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John's Gospel and the Truth of the Incarnation [Lecture Notes]

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John's Gospel and the Truth of the Incarnation

Notes on Six Lectures Originally Given to the Monks of New Camaldoli, Big Sur
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by

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Conference 1: The Problem of the Classical Doctrine of the Incarnation and the Problem of John's Gospel

I. The doctrine of the incarnation is the center of Christianity.

A. The doctrine of the incarnation is what primarily separates Christianity from the other great monotheistic religions of the West.

1. Christianity has tremendous similarities with both Judaism and Islam.

a. With Judaism Christianity shares the Hebrew Scriptures and all that they contain. Indeed, it has primarily been through Christianity that the Jewish Bible became known throughout the world.

b. With Islam we share many of the biblical stories (which are retold in the Qur'an) and even share a reverence for Jesus who in Islam is a great prophet.

2. But both religions categorically reject the Christian notion that Jesus is the unique incarnation of God. The Qur'an explicitly declares, "Praise to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His Kingdom" (17:111).

B. The affirmation of the incarnation is the core of traditional Christian theology, as we can see from such pillars of orthodoxy as

1. The Nicene Creed (325 C.E.)

2. The Chalcedonian definition (451 C.E.).

II. Because of the incarnation Christians have in Jesus the ideal model of what a human being should be, since he is the human being who was totally filled with God.

A. Of course, every human being is unique, and we should not aspire to be exactly like Jesus.

B. Nevertheless, the personality of Jesus is at least a helpful standard for reflection.

C. That personality includes the following elements.

1. Jesus loved the pleasures of life but was not attached to them.

a. His enemies accused him of being a drunk and a glutton (Mat. 11:19).

b. He accepted death by torture as God's call for him.

2. He lived one day at a time in trust (Mat. 6:25-35). Note that as an itinerant Jesus had to live this way.

3. He could see into people's hearts and respond to the real person, and, consequently, he brought people's true selves to light.

4. He was compassionate toward people in need. Note that compassion includes both sharing someone's pain and acting to eliminate their problems.

5. He was impatient with all forms of pride and hypocrisy in religious leaders and tended to be confrontational toward people who had hidden agendas.

6. He could not be manipulated either by individuals or social regulations.

7. He acted with authority.

8. He was humble and pointed away from himself to God.
9. All the above came from his relationship to God which was characterized by
 - a. Obedience
 - b. Intimacy

III. Because of the incarnation through Jesus we know God more deeply than otherwise would be possible.

- A. Human beings can know other human beings more fully than we can know any other spiritual being.
- B. Knowing about God through documents (e.g., the Qur'an, even the Bible) is not the same as knowing God, because God is not a document.
- C. What we can know about God through mystical experience is important but limited as the divergence between different religions demonstrates (see below).
- D. By contrast, Christians know how God was as a human being. And since God is eternal, how God was is still how God is.

IV. Because of the incarnation, Christians know that through Jesus we can become divine. If God could share in a human life fully, then it is possible for human lives to share in God fully. Note the famous theological statement that God become human in order that humans might become divine (made first by Clement of Alexandria and often repeated).

V. Through Jesus we have a horizontal relationship with God, not just a vertical one.

- A. God and we have the common experience of limitation, suffering, and human love.
- B. Therefore, thanks to the incarnation we relate to God not only as our Creator and Lord, but also as our brother and friend.

VI. John's Gospel is the primary witness to the doctrine of the incarnation.

- A. John's Gospel insists that in Jesus the Divine Word became flesh and that, consequently, Jesus is the human life of God. This insistence appears in the introduction (1:1-18) and climax of the gospel (20:27-31) and other emphatic passages (e.g., 10:30-33).
- B. Even a scholar like James Dunn who claimed (albeit wrongly) that that the doctrine of the incarnation is not found in such books as Paul's Letters and Hebrews insists that it is undeniable that we do find the incarnation clearly taught in John's Gospel. Of course, the Bible is supposed to be the basis for Christian doctrine.

VII. The doctrine of the incarnation has come under attack, especially recently. Opponents claim

- A. The doctrine is not logically coherent. Jesus can be either human or divine but not both at the same time.
 1. In ancient times even many Christians held that Jesus could not be both.
 - a. Some denied that Jesus was divine (Adoptionists, Arians).
 - b. Some denied that he was human (Docetists, Apolinarians).
 2. In modern times skeptics have continued to insist that the doctrine that Jesus is one person in two natures is logical nonsense (*The Myth of God Incarnate*).
- B. Modern scholars often hold that the claim that Jesus is divine has no basis in the life of the historical Jesus. Jesus never indicated that he was divine.
- C. Many would argue that the claim that Jesus is the unique instance of someone who is human and divine denigrates other religions and contributes to Christianity's missionary arrogance.

VIII. John's Gospel has also come under attack. Critics say that

- A. It is not a reasonable record of what Jesus taught and did.
 1. John's Gospel portrays Jesus very differently than the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do. For example,

- a. In the synoptics Jesus talks mostly about the Kingdom of God, whereas in John Jesus talks primarily about himself.
 - b. In the synoptics Jesus never claims to be divine during his earthly life, whereas in John he certainly does make this claim (e.g., 8:58).
 - 2. John's Gospel is later than the synoptics, since John was written after the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues.
 - 3. Consequently, we must assume that John's Gospel does not give us a reliable record of what Jesus taught, and is misleading when it claims that the later doctrine of the divinity of Jesus has any basis in the life and teaching of the historical Jesus or even in earliest Christianity.
 - B. John's Christology primarily reflects outside influences (esoteric Jewish thought? Greek philosophy? Pagan mythology? Gnosticism? Samaritan theology?).
- IX. In the following conferences I will respond to all of the allegations made above.
- A. I will argue that the doctrine of the incarnation goes back to the resurrection experiences and is clearly taught in Paul's letters, which are the earliest Christian documents.
 - B. John's Gospel is a record of an eyewitness who in retrospect guided by the Spirit correctly understood and presented what God was doing through Jesus.
 - C. John's Gospel was a response to the competing claims that Jesus was not fully divine or not fully human.
 - D. Thanks to a later editor the canonical Gospel of John outlines the steps by which one can continue to know and even experience that in Jesus God had a human life.
 - E. Finally, in its own strange way John's Gospel validates the different religions of the world.

