



DEEP INCARNATION by Denis Edwards

RE-SOURCE #1 – February 22 – May 27, 2023

Australian theologian Denis Edwards (1943-2019) traces the development of the concept of “deep incarnation” by various contemporary theologians. By deep incarnation he means a way of making connections between incarnation and the whole of creation.

To whet your appetite to read more of this short and very readable book, I have selected some excerpts from the views of Karl Rahner and Elizabeth Johnson on incarnation in an evolutionary world. Mary Ann Buckley, SHCJ

“... For Christ is true human being, true son of Adam, truly lived a human life in all its breadth and height and depth. And hence, everything, without confusion and without separation, is to enter into eternal life; there is to be not only a new heaven but a new earth. Nothing, unless it be eternally damned, can remain outside the blessing, the protection, the transfiguration of this divinization of the whole, which, beginning in Christ, aims at drawing everything that exists into the life of God..., precisely in order that it may thus have eternal validity conferred upon it. This is the reality of Christ, which constitutes Christianity, the incarnate life of God in our place and our time. (Karl Rahner, Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology II, quoted in Deep Incarnation, p.85)

“Throughout his theological career, Rahner saw the need to understand the incarnation in fresh ways in light of the new picture of reality that was emerging from scientific cosmology and evolutionary biology. He points out that whereas traditional theology assumed a static world, we can now see that there have been massive transitions in the history of the universe, including the transitions from matter to the first forms of life on earth, and the transition from early forms of life to various species of *homo*, and to modern humans, with their extremely complex brains. **This leads Rahner to ask:**

How should we think about the incarnation in the light of an evolutionary view of the world in which we live?



Rahner makes two fundamental assumptions in responding to this question. The first is that **humans belong in one inter-connected world**, existing only in evolutionary and ecological interrelation with the biological and material world in which they evolve. **The human spirit, with its unique consciousness and freedom, emerges only as radically related to matter.** So Rahner speaks of biologically organized matter as “oriented in spirit.” Under the impulse of God’s creative Spirit, matter comes to transcend itself and becomes self-conscious spirit.

In Rahner's view, the unity of the one universe, and the unity of matter and spirit, have direct significance for Christology. A radical unity of this kind supports the understanding that **the incarnation involves a hypostatic union of the Logos, not just with the isolated humanity of Jesus, but with the matter of the universe as such, with the radical potentiality of the whole creation.** Such a unity of the one world of matter, flesh, and consciousness shows, Rahner says, "why the total reality of the world is *ipso facto* touched to its very roots by the incarnation of the Logos precisely in virtue of the fact that matter must be conceived of fundamentally and from the outset as one. A second fundamental assumption for Rahner is that, whereas many theologians have seen the reason for the incarnation simply as the salvation of sinful humanity, he holds to the tradition associated with Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308), but also with many others, that from the beginning God's creation is directed to the incarnation. Irrespective of human sin, the divine intention in creating a world of creatures was always freely to give God's self to creatures in the incarnation, and so to bring them to their fulfillment. **God creates a world in order to give God's self to creatures in the Word made flesh and in the Spirit poured out.** Harvey Egan writes that the briefest summary of Rahner's theology is "his creative appropriation of Scotus' view that God creates in order to communicate self and that creation exists in order to be the recipient of God's free gift of self."



"[Elizabeth Johnson] sees the incarnation as a new radical embodiment, in which **the Wisdom/Word of God joins the material world to accomplish a new level of union between Creator and creature ...** [S]he suggests that the incarnation brings salvation to all that is embraced by the Word made flesh. This has often been understood as referring particularly to all aspects of the humanity that are taken by the Word. Deep incarnation seeks to clarify a further extension of the impact of incarnation:

'Deep incarnation extends this view to include all flesh. In the incarnation Jesus, the self-expressing Wisdom of God, conjoined the material conditions of all biological life forms (grasses and trees), and experienced the pain common to all sensitive creatures (sparrows and seals). The flesh assumed in Jesus connects with all humanity, all biological life, all soil, the whole matrix of the material universe down to its very roots.' (cf. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 196)



The incarnation not only weds Jesus to humanity but also reaches beyond humanity to all living creatures and to the cosmic dust of which all earth creatures are composed. In this way, Johnson says, matter and flesh become part of God's own story forever. **The incarnation is a cosmic event.**" (cf. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 197)