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The possibilities of Incarnation: some radical Molinist suggestions

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Abstract: **The traditional doctrine of the Incarnation maintains that God became man. But was it necessary that God become the particular man He in fact became? Could some man or woman other than the man born in Bethlehem roughly two thousand years ago have been assumed by the Son to effect our salvation? This essay addresses such questions from the perspective of one embracing Molina's picture of divine providence. After showing how Molina thought his theory of middle knowledge helps alleviate a traditional Christological puzzle, the essay turns to the aforementioned questions concerning God's incarnational alternatives and suggests some fairly radical answers. Finally, the essay presents two substantial objections to these radical answers and argues that these objections fail.**

According to traditional Christian belief, the salvation of mankind was achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Atonement, Christians believe, crucially involved Incarnation; for us humans to be saved, it was necessary (or at least eminently fitting) that God become man. But was it also necessary that God become the particular man He in fact became? Was the specific human being who was born in Bethlehem roughly two thousand years ago the *only* man through whom God could have reconciled the world to Himself? Or could that same salvific end perhaps have been attained had God the Son united Himself with some other man or woman? Were St Peter or St Paul candidates? How about St Augustine, or Mother Teresa, or Billy Graham? Moving a tad further afield, how about another Bill – Bill Clinton? Could he have been the instrument of divine salvation rather than – well, rather than what he is? Finally, were any of us candidates? Could the Word of God have become incarnate in you, or in me?

This is the family of questions I intend to address in this essay. They are not, I think, questions Christians are accustomed to asking themselves. But they arise quite naturally when we begin to think seriously about divine providence. After all, a central part of God's providential plan for His world involved Incarnation and Atonement. In thinking about how providence operates and how to reconcile that

providence with both divine and human freedom, it is natural to wonder what options, if any, were available to God with respect to the Incarnation.

Before examining these questions, though, I need to do three things. First, I will very briefly outline the account of divine providence that I will be assuming to be correct. Second, I will quickly recount what I see as some of the essentials of the standard Christian picture of the Incarnation. And third, I will offer a cursory explanation of how the account of providence I defend offers us an intriguing perspective on that traditional Incarnational picture.[1] With these three preliminaries in place, the stage will be set to usher in our questions concerning God's incarnational alternatives, and to suggest some fairly radical answers. Finally, I will present two substantial objections to these radical answers and argue that these objections fail.

The Molinist account of providence

The account of divine providence I defend stems from the writings of the sixteenth-century Iberian philosopher Luis de Molina. According to the Molinist picture, God's exercise of providence is dependent upon His middle knowledge – His knowledge of contingent truths over which He has no control. The truths in this category that are of greatest interest to us are what I have elsewhere called *counterfactuals of creaturely freedom*.[2] These counterfactuals are conditionals that, speaking loosely, tell God how any creature who does or might exist would freely act in any set of circumstances in which that creature could be created and left free.[3] Given His knowledge of such counterfactuals, God can, by carefully selecting both the beings He creates and the situations in which He places them, arrange things in such a way that His goals for the world are attained with certainty, but attained largely through the free acts of His creatures rather than through His causally determinative initiatives.[4]

As I see it, Molinism is the natural product of two more basic views: a strong traditional notion of providence (including universal divine foreknowledge and specific sovereignty) and a libertarian picture of freedom. Since Christians have good reason to be attracted to each of these two positions, and since the only way consistently to hold both is to adopt the Molinist account of providence, Molinism is, I contend, the position most worthy of Christians' support.[5]

This account of the dialectical situation is, of course, extremely controversial. But that controversy is not my focus in this paper. Rather, my goal is to examine some of the implications of this picture of providence on our understanding of the Incarnation. Before we can do that, though, a few remarks on the doctrine of the Incarnation are in order.

Incarnation and the human nature of the Son

Christians contend that Jesus Christ is both truly and fully divine and truly and fully human. The second person of the Trinity, who possessed his divine nature from eternity, took on (or, as it is often put, *assumed*) a human nature at a precise point in time. In becoming incarnate, the Son took on whatever exactly we humans are. And what are we? Are we simply bodies of a particular type? Immaterial souls? Body–soul composites? Something else? Whatever it is that a human being is, that is what the Son assumed in becoming a man. Following much of the traditional discussion of these matters, I will speak of the Son as assuming an *individual human nature*.[6] In further deference to tradition – and because I find the position plausible – I will also assume in what follows that individual human natures are divinely created body–soul composites, though I don't think much of what I say hinges on this assumption.