Conference 2: A Proposal for the Origin of the Doctrine of the Incarnation

- I. The doctrine that Jesus was human began with the experience of those who knew him on earth and was not questioned until they died.
 - A. Our earliest written sources never doubt that Jesus was a human being. The New Testament always assumes (or even stridently insists) that Jesus was human.
 - 1. Jesus does the things that humans do, such as eat and sleep.
 - 2. He calls himself the "son of humanity [man]" a phrase which has the basic meaning of "human being."
 - B. This universal assumption that Jesus was human must ultimately come from the memory of those who knew him in the flesh and were certain that he was human.
- II. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the second century the Letters of Ignatius show that some Christians (Docetists) were claiming that Jesus only "appeared" to be human, a claim that Ignatius stridently attacks.
- III. The denial of the humanity of Jesus probably came from the following factors.
 - A. The philosophical problem of how to combine belief in the divinity of Jesus with his full humanity. The Docetists accepted the divinity of Jesus and probably thought that it excluded his full humanity.
 - B. A sense that the human body was not spiritual but, instead, dirty. Therefore, a fully divine Jesus could not have been degraded by having a body.
 - C. The death of all the people who had actually known Jesus in the flesh.
- IV. From the synoptic gospels it seems clear that no one believed that Jesus was divine during his lifetime.

A. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus

1. Never claims to be more than a human being during his lifetime.
2. And he does not seem to be concerned about his own identity.
3. Instead, he talks about God and prays to God. He is inaugurating God's kingdom.
4. Even his most enthusiastic followers only proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, a proclamation that Jesus apparently regards with reserve. The normal understanding of "Messiah" was an earthly, if triumphant and holy, king. By "normal" I mean the mainline understanding that presumably prevailed among the common people from whom Jesus and his disciples came. In my opinion, some scholars have paid far too much attention to esoteric Jewish texts (e.g., the Similitudes of Enoch) which I suspect no one in the early church knew and which did not reflect popular viewpoints.

B. Especially in Matthew, Jesus's reveals his divinity at the resurrection (Mat. 28:16-20).

C. One assumes that the synoptic gospels faithfully reflect the historical development: Everyone assumed that Jesus was only human when he was on earth, and it was only after the resurrection that he was hailed as divine.

V. The primary question is how long after Jesus's death did it take for faith in the divinity of Christ to arise (forgive the pun).

VI. My own position is that the risen Christ was already *experienced* as divine.

A. The experience of God in the Old Testament texts (and perhaps in general) includes the following:

1. God is personal. He knows individuals like Abraham and knows the nation of Israel and loves them.
2. But God has no limits.
 - a. He is not limited by time. He existed before creation, has always existed subsequently, and will always exist.
 - b. He is not confined by space, since he can appear anywhere and even is simultaneously in heaven and in his temple on earth.
3. The biblical God gives commands and promises, and, therefore, will be known more fully in the future. E.g., "You shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves" (Ezek. 37:13).
4. He also is mysterious. He is the hidden God.
 - a. In competing religions God was visible in art and in nature (since the gods were identified with natural phenomena, such as the sun and moon).
 - b. The Bible forbids representations of God, and although God creates the natural world, he is not part of it.

B. The resurrection appearances of Jesus include the same elements.

1. The risen Jesus has no limits. He appears whenever and wherever he chooses. And he disappears whenever he likes.
2. He is personal. Indeed, he brings peace, and he is recognized as the same Jesus whom the disciples had known.
3. Yet, he has an air of divine mystery. He is not immediately recognized as Jesus.
4. He commands the disciples to share the "good news" of his resurrection and promises to support them as they do (Charles Perry).
5. Hence, he will only fully be known in the future. That future can be

- a. When a particular Christian has grown spiritually.
 - b. When Jesus returns to rule the world.
 - C. In the meantime, after the resurrection experiences ended but the Spirit of Jesus was still present, Jesus's spirit was also experienced as divine. The Spirit was
 - 1. Limitless, available to all at any time or place.
 - 2. Personal. The Spirit of Christ knew Christians, loved them, challenged them, and gave them gifts.
 - D. Consequently, it seems to me that experiencing the risen Jesus was similar to experiencing God.
- VII. Recent research has shown, at least to my satisfaction, that the earliest Christian writer, Paul, already assumed the divinity of Christ.
 - A. In both ancient and modern times, there has been debate about whether Paul believed that Christ was divine.
 - B. The problem arises for two reasons.
 - 1. Paul seems to say contrasting things in different letters. Here we may merely highlight two extreme examples.
 - a. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul claims that the rule of Christ over the universe is temporary and that in the end he will be subject to the Father (1 Cor. 15:25-28).
 - b. By contrast, in Philippians 2:6-11 Paul states that even before becoming human Jesus had equality with God, then "emptied himself" and "became obedient unto death" and thereafter received the "Name that is above every name [surely YHWH]" and obeisance from the whole of creation.
 - 2. Of course, people read Paul through their own theological perspectives and tend to assume that Paul believed what they believe.
 - C. The letters of Paul are pastoral responses to specific situations, rather than systematic theology.
 - D. Not surprisingly, Paul uses Jesus as a model for the behavior which Paul is urging his readers to adopt. And these different pastoral goals help explain the variations in how Paul describes Jesus. For example,
 - 1. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses the subordination of Christ as a model for the Corinthians to be subordinate to Paul's own direction.
 - a. In 1 Corinthians Paul emphasizes that the Corinthians are not yet spiritually mature and are acting as if they have reached complete maturity and are in a position to judge Paul.
 - b. In response, Paul stresses that for the present the Corinthians need to be subject to Paul and promises that later at the resurrection the Corinthians will have every blessing.
 - c. Consequently, Paul stresses that Jesus was subordinate to the Father and that at the final resurrection we will be equal to Jesus. We will bear his image, and he like us will be subject to the Father, and God "will be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).
 - 2. By contrast, in Philippians Paul uses Jesus as a model that Christians must give up all in order to gain all.
 - a. Paul stresses that the Philippians must give up their pride and resist calls to find security through becoming Jewish. If they give up their pride and security, they will ultimately have every blessing. They will be conformed to the risen Christ.

b. Paul then stresses the Jesus had every privilege (even equality with God), surrendered everything, even accepting crucifixion, and God responded by giving Jesus dominion over all and even giving Jesus the divine Name.

