

Why Did God Become Man?

The Unconditionality of the Divine Incarnation



The Archetype of Humanity is the Incarnate Word*

by Panagiotēs Nellās (†1986)

WE HAVE ALREADY noted that for Irenæus, Origen, Athanasios, Gregory of Nyssa, and other Fathers, among them Saints Maximos the Confessor and Gregory Palamas, **the Archetype of humanity is Christ.**

One particular text of Nicholas Cabasilas does not permit any doubt in this regard. It is similar in nature to the text of St. Gregory of Nyssa that we have cited and, at the same time, constitutes a decisive interpretation thereof:

Indeed, it was for the sake of the new man that human nature was formed at the beginning, and for him both mind and desire were fashioned. We received reason, in order that we might know Christ, and desire, in order that we might hasten to Him; we have memory, in order that we might bear Him within us, since He Himself was the archetype for us when we were being created. For it is not the old Adam that was the paradigm for the new; rather, the New Adam was the paradigm for the old.¹

Hence, the **Archetype of man** is not simply the Word, but the **Incarnate Word:**

*Man yearns for Christ, not only on account of His Divinity, which is the goal of all things, but also for the sake of His human nature.*²

The fact that Christ did not exist historically at the time when Adam was created is of no importance. It is a fundamental Biblical teaching that Christ, in the supratemporal reality of God, is the “Firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15-17).

If man, for whom the whole material creation was made, was the last of all creatures to rise from the earth, it is certainly logical that Christ, Who is the goal of the entire material and spiritual creation, should be posterior to Adam, since all things are led from incompleteness to perfection.³

It is natural that Christ, as the supreme realization of humanity, should constitute the goal of the ascent of mankind, the beginning, but also the end, of history.

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WITHIN this first truth there resides a second truth of equal importance. The fact that Adam was created in the image of Christ implies that he was obligated to exalt himself to the Archetype, or, more precisely, to purify himself and to love God so much that God would come to abide in him and the Word would be united with humanity hypostatically, and thus be manifested in history as the Christ, revealed as the God-Man.

The “introduction of the Firstborn into the world” (Hebrews 1:6) constitutes the preëternal counsel of God, the most sublime mystery “hid from ages and from generations” (Colossians 1:26). Christ was “the counsel and the will of the Father.”⁴

This was the destiny and, as a consequence, the natural course and end of humanity. In relation to Christ, man “was originally fashioned according to a kind of yardstick and criterion... so as to be **capable of receiving God.**”⁵ The Fall consisted precisely in his derailment from this trajectory.

Therefore, the original creation of man was for His [Christ's] sake, since man was formed in the image of God, so that he might be able at some point to contain the Archetype; and the law was given in Paradise by God for His [Christ's] sake,

that is, in order to help guide man to Christ, writes St. Gregory Palamas.⁶

And the Divine Maximos states:

This is the great and hidden mystery; this is the blessed end for which all things were created; this is the foreordained Divine purpose of the origin of existing things, defining which we call it the foreordained end, for the sake of which all things exist, though it itself exists for the sake of nothing else; with this end in view [the hypostatic union of Divine and human nature, Christ], God created the essences of existing things.⁷

And with even greater clarity, St. Nicholas Cabasilas remarks:

For God did not create human nature with any other purpose in mind... rather, He created it with this end in view, that, when it was fitting for Him to be born, He might receive His Mother from it; having first established this purpose [Christ, the hypostatic union] as a kind of standard, He then fashioned man in accordance with it.⁸

Consequently, the fact that God formed man “in His image” means, in the final analysis, that He formed him thus, so that he might incline, by his very nature, by the very fact that he is man, towards the Image. It means that He gave him as gifts (though in such a way that these gifts would actually make man what he is) the potential and the purpose to minister actively to the Incarnation of the Word, Who is the perfect and unique “Image of the Father.” In this way, man, enhypostatized in the Word, would be capable of being himself exalted to an image, of being himself shown forth as an “image of God.”

This elucidates the truth that the phrase “in the image” represents in man a gift, and, at the same time, also a goal, an attribute,

and also a vocation, that is, that it truly constitutes what it is to be human, albeit only potentially. That which is “in the image” is a genuine potentiality, a pledge which ought to lead to marriage, that is, to hypostatic union, the unconfused, but real and thorough mingling and blending of Divine nature and human nature. Only then does the iconic, or potential being of man become actual, true being. It is within the Archetype that man discovers his true ontological import.

