

Thinking Limits: Language and the Event of Incarnation

Andrzej Wiercinski

An increasing number of contemporary philosophers engage with religion in general, and with Christianity more specifically. The turn to the religious in Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, Alain Badiou, Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, René Girard, Slavoj Žižek, and Gianni Vattimo happens from within their own thinking, and is not very much concerned with any institutional dogmatic position of any particular religious denomination. Empowered by Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, and particularly by Heidegger's attempt to overcome onto-theology, the search for a post-metaphysical God, a God who is wholly other, became the significant task of contemporary, primarily continental philosophical reflection.

This turn to the religious happens not necessarily so much because of the predominant interest in religion as such, but because dealing with religious phenomena brings the thinkers to the limits of their own thinking or their personal beliefs and religious commitments. What is particularly striking, however, is the reoccurrence of Christological matter.¹

Thematizing the uniqueness of Christianity, especially the event of Incarnation, helps us to turn to the essential question of the limits of philosophy, and specifically the limits of phenomenological thinking. The question to be addressed focuses on the "why" of the limits. Are we at the limits of the potential of human thinking, of the phenomenological description of that which wants to be shown as it is, or is it a limit belonging to the phenomenon itself and its unique way of letting itself to be seen and caught in a linguistic description?

Language, Ambiguity, and the Task of Interpretation

Philosophically striking is the relationship between transcendence and the event (*Ereignis*) of the Incarnation. Incarnation allows us to see the face of God in Christ, God in the human flesh as *imago Dei*. This seeing happens through the Word; it is a lingual recognition of the face of the Father in the face of the Word, who became

¹ Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (London: T&T Clark International, 2008).

man. This lingual recognition happens prior to any expression in a particular language. In the Scripture, God presents himself in Christ in a language, which is also our human language. We can say that Christ's Incarnation is a way of a poetic condensation (*Verdichtung*) of God in his Word, a loving re-revelation of himself. Unlike in any other human rituals, e.g., in a marriage when the face of the bride is unveiled by the priest (*velatio nuptialis*), God himself performs the unveiling of his own face.

Incarnation is a divine con-descension and con-densation. It is as much a condensation (*Verdichtung*) as a con-descension, *Herablassung Gottes* (also in the sense of the self-abasement or self-emptying which is implied in the term *κένωσις*, *Er-niedrigung*). The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, expresses the lingual character of God's self-manifestation:

In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature." For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.²

The word of the Scripture is here compared to the incarnated Word and the Scripture to the Incarnation of Christ. This analogy of Christ, who is fully human, however without sin, with the Scripture, also fully human, within the confines of language, history, and culture, stresses the divine will to express the infinite within the confines of finitude. This does not hinder God to be fully divine in Christ and yet fully human. Consequently, Scripture as the lingual revelation of the triune God let's us see him as he is: God as the lingual being.

The event of Incarnation is carefully presented by the New Testament authors with the linguistic sensitivity required by the mysterious phenomenon itself. It seems that the Biblical authors were fully aware of their role as "mediators" between the human and the divine and understood their own linguistic expression of divine mysteries as the attempt to let the divine being become expressed and seen by the fellow human beings. Saying and seeing comprise their effort in dealing with phenomena that bring the human mind to the limits of the imagination and understanding which can be put in words. When St Paul says, "when the fullness of

²The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 13. Cf. Paul XII's Encyclical Letter, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 37. See also James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4) and “for what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3), he accentuates the limits and limitedness of human language in dealing with divine mysteries. This language does not reveal if the Son of God already existed in God and was born of a woman or came into existence at the point of being born of a woman.³ John 1:6 says, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” This sending forth of John from God does not imply that John had a preexistent life in God; although, the writer uses similar language to Galatians 4:4. However, if Paul’s intention had been just to stress the sending of Jesus like John the Baptist or other prophets, there would be no need to add that Jesus was born of a woman. The linguistic similarity can be rather seen in Gal 4:6, when Paul speaks of the Spirit of Jesus sent into our hearts. Paul uses the same verb *ἐξαπέστειλεν*, which may suggest that the Spirit was the Spirit before God sent him. Similarly, the Son was the Son before God sent him.⁴