VIII. From the variations noted above, it is at least clear that the risen Christ presently rules the universe with divine authority and that ultimately his disciples will become like him in every respect.

IX. Thus, the issue is not primarily Jesus's relationship to the Father, but who we can become as Christians who already have Jesus's Spirit and will become like him in every respect at the final resurrection.

X. This is the same issue that was decisive both in John's Gospel (as we shall see), and in the Christological controversies which led to orthodoxy.

XI. Moreover, as recent scholarship has stressed, it is striking that even in 1 Corinthians, which most emphasizes the subordination of Jesus to the Father, Paul assumes the divinity of Christ.

A. The classic statement of Jewish monotheism (still said regularly in synagogue services) is the *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the Lord is One" [Deut. 6:4]).

B. In 1 Corinthians Paul modifies the *Shema* to include both the Father and Jesus! "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we for him, and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things and we through him" (1 Cor. 8:6).

XII. In various passages Paul assumes that Christ existed before his human birth (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:9, Gal. 4:4, Phil 2:6-7).

XIII. It is especially striking that Paul sees no reason to defend the divinity of Christ, whereas Paul has to defend many other points which he is making. Apparently, even as early as Paul the divinity of Christ was widely accepted in the church.

XIV. Moreover, as Larry Hurtado has stressed, the divinity of Jesus was clearly implied in the basic devotional activities of the earliest Christians, such as calling on the Name of Jesus or baptizing people in the Name of Jesus.

XV. Consequently, it seems clear that the many later places in the New Testament which proclaim the divinity of Christ (including, Matthew 28:16-20, Hebrews 1:2-4, Revelation 5:13-14) are only emphasizing what was already believed from the resurrection experiences onward.

XVI. In the case of Paul at least, it also seems that the experience of being conformed to Christ without losing one's own identity pointed to the divinity of Christ.

A. A major part of Paul's spiritual experience and future hope was becoming Christ.

1. Paul states that he no longer lives but Christ lives in him (Gal. 2:19-20).

2. Paul through his sufferings is being conformed to the crucified Christ (e.g., Gal. 6:17).

3. Paul looks forward to be conformed after death to the risen Christ (Phil. 3:10).

B. However, one cannot be fully conformed to another human being without losing one's identity.

C. It is only because Christ is divine that through his Spirit Paul can become Christ without ceasing to be Paul.

D. Moreover, Paul describes his own transformation (and the spiritual transformation of his readers) in Christ as "new creation [e.g., Gal. 6:15]," and in the Bible only God creates in the absolute sense.

Conference 3: A Proposal for the Origin of John's Gospel

I. Because of the great differences between John's Gospel and the synoptics, it has been a commonplace in liberal scholarship that John's Gospel and its theology that Jesus was divine were the end result of a long evolution in which outside influences played a major role.

II. By contrast the gospel itself claims to be written by an eyewitness, whom the gospel refers to as the "Disciple Jesus loved," and who appears at several points in the passion and resurrection accounts.

A. Liberal scholars try to blunt this claim by translating 21:24a as, "This is the disciple who testified about these things and has caused these thing to be written" and suggesting that the gospel is merely maintaining that an eyewitness was a distant source for the material.

B. I find this translation wanting.

1. Literally, the Greek reads, "And has written these things."

2. And if the gospel was only claiming a distant eyewitness as the source, "Testified about these things" would be sufficient. "Has written these things" is making an additional claim.

3. Even if one insists that "written" need not mean written down, it must mean more than a distant connection. I would concede that "written" could mean "dictated to a scribe," but not merely being an early source for a tradition that was written down by someone else long afterward.

III. The gospel itself insists that the eyewitnesses of Jesus's ministry only subsequently understood the full meaning of what had happened. We find this claim in various passages (e.g., 2:21-22). To me, the most interesting of these is 12:15-16.

A. I think that it is historically likely that Jesus believed that in some sense he was the prophesied messiah (through not the military figure that many expected). How could Jesus sometimes proclaim that the Kingdom of God had already come in his own ministry (Luke 11:20, 11:31-32, 17:20-21) unless he believed that he was the messiah?

B. If he thought that he was the messiah, then it is likely that sometimes he deliberately fulfilled prophecies of what the messiah was expected to do (Geza Vermes).

C. At the time the bystanders may not have realized what Jesus was doing.

D. But after the fact Christians could have rightly perceived this.

E. And in 12:15-16 we have this explicit claim which seems to me historically probable! In his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus was deliberately fulfilling a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 about a future king, but it was only in retrospect that Jesus's disciples realized that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy.

IV. This later realization of what was "actually" going on was in large part due to the work of the Holy Spirit, and in John's Gospel Jesus explicitly says that the Spirit will remind the disciples of what he said (14:25-26) and also lead the disciples into all truth (16:12-13). Note, especially, 16:25 in which Jesus declares that up to this point he has spoken in obscurities but later will speak to the disciples plainly.

V. I find these claims persuasive.

A. In various places in John's Gospel we see events that appear to be historical but which the evangelist reinterprets through his theology of what God was doing through Jesus.

B. An excellent example is 11:47-53.

1. Here we have an event which is historically very likely. Jesus has become popular. The high priest is afraid that Jesus will lead a rebellion and the

rebellion will be crushed resulting in disaster for everyone.

2. The high priest then concludes that it is "better that one person die for the people and not the whole nation perish."

3. Of course, the high priest thinks that he is merely giving realistic political advice that Jesus will have to be sacrificed for the good of the nation.

4. But John's Gospel sees his words as a prophecy of the atonement! Jesus must die to save others.

C. Therefore, the evangelist is claiming that he has been led by the Spirit and can tell us about the past from God's perspective. He knows who Jesus is and what God did through him.

D. The gospel then gives us this "divine" perspective through the speeches of Jesus.

1. It was a commonplace in ancient histories whether Jewish or Greco-Roman for the historian to write speeches for the characters which were not based on what the actual historical figure said.

2. Instead, the speeches were an expression of what the historian imagined that the character could have said or even should have said.

3. All the Fourth Evangelist did was use the speeches of Jesus to express what the evangelist concluded about what God had done in Jesus and who Jesus was.