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THERE ARE certain aspects of this fundamental truth that need to be emphasized.

1. Christ is not an incident or an event in history. The Incarnation of God the Word is not a mere consequence of the Devil’s victory over man. Christ is not the result of an act of Satan.

The union of the Divine and human natures occurred because it fulfilled the preëternal counsel of God. The way in which this great mystery was effected changed,⁹ but the fact remained the same.

Indeed, it is evident to all how the mystery wrought in Christ at the end of the age is unquestionably a demonstration and fulfillment of that which was set forth, at the beginning of the age, in our forefather.¹⁰

2. Before the Divine nature was hypostatically united to the human, man was, even before the Fall, **antecedent to Christ**. This means that, even then, although he had not yet sinned, he was in **need of salvation**, since he was an imperfect and incomplete “infant.”

This teaching lies at the core of the theology of St. Irenæus.¹¹ Human nature could not be completed simply by inclining towards union with its Archetype; it had to bring about this union.

Since Christ is “the head of the body, the Church” (Colossians 1:18)—a fact which means, for Patristic thought, that Christ is the head of genuine humanity—, human nature, as long as it had not yet received the hypostasis of the Word, was, in some sense, lacking

in genuine hypostasis; it was devoid of authentic “existence in accordance with Christ.”¹² It was like an unmarried woman, barren and, as Paul says, “headless” (I Corinthians 11:3).¹³

The realization of man as a truly fulfilled, “whole” being, occurred with the birth of Christ. True men “were born when Christ entered this life and was born.”¹⁴ For this reason, Basil the Great calls the day of Christ’s Nativity truly, and not metaphorically, “the birthday of humanity.”¹⁵

3. The goal of the first man remains ever the same. Every man created “in the image” of God is called to become an “image” in Christ. “Let us give back to the Image that which is in accordance with the image,” writes St. Gregory the Theologian.¹⁶ Christ opened the way to the realization of this goal.

Indeed, the birth of God the Word and His Incarnate Economy are **not exhausted in redemption**, that is, deliverance from the consequences of Adam’s mistake. The Lord redeemed man from enslavement to sin, the Devil, and death, but He also accomplished the task that Adam had not accomplished. He united him with God, bestowing upon him true *being* in God and exalting him to a *new creation*.¹⁷

Christ effects the salvation of man not only negatively, by delivering him from the consequences of ancestral sin, but also positively, by completing his iconic, prelapsarian *being*. His relationship with man is not only curative. The salvation of man is something much broader than redemption; it is **coterminous with deification**.

4. The true anthropological significance of deification is Christification. It is not fortuitous that the Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Colossians, in which he hymns Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...” (1:15), calls “every man” to become “perfect in Christ” (1:28) and the faithful to be “complete in Him” (2:10).

When Paul exhorts the faithful to attain “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13), to acquire the “mind of Christ” (I Corinthians 2:16), the “heart of Christ” (cf. Ephesians 3:17), and so forth, he does not do so for

reasons of external piety and sentimentality; he is speaking in **ontological** terms. He is not advocating external imitation of Christ or mere moral improvement, but actual **Christification**.

For, as St. Maximos writes,

*“The Word of God and God... wills to effect the mystery of His embodiment always and in all things.”*¹⁸

5. The Fathers of the Church called the Pauline **“life in Christ” deification**, primarily in order to safeguard the ultimate goal and the true meaning of life in Christ from the perils created by heresies: first, Arianism, which, by teaching that Christ is a creature, unavoidably restricted life in Christ to the created realm,¹⁹ and the remaining Christological heresies in their turn.²⁰

The Fathers, however, never failed to emphasize that **the content and the path of deification is union with Christ**, precisely because **union with the Archetype** is that which leads man to his fulfillment.²¹

6. In a later era (and this observation is necessary in order that the reader who may be surprised by the foregoing theses might understand why he is surprised), from the twelfth century onwards, **there came to prevail in the West a theological and anthropological, and, by extension, soteriological and ecclesiological understanding at odds with that presented above.**

This understanding was disseminated also in Greece from the nineteenth century onwards, when theology was cultivated and taught at the newly-established University of Athens in relation not so much to the Patristic tradition as to the scientific approach to theology that was burgeoning in the West. The result was that the **Western understanding of Christianity** became widespread in Greece, too.

