both men paid a high regard to language as a functional artefact, reaching beyond the strict logical positivism of a philosopher such as A. J. Ayer, who nonetheless came to regard the role of philosophy to be the 'refashioning of the structure of language... [so that] it may help determine what facts can be' (MCS, 93). For Farrer, the key was in the performative nature of words, in the way that such expressions as 'I absolve you' are in themselves the instrument of effect, and one of the means through which God is able to participate in the moral, and human, act. In Process terms this can be regarded as the impaction of conscious belief and stated expression in the moment of actuality, with a resultant modification of the resulting concrecence. In other words, the act of the believer in speaking a phrase 'makes a difference'. This 'difference', in Farrer's metaphysics, is the incorporation of God's will within the finite act (as figuratively evidenced by Christ's incarnation into the finite world). The unresolved difficulty with Farrer's position though, is that 'The will of God, once admitted, cannot be limited by anything pre-existent to his action; he must be the first, total and sufficient cause' (FS, 80). In requiring this of the Infinite, Farrer is putting an almost intolerable strain on his requirement of even partial independence in the finite.

Feuerbach regarded the 'power of the word as a divine power' (EC, 79): language is affective as well as descriptive; and the history of ideas offers powerful empirical evidence for the ability of expressed language to manifest material transformation. If the Process model has credibility, what Feuerbach's broad position is describing is something akin to the construction of a consensus reality in which linguistically expressed ideas adopt an affective potency. By, for example, defining Christ as the 'Son of God', Christ gains existence as the Divine Human; or, as the Process theologian Charles Hartshorne said, 'if we have a meaning for our thought about God, we also have experience of him' (cited in BB, 89). Experience, in the Process model, is integral to the act of becoming and to consciousness; and consciousness expressed in language combines the thought with deliberative action (speech) which, arguably, may effect a concrescence external to the subject as, analogically, an extension of the physical impression of sound on the environment (this also reflects the functional use of language in *Genesis*). Feuerbach would no doubt have argued that it is the thought about God which is generative, whereas Farrer would prefer that God is generative of the thought. A Process view need make neither distinction, but rather is able to accept both as plausible, and both as expressive of subjective self-becoming.

It is relevant at this juncture to consider in a little more detail the nature of the I/Thou relationship, because this impacts not only on the nature of relationship and the need for a personalist metaphysics, but also provides a possible structure within Process concepts for understanding the imperative to creativity in the act of self-realisation.

The idea of discrete identity is, necessarily, at the centre of a consideration of the I/Thou relationship. If 'I' is to be meaningful, it must be so in relationship with something that is 'not I'. The Cartesian *cogito* falls short of this, and draws everything into the mind of the subject. Objects become 'sense impressions' and relationship is, ultimately, one-sided.

The problem here is that the 'I' stands alone and objects are, as Buber would express it, identified as 'it' (that is, they contain no affective or formative impulse of their own within the matrix of comprehension). For the 'I' to be meaningful it must be understood as an expression of self-identification; that is, as a discernment of an existent 'other'; and for true relationship to occur, the 'other' must be regarded as equally capable of its own 'I' formulation in order that an exchange can take place.

Whitehead describes an aspect of process in terms suggestive of an exchange of information. 'A' perceives the datum of subject 'B' (that is, its outward signs and not the actual entity itself) and determines a subjectified understanding of 'B'. At the same time, the actual entity 'B' (which is non-identical with the subjectified 'B' experienced or felt through the datum received by 'A') perceives the datum expressed by 'A' and formulates its own subjective understanding of 'A' (which, similarly, is non-identical with the actual entity 'A'). The transformative or creative principle is demonstrated through the concrescence of 'A' into an 'A₂' (constituting 'all that is "A" plus its experience of the datum of "B"') and similarly of 'B' into a 'B₂' (constituting 'all that is "B" plus its experience of the datum of "A"'). In both cases, the resulting actual entities, 'A₂' and 'B₂', are non-identical with the objectified perception that each has of the other (see PR, 226).

Whitehead assumed that prehension¹ is the only mode of influence (which may tend to a lack of intersubjectivity or a 'law of continuous separation'), but Lewis Ford has suggested that it 'may be possible to modify Whitehead by supposing that there can be a common creativity which pluralizes itself in the present' (E-mail, *Empathy*). This would allow a much broader sharing of experience, and the development of true empathy. Combining Ford's suggestion with Whiteheadian 'eternal objects' (non-actualised potentials), or with a more direct process in which expressed ideas are treated as non-physical 'actual

¹ Whitehead uses 'positive' and 'negative' prehensions to define the extent of the experience of data. Positive prehensions are included in the subjective experience, while negative prehensions are excluded.

entities', the creative becoming of Christ may then be able to effect an existence as an independent and functioning concrescence distinct from its causal or subjective body. I would also suggest that Christ, in Process terms, lacks negative prehensions and is therefore able to experience, fully, the expressive outpourings of his environment. In so experiencing all that there is to experience, he is able to achieve a fullness of knowing that equates with a thorough and creative self-knowledge. The move to concrescence is the gathering, conjunctively, in the existential self-realisation of Christ, of that which otherwise exists disjunctively. Christ is 'I and Thou'.