VI. We can see the Evangelist's technique by looking at the gospel's explanation of how faith in Jesus's divinity arose.

A. The gospel tells us that the divinity of Jesus was clearly implicit in what he did and what historically he had said. We can see this in an incident in chapter 5.

1. In chapter 5 Jesus heals a lame man on the Sabbath.

2. The enemies of Jesus then criticize him for doing so.

3. Jesus responds, "My Father is working until now and I am working" (5:17).

4. The evangelist then comments, "For this reason the Jews sought the more to kill him, because not only did he violate the Sabbath, but he said that God was his own father, making himself equal to God" (5:18).

5. Then we have a long speech by Jesus in which he talks about his divine authority, including the power to raise the dead and judge them.

6. In that speech Jesus insists

a. He does nothing on his own, because he only seeks to do God's will (5:30).

b. If he testified about himself, his testimony would not be true. It is the Father who testifies about him.

B. In chapter 5 we have an implicit review of how faith in Jesus's divinity originated.

1. Historically, Jesus was totally focused on doing God's will and did not bear witness to himself.

2. Because of that focus on God Jesus was able

a. To work miracles with God's power (note 11:41-42).

b. To violate the biblical law (or, at least, as some interpreted it), since Jesus knew directly what God wanted.

c. To call God his "Father" in some special sense that did not apply to other people.

d. Implicit in the above is the fact that God was so totally present in Jesus that Jesus himself was divine.

3. However, prior to the resurrection, no one recognized his divinity. Even in John's Gospel, no disciple of Jesus ever confesses Jesus's divinity until after the resurrection when Thomas does.

4. But in retrospect, people could see the divinity in Jesus's earthly life, as the evangelist clearly claims in chapter 5.

C. The evangelist then presents us this theological retrospective through a speech by Jesus that the evangelist himself composed.

VII. I conclude that, as the gospel states, the evangelist was an eyewitness to Jesus's ministry and after Jesus's death reinterpreted that ministry in light of the resurrection experiences and of the evangelist's own spiritual growth and the spiritual growth of his community. The Christology of John's Gospel is NOT due to outside influences, whether Greek, Gnostic, Pagan, Samaritan, or even esoteric Jewish.

Conference 4: John's Gospel as a Response to Orthodox Judaism and Docetism

I. It is clear from the gospel itself that the evangelist was defending the divinity of Christ against attacks from mainline Judaism.

A. It is likely that from the beginning the major criticism of Christianity from the Jewish community was that Christianity had turned Jesus into a God.

1. As noted above, monotheism is the central theological claim of Judaism, and as early as Paul's letters, Christians were claiming that Jesus was God.

2. I strongly suspect that the belief that Jesus was God helped motivate Paul prior to his conversion to persecute the Church, though Paul also had other issues with Christianity (e.g., that radical Christians were allowing Gentiles to join the Church without asking them to become Jewish).

B. In John's Gospel itself when Jesus insists on his divinity before Jewish audiences, they respond by trying to kill him.

1. We have already discussed chapter 5, where Jesus calls God his Father and "the Jews" seek to kill Jesus.

2. At the climax of chapter 8 Jesus proclaims, "Before Abraham was born, I am," (cf. Exodus 3:14) and "the Jews" seek to stone Jesus.

3. In chapter 10 Jesus says, "I am the Father are one" (vs. 30) and again "the Jews" seek to stone him, and when Jesus asks why they want to stone him, they reply, "You who are a human being are making yourself God" (vs. 33).

C. Since, as we have seen, Jesus historically did not say that he was God, these scenes in John's Gospel must reflect what was going on when the evangelist wrote (cf. John 9:22).

D. The "Orthodox" Jewish community was expelling Jewish Christians from the synagogues and occasionally killing Christians for believing in the divinity of Christ (e.g., John 16:2).

E. Therefore, the insistence in John's Gospel that Jesus is divine and that salvation comes from believing this is a defense of a beleaguered community, not merely a theological claim. John is explaining to his Christian readers why their suffering is worthwhile and why they should not give up their faith.

II. The gospel defends itself against the claims that its theology is not faithful to traditional Judaism by insisting that the incarnation is the fulfillment of the prophetic hopes of Judaism.

A. Like all of early Christianity John's Gospel quotes various texts from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies (e.g., John 19:36-37 [Exodus 12:46, Zechariah 12:10]).

B. John's Gospel insists that the great figures of Jewish history looked forward to Jesus as the fulfillment of their hopes. Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus's day (8:56); Isaiah

spoke of Jesus (12:38-41).

C. John's Gospel even boldly emphasizes that Moses was only a limited figure who looked forward to Jesus (cf. Hebrews). Of course, in the Hebrew Scriptures Moses is the one through whom God revealed his will definitively. Note the conclusion of the Torah (Deuteronomy 34:10-11). But John's Gospel insists

1. God did not give the truth through Moses, only the "Law" (1:17); grace and truth come through Jesus (John 1:18; cf. Exodus 33:18-23).
2. Moses did not actually see God. People see God through Jesus (John 1:18).
3. Instead, Moses wrote about Jesus (John 5:45-47).

III. Today critical scholars, even ones committed to Christianity, would concede that the Old Testament prophets did not predict the coming of Jesus in a direct (simplistic) way. They and their audience were concerned about their own problems, not what would happen centuries later.

IV. Nevertheless, as a Christian I would still argue that Christianity is the fulfillment of the basic thrust and hope of the Hebrew Bible.

A. It is increasingly recognized that the decisive event which shaped the Hebrew Scriptures was the Babylonian Exile. It was in the Exile that

1. The Torah was written down lest the traditions get forgotten.
2. Earlier prophecies were edited (note that the later chapters of Isaiah were written during the exile and appended to the prophecies of the historical Isaiah).

B. The theological crisis of the Exile was how can we Jews continue to believe in the God of Israel, since the nations who do not worship him have conquered us!

C. The theological answer was

1. Israel was conquered not because the gods of other people were stronger, but because Israel was not faithful to its God, who is the only God that exists.
2. God will restore the fortunes of Israel because of his own mercy (not Israel's righteousness).
3. Through Israel the nations will come to know God.
4. In the golden age to come we will know God more directly and fully ("Then you will know that I am the LORD").
5. Note that the prophetic books
 - a. Were arranged in the Exile so that they begin with prophecies of judgment against Israel because of its unfaithfulness to God and then end with prophecies of the restoration of Israel because of God's mercy.
 - b. Look forward under various images to an era of blessing in which God would dwell with his people in a transformed world.