7. In recent decades, the **issue of deification** has again come to the surface and is being studied to a considerable extent. This fact is auspicious, but I think that there is yet another step that needs to be taken.

Deification must not remain a generic spiritual category, but must acquire a specific anthropological content which is going to speak in the language of the Fathers, a content **simultaneously anthropological and Christological**; that is, deification must be understood once again as **Christification**.

Understood in this way, the goal of man and the means for the accomplishment of this goal—faith, keeping the commandments, ascesis, the Mysteries, the whole of ecclesiastical and spiritual life—are internally illuminated and find their organic connections with each other, with the world, and with **Christ, the Beginning and End of all things**.

8. In other sections of this book, I will endeavor to present an understanding of these realities which is new for us today, but nonetheless Patristic. Here, it is worth noting the liberation afforded to man by this perspective.

First, there is the liberation **from evil and sin**. No matter how terrifying evil may be, since it, and not Christ, is merely an episode and an event, it proves, in the final analysis, insignificant. The understanding of man—of salvation, spiritual life, and so forth—is disjoined from evil and joined to Christ. Evil is relativized. Even the greatest depth of sin does not affect the origin or the destiny of man. Man can remain a slave of sin, but can also disengage from it. **His godlike origin and his Theocentric destiny render him broader than evil and sin, and stronger than the Devil.**

Secondly, there is the liberation **from a cyclical** and, in the last analysis, static conception of history, and also from the other conception, which views history as a matter of biological or dialectical **evolution**.

Since the ontological origin of man does not reside in his biological being, but in his *being* in Christ, and since the realization of his *being* in Christ consists in a journey from *being* in the image to the image itself, or from iconic existence to authentic existence, history can be understood precisely as the realization of this journey. As such, it has its origin and its destiny in Christ.

And since Christ is not only “He Who was and He Who is,” but also “He Who is to come” (Revelation 1:8), history is shaped and determined not only by the past and the present, but also by the future, provided we conceive the future, not as the fulfillment of natural laws to which the necessary biological or dialectical evolution of creation leads, but as the Parousia, at the end of the ages, of Christ, the Recapitulator of all things, that is, the Word together with His body, the transfigured world.

In this way, the development or evolution of humanity, and in general, of the creation, is illuminated internally. Our conception of humanity is not restricted to the processes of change that are to be observed in the material dimension of the image, but without this first dimension being overlooked, it is extended and understood chiefly as the evolution or **exaltation of the image to the Archetype**.

The evolution of the image thus transcends the bounds of creation—bounds which those who do not see anything other than the material dimension of the image, ignorant of the image itself, find it necessary to posit—and reaches as far as infinity. Evolution is understood in this manner in all of its dimensions—not only those which scientific observation determines—and its value is enhanced.

9. These theses lead us to **the core of the anthropological problem** as we confront it today. The truth that they contain is the most crucial anthropological truth, painful, and yet at the same time salvific for contemporary man. It is painful, because it cuts off at the roots even the slightest impulse towards the assertion of **autonomy**. It is salvific, because it opens up to man magnificent and unlimited horizons for authentic and true human **activity and development**.

Of course, in saying that this truth abolishes autonomy, we do not mean that it justifies heteronomy, in the philosophical sense of the terms. These terms have been tragically misunderstood in recent centuries, and essentially lie outside the Orthodox approach to the problem.

What I am endeavoring to do, here, is to show that, for man, God is not an external “principle” on which man depends, but truly and in actuality his **ontological origin and goal**.

Having been formed in the image of God, man is endowed with a **theological** structure. In order to be truly human, he must at every moment exist and live **theocentrically**. When he denies God, he denies himself and destroys himself. When he lives theocentrically, he elevates himself unto infinity; he develops and attains to fulfillment unto eternity.



* **Source:** Panagiotēs Nellās, *Zōon Theoumenon—Προοπτικές για μιὰ ὀρθόδοξη κατανόηση τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* [*The Deified Creature: Perspectives on the Orthodox Understanding of Man*] (Athens: Ekdoiseis “Epopteia,” 1979), pp. 35-45, 269-272.