In fact, the ambiguity of many passages of the Scripture calls for interpretation. And as Ricoeur reminds us, even though they can be interpreted in different ways, not every interpretation is equal.⁵ Thomas Aquinas makes us aware that “*in Scriptura autem divina traduntur nobis per modum quo homines solent uti*”: “In Scripture divine things are presented to us in the manner which is in common use amongst men.”⁶ The canonical approach to Scripture calls for the theological interpretation within the whole context of the Bible. The expression coined by Aquinas, “divine economy of scripture,” practically means the attention to the uniqueness and unity of Scripture. For him, “*officium est enim boni interpretis non considerare verba, sed sensum*,” “the duty of every good interpreter is to contemplate not the words, but the sense of the words.”⁷ It is truly unfortunate that

³ However, it is not difficult to find the notion of Christ’s preexistence throughout Paul’s letters, Phil. 2:6-8; Col. 1:15-18; 1Cor. 8:6; 10:9; 2Cor. 8:9.

⁴ “Does the ‘sending’ of the Son imply his pre-existence? If the Spirit was the Spirit before God sent him, the Son was presumably the Son before God sent him.” Frederick F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 195.

⁵ “An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation. There are criteria of relative superiority for resolving this conflict, which can easily be derived from the logic of subjective probability.... If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal....The text is a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism. It is always possible to argue against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach.” Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in idem, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 160.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Hebraeos lectura*, 1, 4.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, 27. See also *Disputed Question on the Union of the Word Incarnate: Quaestio Disputata de Unione Verbi Incarnati* http://www4.desales.edu/~philtheo/loughlin/ATP/De_Unione/De_Unione1.html.

some of the most recent theological approaches, particularly with regard to the re-translation of the liturgical texts of the Catholic Church aim at the literal translation as if there were a possibility of a literal translation without a serious call for interpretation.

In a *Letter to the Philadelphians*, Ignatius of Antioch speaks of the Scripture as the flesh of Christ: The author takes refuge in the Gospel as the flesh of Jesus (“while I flee to the Gospel as to the flesh of Jesus: *προσφυγὸν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ ὡς σαρκὶ Ἰησοῦ*).⁸ Other Church Fathers proclaim the analogy between the incarnated Word of God and the words of God expressed in human language, particularly frequently John Chrysostom.⁹ Origen made a similar comparison:

Just as this spoken word cannot according to its own nature be touched or seen, but when written in a book and, so to speak, become bodily, then indeed is seen and touched, so too is it with the fleshless and bodiless Word of God; according to its divinity it is neither seen nor written, but when it becomes flesh, it is seen and written.¹⁰

To speak about Incarnation means to dwell in the realm of mystery. Several theologians throughout the history of systematic theology critically addressed the enigmatic dogmatic expression of the phenomenon of the Incarnation. They declared the notion of the Word of God joined together in a personal union with Christ’s human nature not only as outdated but unhelpful to understand essential concepts of classical Christology within a broad Chalcedonian framework.¹¹ It becomes clear that the key issue here is the interpretation of the language in which the phenomenon of the Incarnation is described, discussed, and translated into the article of faith as it found its expression in the Council of Nicea’s ontological statement that “the Son is one in being (*ὁὐσία*) with the Father” (*ὁμοούσιος*). The further affirmation of Christ’s two natures, the divine and the human, helps to understand that he is a true human being, born of a Virgin Mary (Council of Ephesus). As the Mother of the Incarnated, *Θεοτόκος*, she is the one who gives birth to God. The Council of Chalcedon clarifies additionally that there are two natures in Christ but only one Person who is divine. The unity of the human and the divine will happens in the will of the Person of the Incarnated God.