D. To me as a Christian, the incarnation and the spread of the gospel was in fact the historical fulfillment of the exilic hope.

1. It was through the incarnation that God became fully known.
2. It was through Christianity that the world came to know the spiritual heritage of Israel. Note that Christianity kept the entire Hebrew Bible merely relabeling it as the "Old Testament."

V. Another way that John's Gospel responds to Orthodox Judaism is by giving models for how there could be a Divine Son along with God (the Father) without there being more than one God.

A. Of course, John admits that it is a paradox to say that the Son and the Father are both divine and there is only one God (John 1:1).

B. Nevertheless, John does provide explanatory models of how Jesus and the Father can both be God.

1. The word and the speaker. Jesus is the self-expression of God.
2. Mutual knowledge (e.g., 10:15). The Father and the Son know each other fully.
3. Mutual donation, mutual honoring (e.g., 5:22). They give themselves totally to each other and honor each other.
4. Perfect imitation (e.g., 5:19). Jesus does what the Father does.
5. Mutual indwelling (e.g., 17:21). Jesus and the Father dwell in each other.
6. Progressive mission (e.g., 17:18-19). As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus now sends us.
7. Of course, the very terms "Father" and "Son" suggest how Jesus can be God. He derives his being from the one divine "nature" and shares in an intimate personal relationship with his "parent."
8. All the models are somehow part of the mutual love of the Father and the Son. Apparently, the claim is that if we understand love deeply enough, we will understand the incarnation.

VI. John's Gospel is also a response to the rising threat of Docetism.

- A. As noted above, Docetism was the (heretical) Christian theology that Jesus did not have a physical body, since he was divine.
- B. Docetism was developing around the same period as the Gospel of John was written and later edited (see below).
 1. Some of the foundations of Docetism were earlier.
 - a. Already Plato taught that the human body was a prison for the soul.
 - b. In 1 Corinthians Paul has to reply to members of the church who did not believe in the (bodily) resurrection (1 Corinthians 15).
 2. Docetism already existed in its full form by around the year 100, since Ignatius who was martyred around 110 combats it.
 3. John's Gospel was written around the year 90 and edited sometime after that.
- C. I believe that the Epistles of John already are a response to Docetism.
 1. Many mainline scholars, including Raymond Brown, have argued this.
 2. And the Epistles insist that Christ came "in the flesh" (1 John 4:2, 2 John 7), as does the Gospel (1:14).
 3. Recently, a scholarly minority has argued that came "in the flesh" merely means that Jesus is the Messiah that the Jewish community was expecting and that the Johannine Epistles are insisting that "Jesus is the Christ" against Jewish denials (1 John 2:22).
 4. My own position is that the Epistles are attacking the theologies of both the Docetists and Orthodox Jews. Both groups existed, and even if the Epistles are primarily targeting one of them, the same assertions in the epistles would respond to both. The letters of Ignatius also attack both Docetism and Orthodox Judaism.
- D. In any case the Gospel of John, especially in its final edited form, clearly is responding to claims that Jesus did not have a real body. Note
 1. The offensive, even cannibalistic language, in chapter 6 about munching on Christ's flesh and drinking his blood (vss. 51b-58).
 2. The challenge to Thomas to put his finger and hand in the wounds of the crucifixion, thus indicating that even in his risen state Jesus had a tangible body (20:27).

VII. As we have seen, one way that John's Gospel responds to the challenge of Docetism is by repeating eyewitness testimony that Jesus had a real body, for example, the eyewitness

testimony of Jesus bleeding when he was stabbed at the crucifixion (19:33-35).

VIII. Nevertheless, the primary way John's Gospel responds to Docetism is by insisting that only if the Divine Christ had a real body could he have shown the love that brings salvation.

A. In the Epistles we have the same theology.

1. The Epistles insist that Christian love is only real if it includes costly self-sacrifice (1 John 3:17-18).

2. God showed his love for us by Jesus dying in the flesh (1 John 3:16).

3. It is this love which is to be an example for us.

B. In the Gospel also we know God's love because in Jesus God experienced suffering and death.

1. Of course, one can cite the famous 3:16.

2. But perhaps even more important, Jesus insists that the greatest love is to lay down one's life for one's friends, and that this is the love that he is showing.

3. Of course, his "friends" must imitate his example (15:12-14).

IX. Unfortunately, much modern theology has combined the perspectives of Orthodox Judaism and ancient Docetism.

A. Like Orthodox Judaism Radical Christian theologians claim that Jesus was not divine but only an inspired human being.

B. One unavoidable docetic consequence is that in Jesus God did not directly experience the limitations and sufferings of human existence.

X. Donald Gelpi stressed that the incarnation took place when God took on the direct experience of a human life and suffered and died in love, and this has become my theology also.

Conference 5: How the Editing of John's Gospel Shows the Steps by which Readers Can Know that Jesus Is the Incarnation of God.

I. It is clear that after an initial draft of John's Gospel, the evangelist died and an editor retouched the work.

A. The original gospel must have ended with chapter 20.

1. There the scene with Thomas dramatically brings to a climax the Gospel's main theme that Jesus is both human (Thomas is invited to touch the wounds of Jesus) and divine (Thomas responds by calling Jesus "God").

2. Then the text actually tells us that it will give no more signs.

3. And the text abandons the narrative and directly addresses readers telling us that through faith that Jesus is God's Son we will find life.

B. In chapter 21

1. We read that a rumor that Jesus promised that the author of the Gospel would not die (cf. Mark 9:1) was untrue. Apparently, the author has already died.

2. A second hand explicitly differentiates itself from the primary author by telling us that what the evangelist wrote is true (24).

C. Accordingly, it seems clear that chapter 21 came from a later editor. In my opinion, the literary style of chapter 21 differs from the rest of the gospel because of the almost obsessive use of synonyms. For example, there are three different terms for fish!

II. Symbolically, chapter 21 outlines the stages of the ideal Christian life.

A. The opening portion suggests conversion.

1. The disciples are back in their pre-conversion setting as it appears in the

synoptics. They are in Galilee fishing.