Notes

1. **St. Nicholas Cabasilas**, *Concerning the Life in Christ*, Discourse VI, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 680A.
2. *Ibid.*, Discourse VI, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 681AB.
3. *Ibid.*, Discourse VI, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 681A.
4. **St. John of Damascus**, “Homily on the Withered Fig Tree and on the Parable of the Vineyard,” §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCVI, col. 580B.
5. **St. Nicholas Cabasilas**, *Concerning the Life in Christ*, Discourse II, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 560D.
6. **St. Gregory Palamas**, “Homily VII, ‘On Theophany,’” in *Τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Γρηγορίου ἀρχιεπισκόπου Θεσσαλονίκης τοῦ Παλαμᾶ ὁμιλίαι κβ̄* [*Twenty-Two Homilies of Our Father Among the Saints Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica*], ed. S. Oikonomou (Athens: 1861), p. 259.
7. **St. Maximos the Confessor**, *To Thalassios, Concerning Various Difficult Passages in Divine Scripture*, Question LX, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XC, col. 621A.
8. **St. Nicholas Cabasilas**, “Homily on the Annunciation,” §8, in *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ. Τρεῖς Θεομητορικὲς ὁμιλίαις* [*The Mother of God: Three Homilies on the Mother of God*], ed. and trans. Panagiotēs Nellās [*Ἐπὶ τὰς Πηγὰς*, Vol. II; Athens: Ekdoiseis “Apostolikes Diakonias,” 1974], 2nd ed., pp. 150-152). For a multitude of other Patristic testimonies and a profound analysis of the issue, see St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite, “Ἀπολογία ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ «Αὐράτου Πολέμου» κειμένου σημειώματος περὶ τῆς Κυρίας ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου” [“A Defense of My Annotation Concerning Our Lady, the *Theotokos*, in the Book *Unseen Warfare*”], in *Συμβουλευτικὸν Ἐγχειρίδιον* [*A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*] (Volos: S. Schoinas, 1969), pp. 207-216.
9. Cf. **St. Maximos the Confessor**, *Concerning Various Difficult Passages in Saints Dionysios and Gregory* [*Ambigua*], *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCI, col. 1097C: “It was necessary... lest man should become estranged and remote from God, for another way... both more extraordinary and more God-befitting, even as that which is

above nature is higher than that which is according to nature,... to be introduced instead.”

10. **St. Maximos the Confessor**, *ibid.*, col. 1097D. Cf. *ibid.*, cols. 1092BC, 1280ABC, 1308C-1309A; St. Maximos, *To Thalassios*, Question XXII, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XC, cols. 317B-320C; *ibid.*, Question LX, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XC, cols. 620C-621C.

- The thesis, first articulated by **Rupert of Deutz** (12th century), and insightfully developed by **Duns Scotus** (13th century), according to which the Word would have become man independently of the Fall of Adam, is well known. Also well known are the lengthy discussions to which this thesis gave rise in the West (for a synoptic presentation of these discussions, see **Father Georges Florovsky**, “*Cur Deus Homo? The Motive of the Incarnation*,” in *Creation and Redemption*, Vol. III in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 163-170; http://www.synodinresistance.org/Theo_en/E3c8002aGiatiEnsi.pdf).

Many contemporary Western students of the Fathers (see, for example, **Hans Urs von Balthasar**, *Liturgie Cosmique: Maxime le Confesseur* [Paris: Aubier, 1947], p. 205, and Orthodox theologians (see Florovsky, “*Cur Deus Homo?*,” pp. 167-168; Nikos Nissiotis, *Προλογόμυνα εἰς τὴν θεολογικὴν γνωσιολογίαν* [*Prolegomena to Orthodox Gnosiology*] [Athens: 1965], p. 67; **Andreas Theodorou**, *Cur Deus Homo? Ἀπροϋπόθετος ἢ ἐμπροϋπόθετος ἐνανθρώπησις τοῦ Θείου Λόγου*; [*Cur Deus Homo? Was the Incarnation of the Divine Word Unconditional or Conditional?*] [Athens: 1974]), after serious and noteworthy inquiries, seem, nonetheless, to have been thwarted in their endeavor to relate the aforementioned thesis of Duns Scotus to the teaching of the Fathers concerning the **preëternal counsel of God—that human nature was to be united with the Divine nature in the Hypostasis of the Word**. In the end, and within the climate created by the Western discussions, they accept that, for Orthodox Tradition, the issue has not been clarified, that it is a *theologoumenon*.