One of the main questions is the applicability of the language of *περιχώρησις* (*perichoresis* – *circumincessio* – mutual interpenetration from *περὶ* – around, and

⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 5.

⁹ See Mary Healy, “Inspiration and Incarnation: The Christological Analogy and the Hermeneutics of Faith,” *Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006): 27–41.

¹⁰ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* (PG 17, 289AB).

¹¹ Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

χορεύω – to dance) to the unity between Christ’s two natures. Can the language of *perichoresis* be an alternative to the classical notion of the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of properties)?¹²

Another vital issue is the unique status of the human nature of Christ, which needs to be seen in a wider context of the philosophical notion of the person and nature. It is interesting to see the significant difference between the use of the terms *ἀνθρώποις* and *ἐνθρώποις* in order to describe the human nature of Christ.¹³ Christ’s human nature has no personal existence independent of the Son of God but has its existence only in the person of the Son. The affirmation of the anhypostatic and enhypostatic character of Christ’s human nature connotes a unique mode of relationship to God. Following late Barth we can say that while Christ’s humanity is essentially the same as ours, it is a humanity of God. The task of accentuating this notion cannot be undermined: We should not fall back and repeat the positions interpreting the difference between the relationship of Christ’s and other human beings’ human nature to God in terms of degree and not essential uniqueness.¹⁴ But this would mean that our humanity is, at least since Christ’s Incarnation, also a divine humanity: “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.”¹⁵ This is clearly God’s wish to make us divine, a task we call *θεωσις* (divinization, *Vergöttlichung*, *theosis*). Through the Incarnation a human being will not be God, but will be divinized (*vergöttlicht*).

Incarnation – Limit and Excess –The Positivity of Limit – Freedom and Dealing with the Confines

Incarnation has something to do with the enclosure, with the vessel of Christ’s humanity. The vessel, *Gefäß*, comes from the German verb *fassen*, which means “to take hold of, catch, enclose, package, load, dress, even decorate.”¹⁶ Latin *continere* emphasizes the material aspect of holding together and enclosing. The Greek *σκεῦος* refers also to the metaphorical meaning of vessel as an image for body and soul. In

¹² Cf. Andrzej Wiercinski, “Trinity and Understanding: Hermeneutic Insights,” in Guilio Maspero and Robert Wozniak, ed., *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

¹³ Cf. Barth’s defense of the anhypostasis and enhypostatic character of Christ’s human nature in *Church Dogmatics* IV, 2, 49–50, 52–53, which differs from his earlier position in the previous volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*.

¹⁴ Cf. Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, 4.

¹⁵ St Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1 (PG 7/1, 939).

¹⁶ Friedhelm Mennekes S.J., “How Do I Attain Knowledge of Love? Artistic and Mystical Aspects of Devotion,” in Young-Jae Lee, *1111 Schalen*, ed. Reinhold Baumstark, Exh. cat. for the exhibition Young-Jae Lee: 1111 Schalen, *Pinakothek der Moderne*, Munich (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006).

the Biblical tradition, Torah was seen from a transcendental perspective, to use Rabbi Akiva's description, as "the precious vessel by which the world was created."¹⁷ And a human being was created as a precious vessel of God. Following the second creation story in *Genesis*, we can say that the vessel, the outside shell, allows for the preserving of the breath of life:

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.¹⁸

This new creation becomes a living being of the creative breath of God. A vessel is now filled with life. Or life is encompassed by the vessel. Moses was not allowed to see the face of God. (Ex 33:20) What has diametrically changed with the revelation of the Revelation is the fact that the same God, whose face remained hidden for Moses shows his face to human beings in the Incarnated. Now we can see the face of God in the face of the Son who came down from heaven.