2. Christ has already risen from the dead, but the potential disciples do not know him and so are in darkness, and they labor without success.

3. The story of the miraculous catch is a conversion/call story in Luke (Lk. 5:2-11), and by the time the editor of John was writing, members of his community probably were reading the other gospels (cf. John 21:25).

4. In the story Jesus challenges the disciples and then provides a sign. As a result, they recognize him and come to him (i.e., they are converted).

B. The section about Peter jumping into the water symbolizes baptism. Note that in the early church baptismal candidates probably stripped, tied on a temporary covering, and were then baptized by immersion. In chapter 21 Peter is naked or, at least, lightly clad, ties on an outer garment, and throws himself into the water.

C. As is generally recognized, the subsequent scene in which Jesus feeds the disciples symbolizes Eucharist. Note, especially, Jesus *taking* the *bread* and *giving* it.

Elsewhere the New Testament uses such language in connection with the Eucharist.

D. The beginning of the dialog between Jesus and Peter stresses committed discipleship.

1. Peter must now go on to love Jesus and feed his sheep.

2. The scene is closely tied to Peter's denial (18:15-18, 25-27), since in both scenes Peter must respond to three questions about his relationship to Jesus, and there is a charcoal fire.

3. In John's Gospel, contrary to the synoptics, what Peter specifically denies when questioned by the high priest's attendants is being Jesus's "disciple" (18:17, 25; cf. 18:19).

4. Consequently, the three questions from Jesus about whether Peter loves Jesus are a challenge to him (and the reader) to become a committed disciple.

E. The end of the dialog, however, points to giving up one's very life for Jesus. After feeding Jesus's sheep, Peter must suffer a martyr's death.

F. Then we have a scene in which Jesus announces a still higher vocation: Taking his place in the world until his second coming. The Beloved Disciple must abide until Christ's return. Just as Jesus was in the Father's breast and revealed him to human beings (1:18), so the Beloved Disciple was at the chest of Jesus and must now reveal him. Since the text insists that Jesus did not promise that the Beloved Disciple would live until the second coming, the passage must mean that the testimony of the Beloved Disciple in the gospel would endure.

III. L. William Countryman argued that the Evangelist arranged the first 20 chapters of the Gospel of John according to the stages of the ideal Christian life. He pointed out that in John's Gospel after the prologue

A. We first have a section which focuses on conversion, including the conversion of Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel.

B. Then there is a section on baptism which even includes Jesus and/or his disciples baptizing people.

C. Next we have section on the Eucharist with the famous Bread of Life sermon in chapter 6.

D. Later sections discuss more advanced stages of the Christian life.

E. But there is no mention of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

IV. The major difference I have with Countryman is that the evidence from chapter 21 suggests that the editor imposed this arrangement.

V. The editor did this primarily to show readers how they could know that Jesus was both

human and divine.

A. The editor was obviously concerned about defending the truth of the gospel, since he speaking in behalf of the community added the words, "We know that his [the Evangelist's] testimony is true" (21:24).

B. And it seems likely that by the time the Editor was at work, the truth of the gospel needed even more defense than when the Evangelist wrote it.

1. The Evangelist could testify as an eyewitness, whereas the Editor almost certainly could not.

2. As we have seen, the popularity of Docetism was increasing, and Jewish hostility to the claim that Jesus was divine certainly remained extreme.

3. The editor then outlined the steps by which one could learn by experience that Jesus was the incarnation of God.

VI. The section on conversion makes the important point that we cannot know for ourselves that Jesus is the incarnate God when we first become Christians. Given the limitations of time, we will have to be content with an analysis of one key passage, Nathaniel's encounter with Jesus (1:47-51).

A. Once Nathaniel actually meets Jesus, Nathaniel converts, and like many new converts, he becomes overenthusiastic ("Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!")

B. Jesus responds that Nathaniel has come to faith on flimsy evidence and will see something greater, namely, "the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Humanity."

C. The greater thing that Nathaniel will see is that Jesus is God incarnate.

1. The normal meaning of "Son of Humanity" in scripture is "a human being."

2. The "angels of God ascending and descending" alludes to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:10-17.

3. Jacob dreams that he has found the ladder between heaven and earth, the point where the divine and human connect.

4. John's Gospel then symbolically says that Jesus replaces Jacob's ladder and is the place where the divine and the human meet.

5. In other words, Jesus is the incarnation of God.

6. But as a new convert Nathaniel cannot yet know this.

VII. The section on the sacraments makes the important point that the sacraments bear witness to the reality of Jesus's physical body.

A. The sacramental section goes from the first Passover in John's Gospel through the second (2:13-6:71).

B. The preface to the section tells us that Christ's body replaces the temple.

1. We start with Jesus's protest in the temple, an event that is also recorded in the synoptics and is surely historical.

2. In the ancient world, including the Jewish one, God dwelt in the temple.

3. I believe that historically Jesus's protest in the temple was primarily a sign of two things.

a. The temple would be destroyed.

b. It would be replaced by the Kingdom which Jesus was proclaiming.

4. The Evangelist claims in retrospect that the protest shows that the body of Jesus is the true temple because God dwelt in Jesus's flesh.

5. Note that in chapter 4 Jesus tells the woman at the well that a new hour is coming when people will no longer worship in temples but in "spirit and truth."

C. The continuing sign that in Jesus God had a normal physical body is the

sacraments.

D. Baptism is physical worship in spirit and truth which bears witness to Jesus as the new temple.

1. Thanks to the editor, the story of Jesus and the Woman at the Well has a baptismal preface (4:1-2).
2. Therefore, when Jesus goes on to talk about "living water," he is in the edited gospel discussing baptism.
3. Baptism is part of the worship in spirit and truth which replaces the temple as the physical location for the presence of God.
4. If God can come to us in the physical water of baptism, God can come to the world through the physical body of Jesus.

E. Of course, the primary sacramental sign that Jesus had a real body is the Eucharist which in the edited gospel is the theme of chapter 6.