- I think, however, that there is **no real internal relationship between the question raised by Duns Scotus and the teaching of the Fathers**. The Fathers are not talking about a theoretical issue, about what would have happened if Adam had not sinned. Nor are they dealing with the theological issue as to what was the purpose of God the Word. For, how is it possible for God, Who is absolutely simple, to have a purpose, never mind a purpose of the kind that the creation would determine for Him? The teaching of the Fathers is manifestly anthropological and cosmological; it pertains to the purpose of the world. St. Maximos clearly teaches that the purpose of the world was, and is, hypostatic union with God, with the qualification that the manner of the realization of this purpose has changed. But the change in the manner of the realization of the purpose does not alter the purpose. According to the Fathers, the essence of the matter is the purpose.

- **I do not wish to discuss** the issue in this note, save to offer a basic explanation as to why I am **not presenting the teaching of the Fathers on this issue as a theologoumenon**, but categorically, and to make it clear that the Patristic teaching has **nothing to do with the opinion of Duns Scotus**. I hope to study the whole is-

sue at length in a forthcoming treatise, since it is truly crucial and constitutes the **fundamental presupposition of Christianity**, and any erroneous understanding of it leads to an erroneous understanding and practice of the Evangelical and Patristic Faith. The insistence of St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite on this point, in his detailed “Defense,” is striking.

11. See **John Romanides**, *Τὸ προπατορικὸν ἁμάρτημα* [*The Ancestral Sin*] (Athens: 1957), pp. 113-140; **E. Peterson**, “L’homme image de Dieu chez saint Irénée” [“Man as a Image of God in St. Irenæus”], *La Vie Spirituelle*, Vol. C (1959), pp. 584-594; **A. Benoit**, *Saint Irénée, Introduction à l’étude de sa théologie* [*St. Irenæus: Introduction to the Study of His Theology*] (Paris: 1960), pp. 227-233; **A. Orbe**, *Antropología de San Ireneo* [*The Anthropology of St. Irenæus*] (Madrid: 1969); **Andreas Theodorou**, *Ἡ περὶ ἀνακεφαλαίωσης διδασκαλία τοῦ Εἰρηναίου* [*The Teaching of Irenæus Concerning Recapitulation*] (Athens: 1972); **H. Lassiât**, *Promotion de l’homme en Jésus-Christ d’après Irénée de Lyon* [*The Advancement of Man in Jesus Christ According to Irenæus of Lyon*] (Paris: 1977); idem, “L’anthropologie d’ Irénée,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, Vol. C, No. 3 (1978), pp. 399-417.
12. **St. Nicholas Cabasilas**, *Concerning the Life in Christ*, Discourse II, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 533D.
13. The theology of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (11:1-16) is striking. The head of the woman is the man, the head of the man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God. The line is continuous. Wherever there is division, a rupture of communion is created, a lack of fullness, and barrenness.
14. **St. Nicholas Cabasilas**, *Concerning the Life in Christ*, Discourse IV, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 604A.
15. **St. Basil the Great**, “Homily on the Holy Nativity of Christ,” §6, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXI, col. 1473A.
16. **St. Gregory the Theologian**, “Oration I, ‘On Holy Pascha and On His Tardiness,’” §4, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXV, col. 397B.
17. See **St. Maximos the Confessor**, *To Thalassios*, Question LXIII, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XC, col. 692B.
18. **St. Maximos the Confessor**, *Concerning Various Difficult Passages in Saints Dionysios and Gregory* [*Ambigua*], *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCI, col. 1084D.
19. **St. Athanasios the Great**, “Oration II ‘Against the Arians,’” §67, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXVI, col. 289C: “For if, being a creature, the Word had become man, man would nonetheless have remained just as he was, not joined to God. For how, being a work, could he have been joined to the Creator through a work?” Further on in the same oration (§70, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXVI, col. 296A), he says: “Man would not have been deified by being joined to a creature, unless the Son had been true God.”
20. **Nestorianism**, by teaching that the human and Divine natures are joined, but not actually united, ended up admitting that man can approach the infinite, but cannot enter into it. By contrast, **Monophysitism**, by viewing man’s salvation as his absorption by God, ended up preaching the obliteration rather than the salvation of man. The struggle waged by the Fathers against heresies was not only theologi-

cal in nature, but also anthropological. It was a struggle to safeguard the ultimate goal of man and, in consequence, his nobility.

21. See "Divinisation, Patristique grecque," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Vol. III, pp. 1376-138.