Feuerbach used the internal coherence of the I/Thou formula in developing his concept of externalised projections. That which humans cannot control is projected as an attribute of God and the perceived effect is then re-embraced as God's will. Farrer, more directly, regarded the ultimate concept of God as 'the wholly-free or self-determining agent, the sovereign will' (FS, 120). This idea of a 'self-determining agent' is of particular relevance, as, in terms of theistic belief, it is possible to see the act of creation as in itself an expression of the will to self-knowledge: Creation is the necessary 'thou' to God's 'I', as indeed can be seen in the formula 'I am that I am' (where God is self-expressed as describing the inclusivity of both parts of the equation). A similar expression of inclusivity can be seen in Christ's self-affirmation as 'Alpha and Omega'. In both, the Infinite and finite are drawn into a symbiotic unity of self-expression.

In Process philosophy each 'actual entity' seeks to express itself in novel relationship to its environment. There is a sense in this of a move to wholeness, or to increasing the relationship with *and* incorporation of the 'other'. In personalist language this can be thought of as an imperative to self-knowledge, for it is only by experience of the 'other' that the boundaries of the self can be known. It is this idea of the will being used to explore and transcend limitation that Nietzsche valued so highly. Will is not, however, simply a prior and directing component of an intentional act directed towards a particular

outcome; although the particular outcome *is* a step into a creative re-determination of the self. If the will is always self-referred in the process of achieving wholeness, God's act of Creation can be seen, essentially, as a process of God's internal realisation of an I/Thou relationship. In order to know God, God must regard God as 'other'. God thus becomes the outer body of the world (or the self-consciousness of the world-as-unity); and the world is the activity of the mind of God (or God-in-particulars). Colin Gunton quotes Hartshorne who, in reaching a broadly similar conclusion, somewhat inelegantly wrote: 'Everything contributes equally directly to the cosmic value. This means that the world-mind will have no special brain, but that rather every individual is to that mind as a sort of brain-cell' (BB, 75). (A better picture is offered in the Lurianic formula of *Tsimtsum*, in which, in order to know himself, God constricts a space within himself so that the Creation may become.¹) Gunton is right when he answers the question 'who is in control, the brain-cell or God?' by saying that 'all the evidence suggests that it is the former... The part played by God in traditional theism now passes to man. He is the one free to make the world what it is, while God is the one privileged to watch him making a success of it' (BB, 75).

Farrer posited the idea of 'Sovereign Will', and in *Finite and Infinite* he suggested that will 'is bound to its successive phases and must go on adding more. It is identified with the phase of the moment, but not wholly so, it transcends in so far as it reaches forward to add the next phase' (FI, 132). The 'next phase' is, of course, not yet fully determined (to allow both the idea of free-will in the finite, and the active agency of God), and it seems here that Farrer is coming close indeed to conjoining 'will' with 'creativity' in much the way that Whitehead requires the ingress of novelty into 'becoming'. It is notable that Farrer, to allow Christ to be a paradigm of (human) faith, required that Christ enact the Passion without knowledge of its outcome (see p4, above). One can take this a step further by suggesting that Christ is not, as Farrer would have it, a paradigm of faith or 'the self-

¹ For a full discussion of *Tsimtsum* see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish*

enacted human parable of Godhead', but rather that Christ is paradigmatic of entirely human self-knowledge: as God is 'I am that I am', so Christ is 'Alpha and Omega'. This can be seen as an injunction to acknowledge — as Feuerbach might prefer — that it is through self-knowledge that humanity achieves wholeness, and that it is in this sense that the 'Kingdom of God' is within (an expression which bears a remarkable symmetry with the idea of *tsimstum*).

Christ is, in this extrapolation of Process terminology, highly receptive and responsive to the surrounding data (an absence of negative prehensions), and is able to impart a creative novelty into the moment of becoming. The future cannot be foreseen (since it is not yet actualised), but Christ is acting always with self-knowledge even unto death. It is then that the last projection is reabsorbed in the words 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me' (Matthew 27:46), an acknowledgement of the need to stand alone in full self-realisation of the moment. This makes Christ more than a prophet, but establishes him instead as an exemplar of the human process of full self-becoming. To quote Farrer:

'the humanity of Christ... is itself human nature perfectly actualised in its true setting, that of absolute rightness of relation towards God... what happens in him is what happens, ... imperfectly, in believers.' (MP, 90)

This leaves the final question of whether Christ is symbolic or actual; and if 'actual', in what sense. Farrer is explicit: Christ is 'actual' in being God's 'act of condescension in the saving incarnation' (FL, 98); but he is yet symbolic, serving as a paradigm of human behaviour and relating. Feuerbach's Christ is altogether more symbolic, representing God's relinquishment of divinity in an expressive act of divine love.

I have already suggested that Christ can serve rather differently from either of these models through having established a paradigm of human self-becoming and self-knowledge. If, as I believe it is possible to propose, Process concepts allow all factors within a moment of becoming to contribute to the resultant concrescence, then there is room to suggest that the conscious projection of human attributes into the divine can indeed become concrete; that is, Christ is the physical actualisation of the human ideal. Pushing this a stage further, and using Lewis Ford's idea of a 'common creativity which pluralizes itself in the present', Christ's concrescence can continue, as a creative impulse (and not simply as historical or objective data), to inform events beyond the moment of his physical embodiment. Christ therefore begins as a project of human idealisation; becomes; and, in the 'becoming', transforms again into an independent creative principle which collaborates with, and informs, future events of self-realisation. The result is a trinitarian formula in which Christ is, simultaneously, symbol, paradigm *and* agency.

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