1. A problem in chapter 6 is that Jesus tells the crowd things that it could not possibly understand and insists that the crowd will perish unless it believes them!
 - a. For example, Jesus insists that his listeners must munch on his flesh.
 - b. If they do not, they will perish.
 - c. Not surprisingly, the listeners do not understand, and some even protest and desert.
2. Once again, the Gospel of John is primarily speaking to its readers, and the Evangelist and Editor have composed Jesus's words to address us.
3. The Christian reader should understand that we eat Jesus's body in the Eucharist.
4. The cannibalistic language, which the editor added of munching flesh and drinking blood, emphasizes that the Eucharist is the continuing sacramental sign that in Jesus God had a physical body. Note that if Jesus is not God then at the Eucharist we actually are symbolically engaging in cannibalism. The Eucharist is not cannibalism because we consume the body of God.
5. Theologically, the Eucharist (like baptism) demonstrates that God can come to us through matter, and this demonstration validates the incarnation.
6. We may note in passing that the sacraments point to our future resurrection. If God can transform material things, God can transform us at death.
7. An important implication is that when we receive the water of life in baptism and the bread of life in the Eucharist we are confessing that Jesus had a physical body.

VIII. The following section of John's Gospel makes the contrasting point that it is when we live as committed disciples after baptism and Eucharist that we can begin to experience that Christ is divine.

- A. At the beginning of the section Jesus's brothers challenge him to reveal himself both to the world and to his disciples (7:3-4).
- B. Then Jesus in the most emphatic way publicly proclaims his divinity. Before Abraham was, Jesus is (8:58; cf. Exodus 3:14), and he and the Father are one (10:30).
- C. Those who are not committed disciples regard Jesus's statements as madness and attempt to stone him for blasphemy.
- D. However, in this section Jesus insists that his "sheep" can distinguish his voice from other voices (10:4-5) and know him (10:14).
- E. The key passage in this section (and one that was added by the editor) is, "If you remain in my [Jesus's] word, you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth,

and the truth shall set you free" (8:31-32). It is as we live as committed disciples that we can begin to experience the truth that in Jesus God became incarnate.

F. If I may add a personal note, it is as I struggle to serve others that I increasingly feel the appropriateness of God becoming human in order to do the same.

IX. We may note in passing that John's Gospel even discusses a higher knowledge which comes in the highest stage of the Christian life.

A. I will not talk on this, since few of us get to this stage.

B. Nevertheless, the gospel insists that in that stage Jesus though the Spirit will so dwell in us that we will know everything that the Father has told him (15:15).

Conference 6: John's Gospel as an Affirmation of World Religion (an attempt)

I. John's Gospel clearly teaches that the sole way to "salvation" is through Jesus.

II. John bases this conclusion on the theological grounds that Jesus is the only incarnation of God.

III. Of course, the author's negative view of other religious paths probably reflected a cultural perspective, not merely a theological one.

A. Part of that cultural perspective was the legacy from the Old Testament of Jewish antipathy toward "Pagan" religion.

1. Before the exile the prophets attacked "foreign" religion, because it justified a royal system that oppressed the poor. Not surprisingly, in its opposition to foreign religion the prophets focused on the worst aspects of Paganism (e.g., child sacrifice).

2. At least from the time of the Exile (586 B.C.E.) on, monotheism became the primary marker that one was Jewish, and the need to preserve Jewish identity reinforced a negative attitude toward other religion.

B. John's Gospel accepts the inspiration of the Old Testament and affirms often uncritically its basic perspectives.

IV. Part of John's cultural perspective was also due to the fact that the non-Jewish religion he knew was very primitive.

A. Of course, John had no knowledge of the high religions of Asia.

1. When the Gospel of John was written, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism had all existed in one form or another for centuries.

2. But these religions were unknown in the Roman Empire.

B. The popular religion of the Greco-Roman world which John certainly did know was very primitive.

1. It was still mythological.

a. A mythological religion tells stories and cannot critique them (Robert Bellah).

b. By the time of John's Gospel, philosophers were trying to elevate Greco-Roman religion but had not changed the shape of religion as a whole.

2. The purpose of Pagan religion was primarily to placate the gods so they would ensure public welfare, including the maintenance of the current power structure.

3. Consequently, religion was not concerned with ethics or deep, transforming religious experience.

V. For a modern Christian reader, however, the primary question must be how to affirm the

valid insights and experiences of the higher (axial) religions and the exclusive claims that John's Gospel makes.

VI. Obviously even axial religion is very diverse, as we can see by a quick comparison of Islam and Buddhism, the two religions which are (at least at present) the greatest competitors to Christianity.

A. Islam

1. Focuses on a personal god
2. Stresses the autonomy of each individual and the need for every person to choose to submit to God.
3. Emphasizes that religious images are evil.

B. By contrast, Buddhism

1. Is not in principle theistic.
2. Denies the existence of a (separate) self.
3. And freely uses religious images.

C. One can recognize that both Islam and Buddhism bring joy and peace to their adherents, but this recognition does not mean that these two religions are basically saying the same thing!

VII. No conceivable religious system can accept everything that even the axial religions have experienced and taught, and attempts to do so should not be confused with "tolerance."

A. The three great missionary religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, all claim that they offer the ultimate path to truth and salvation. And together these three religions account for the majority of people on earth!

B. The more "politically correct" position of Hinduism that all religions are equally valid paths to ultimate reality contradicts what the great missionary religions teach and, therefore, is in practice a claim to superiority, not a claim for tolerance. Note that intolerance of intolerance is a form of intolerance (sometimes an extreme form)!

VIII. It is often claimed that John's Gospel holds that no one except baptized Christians who accept the divinity of Christ can be saved. This claim is solidly based on such texts as John 3:5 ("unless one is born from water and the Spirit, one cannot enter into the kingdom of God"), 8:24 ("you will die in your sins unless you believe that I AM"), 14:6 ("no one comes to the Father except through me").

IX. Nevertheless, one must note that John's Gospel also insists

A. God loves the world and has no desire to condemn the world (even though the world deserves condemnation [3:16, 12:47]).

B. Salvation is union with God, and damnation is separation from God.

C. Judgment in John, whether in the present or on the last day, is exposure. The wicked cannot bear the truth and so must hide from it (3:18-21, 12:48). The condemning truth is either that they refused to believe in Jesus or that their deeds were evil.

D. Those who are honestly ignorant of the Christian message have not sinned (9:41, "If you were blind you would have no sin," and 15:22, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin.")

E. Surely those who acted lovingly without being Christians will have much to rejoice in when their deeds are brought to light at the last judgment.