Joseph Ratzinger in his *Introduction to Christianity* remarks on Hölderlin's motto to his *Hyperion*, "Non coarctari maximo, contineri minimo, divinum est" ("Not to be confined by the greatest, yet to be contained within the smallest, is divine"). Hölderlin refers here to a Latin epitaph for Ignatius of Loyola composed by an anonymous Jesuit scholastic: *Non coarctari maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est*. The human way of thinking God positions him as a consciousness like ours with all its limitations, as someone who can never embrace the whole. For Ratzinger, this Latin maxim summarizes the Christian image of the true greatness of God, for whom nothing is too small:

The boundless spirit who bears in himself the totality of Being reaches beyond the "greatest," so that to him it is small, and he reaches into the smallest, because to him nothing is too small. Precisely this overstepping of the greatest and reaching down into the smallest is the true nature of absolute spirit. At the same time we see here a reversal in value of maximum and minimum, greatest and smallest, that is typical of the Christian understanding of reality. To him who as spirit bears up

¹⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2006), 241.

¹⁸ Genesis 2:4-7.

and encompasses the universe, a spirit, a man's heart with its ability to love, is greater than all the milky ways of the universe. Quantitative criteria become irrelevant; other scales become visible, reckoned by which the infinitely small is the truly embracing and truly great.¹⁹

We can call Incarnation the paradigm of divine pedagogy regarding the relationship between the unlimited and limited, the immortal and the mortal, the almighty and the powerless, the boundless and the bounded. Incarnation is the concretization of God without removing the mysterious aspect.

Incarnation and the End of Transcendence

In the post-secular era, the faith in the personal and transcendent God of Christianity has been increasingly substituted by the belief in the immanent and non-personal spiritual energy. The inner-worldliness and immanence of the divine occupies the mind of many contemporary philosophers, who seem to proclaim loudly the end of God's transcendence. The event of the Incarnation is perceived along with the customary reading of Hegel as the death of God as Father. Thus it is the end of transcendence.

However, to recognize in the wisdom of the Incarnate the eternal plan of creation and salvation is to recognize God. In the figure of the Incarnated, God really dwells among human beings. Christ as the only Son of God is truly God, and not merely one who has experienced God in a special way, like other enlightened individuals who, in the religious sense, matter not as the concrete persons, but rather as the path that they are pointing out.

Incarnation invites us to wander about the mystery of language and communication. We might quote here Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

Perhaps all men, as well as the man of letters, can only be present to the world and others through language; and perhaps in everyone language is the basic function which constructs a life as it constructs a work and which transforms even the problems of our existence into life's motives.²⁰

¹⁹ Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 146-

²⁰ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960," in idem, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. John Wild, James Edie, and John O'Neill (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 18 and *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1995), 30. See further Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, eds. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Bloomington, Ind.: Northwestern University Press, 2002) and Gary Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981).

A human being is for another human being a mirror, and all together are the reflection of God's image, *imago Dei*. Incarnated *Verbum Dei* is for us humans an icon of God, of the Trinity. The reflection regarding the relationship between divine persons takes place above all in language. It is a communicative event. Interpretation is the mode of divine and human being. Thematizing the limits of phenomenology and hermeneutics opens a way of thinking that is impossible within the confines of phenomenology. Thinking Incarnation sensitizes phenomenology toward relationality, which is not only the essential dynamics of the inner-Trinitarian life of God, but sets God in his self-manifestation in Christ Incarnated in relation to the world and human beings.

Hermeneutics helps us to avoid any disinterested reading of our intellectual tradition just to appropriate some useful notions and ideas. Since thinking is never "from the outside" of tradition, our preoccupation with the limits of phenomenology with regard to thinking Incarnation serves as much as an exposition of the philosophical and theological tradition as a development of our own thinking and consciousness of the limits of our thinking.

In that regard, the review of the theological positions concerning Incarnation serves not simply as the re-visitation of the archaic dogmatic formula by attempting a simple archeological re-construction of the past with possibly no effect on the faith commitment of the contemporary believers, but, and it is a decisive hermeneutic insight, it serves as a re-vision, which focuses on the vision, inherently inscribed in the very heart of the event of Incarnation. This vision is a powerful invitation for us to engage the great things God is doing among his people and to see him, the Incarnated Word of God, as the absolute challenge to our human thinking.