F. When Jesus was "lifted up," he drew all people to himself (12:31-32).

X. To some extent the tensions between "VIII" and "IX" above demonstrate that John's Gospel is not systematic theology! And one should beware of doing theology on the basis of isolated verses, rather than considering the Gospel as a whole.

XI. Nevertheless, the following is surely in John.

- A. Those who heard Jesus when he was alive in the flesh and rejected and killed him have an especially difficult challenge to find salvation because
 - 1. They rejected the incarnate God definitively. Hence, it will be difficult to acknowledge what they have done.
 - 2. They will have a harder time perceiving Jesus in the Spirit having not even seen God in Jesus when he was physically present (12:35-36).
- B. Nevertheless, with the crucifixion, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit, even those who killed Jesus have a new opportunity to acknowledge him (cf. Acts 3:11-21).
- C. By contrast, all who are truly (invincibly? [Thomas Aquinas]) ignorant are innocent and will have a chance to be saved at the final judgment when Jesus will be visible to all and will reveal the good and evil that people have done.
- D. Building on John, we should note that many people are "invincibly ignorant" of the truth of Christianity because of the shortcomings of Christians.
 - 1. John's Gospel insists the world will know that we are Christians by our love.
 - 2. Given how often Christians have not demonstrated much love, it is not surprising that so much of the world is not impressed with Christianity.

XII. In my opinion the best way of classifying religions (whether religions as a whole or denominations within religions) is whether they have a mysticism of separation or a mysticism of identity.

- A. There are, of course, different ways of classifying religions.
- B. A famous one is orthodox (religions emphasizing correct belief) versus orthoprax (religions emphasizing correct behavior). But since all axial religion includes both belief and behavior, I personally am not comfortable with this dichotomy.
- C. It seems to me that if religion is (by definition?) about how to relate to Ultimate Reality then we should classify religions by how they do this.
- D. There are basically two ways.
 - 1. A mysticism of separation.
 - a. The primary religious experience is the chasm between God who is almighty, eternal, morally perfect and the human individual or community which is weak, transitory, and sinful. Two famous illustrations of this experience are Isaiah's vision in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-8) and Arjuna's vision when Krishna reveals his divine self (Bhagavad Gita, chapter 11).
 - b. The experience of separation gives birth to a theology emphasizing the absolute difference between the Divine and the world. Note that some practitioners of Hinduism insist on the difference between God and the human who loves God.
 - 2. A mysticism of identity.
 - a. The primary religious experience is that one's deepest self is identical with Ultimate reality. We find this experience in such diverse documents as the Upanishads of Hinduism and the Sufi writings in Islam and even in the Buddhist doctrine of no self.
 - b. Of course, this experience gives birth to a theology that the deepest self is Ultimate Reality. "Brahman is atman." Everyone's deepest nature is the Buddha nature.
- E. Although both schools of religion exist to some extent in all of the axial religions (religion in general?), it is basically true that the religions that originated in the West tend toward a mysticism of separation, the religions that originated in India tend toward a mysticism of identity, and the religions that originated in China contrast with

each other.

1. Mainline Judaism and Islam emphasize the difference between the Divine and the human self.
2. Hinduism and Buddhism emphasize the identity of the Absolute and the Deepest Self.
3. Confucianism with its emphasis on education, constant self-examination, and following social norms tends toward the "separation" branch of religion.
4. Taoism with its emphasis on being childlike, spontaneous, and disregarding social norms tends toward the "identity" branch.

XIII. Although both schools of religion obviously celebrate profound experience and arrive at deep truth, I believe that both schools of religion have severe problems.

- A. The problem with the mysticism of separation is that deep communion with God is impossible because of the chasm between the divine and human.
- B. There are various problems with the mysticism of identity.
 1. If the divine is identical with the deepest self, it is difficult to love the divine, because love can only be strong if it embraces the Other.
 2. If the divine is identical with the deepest self, sin cannot be too serious. Our deepest selves are perfect. Religions that emphasize a mysticism of identity tend to dismiss sin as only ignorance.
 3. With the dismissal of sin as only ignorance, there is a tendency to regard injustice as unimportant or even an illusion.
 - a. In Hinduism and Buddhism there really is no injustice. What appears to be innocent suffering is in fact due to mistakes in previous incarnations.
 - b. In Taoism what appears to be evil is in fact good when seen in a larger context.
 4. Of course, if injustice is unimportant, social reform is not urgent.

XIV. I believe that John's Gospel proclaims a religion that affirms both a mysticism of separation and a mysticism of identity and avoids the problems of each.

- A. John's Gospel stresses the tremendous difference between the Eternal God (who is Father, Word, and Spirit) and created reality. Note, especially, the emphasis on the horrifying sin of a world which hates the truth and kills Jesus and his followers (John 15:18-25).
- B. Nevertheless, John's Gospel stresses the unity between God and those who believe in Jesus and become like him. At the highest stage of Christian maturity, Christians are no longer the servants of the Divine Christ but are his "friends" (15:15) and "brothers" (20:17) and sisters. Indeed, John's Gospel does not hesitate to call them "gods" (10:34-35). And in the next life we will experience God's glory fully.
- C. The reason that John's Gospel can fully embrace both mysticisms is the incarnation which culminates in the crucifixion/resurrection.
 1. There is a barrier between God and the universe which human beings cannot cross by their own efforts.
 2. God crosses the barrier by becoming a human being and then raising that human being. Note, especially,
 - a. Through the incarnation of the eternal Word, God reveals to us who he is.
 - b. The incarnate Word suffers and dies, just as other human beings do.
 3. Thanks to the resurrection, the Word now dwells with the Father in heaven.
 4. And sends to us his Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

5. Accordingly, through the incarnation (and only through it) we can enter fully into the life of the divine. This entrance is not only due to the realization of inherent potential; it is also "new creation" by the power of God's Spirit.

6. As we enter into the life of the divine, we take Jesus's place in this world by reaching out in love to others.

XV. Therefore, I personally find in John's Gospel an affirmation of the higher religions, because John's Gospel emphasizes the complementary truths that

A. There is a chasm between humans and the Ultimate Reality, and as humans we do sin and perpetrate injustice.

B. The deepest self has tremendous gifts and even greater spiritual potential. The deepest self can indeed become divine.