As I understand it, the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation implies that the individual human nature assumed by the Son – a nature that I will call CHN – has a unique metaphysical status.[7] Most of us human persons are nothing other than individual human natures – that is, wholes made up of body and soul. Hence, whatever can be said of my individual human nature – of the body–soul composite that I am – can equally be said of me, of this specific person. As the medievals would put it, most individual human natures just are *supposita*, or ultimate subjects of predication. If we wish to avoid the Nestorian heresy, though, we cannot say this about CHN, for if CHN were a *suppositum* distinct from the Son, then the Incarnation would yield two persons rather than one. What we need to say in this special case, then, is that CHN is not a *suppositum*; rather, the ultimate subject of whatever properties CHN has is not that body–soul composite itself, but rather the Son, the eternal and divine person who is united to and sustains in being this individual human nature.[8]

CHN, then, was born in Bethlehem, spoke with Mary Magdalene, cured the blind and the lame, was kissed by Judas, accepted death on a cross, and so on. In making such statements, of course, we are not saying that CHN was the *person* who did or suffered all these things. For the only person involved in the Incarnation is the Son, the selfsame person who existed eternally before CHN came to be. Still, because the Son did these things through the created body and soul that make up CHN, it is entirely appropriate to see CHN as the immediate, and the Son as the ultimate, possessor of the characteristics involved.

Molinism and the freedom of the Son's human nature

Molina clearly believed that his theory of middle knowledge had significant ramifications for our understanding not only of the general notion of divine providence, but also of the specific doctrine of the Incarnation. In particular, he

seems to have felt that it was only by adopting a Molinist stance that we can resolve a particularly thorny Christological puzzle.[9]

The puzzle he had in mind concerns the freedom of the human nature assumed by the Son. On the one hand, we seem committed to saying that CHN cannot sin. For, since the Son is the only person involved in the Incarnation, it follows that what CHN does, the Son does. But the Son, as an essentially divine and hence essentially morally perfect being, cannot sin. On the other hand, to say that CHN was not free to sin seems to lessen (perhaps even to eliminate) the meritorious nature of CHN's accepting death on a cross.[10] Furthermore, denying CHN true moral freedom makes it difficult to see how we can take Christ's life as a model for our own. The book of Hebrews (4.15) tells us that we have in Jesus a Saviour 'who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin'. How can we take this claim seriously if we insist, not simply that CHN passed all such tests, but that CHN couldn't possibly have failed them?

Our quandary, then, is how to ascribe to the Son the impeccability his divine nature entails while also ascribing to him the kind of freedom his human nature and salvific mission seem to involve. Molina's solution to this puzzle, translated into contemporary language, seems to have been this. There is no possible world in which an assumed human nature sins. So, if CHN is assumed, it follows that CHN remains sinless. But being sinless does not entail being unable to sin, and as we have seen, CHN needed such freedom. It follows, then, that God must have arranged things in such a way that (i) CHN was placed in *freedom-retaining circumstances* (i.e. circumstances that left open to CHN the genuine option to sin), and yet (ii) CHN did not in fact sin in those circumstances. And how did God manage to arrange things in this way? By employing His middle knowledge as to how CHN would freely react if placed in various different circumstances. Given this middle knowledge, God decided both to assume CHN and to place it only in those circumstances in which He saw that CHN would freely avoid sin.

A bit of formalization might prove helpful here. Suppose that, prior to making any creative decision, God saw that each of the following contingent counterfactuals was true:

> (1) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances *C*, CHN would freely sin.[11]
> (2) If CHN were placed in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances *D*, CHN would freely refrain from sinning.[12]

In knowing (1), God would know that He could not create CHN, assume CHN, and place CHN in *C*. In knowing (2), though, God would know that He could create and assume CHN and place CHN in *D*. Since the circumstances *D* are freedom-retaining, CHN's freedom to sin would be assured. But God would know with certainty that CHN would not in fact employ its freedom wickedly. Therefore, both the

freedom of the assumed human nature and the impeccability of the divine person assuming that nature would be safeguarded.

Suppose we call an individual human nature *assumable* if and only if there are lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances such that the nature would remain sinless if placed in those circumstances.[13] Let us also agree to call a conditional that specifies circumstances in which a nature would freely refrain from sinning a *counterfactual of assumability*. Our conditional (2), then, is a counterfactual of assumability, one that tells God that CHN is assumable.

So Molinism seems to have an unexpected payoff when we turn our attention to the Incarnation: it does indeed offer us the resources to propose an intriguing solution to our Christological puzzle, a solution that applies a full-blooded libertarian sense of freedom to CHN without involving the Father in any risk that His anointed one might turn against Him.

Incarnational alternatives: six radical Molinist theses

We are now, at long last, prepared to consider the questions with which we began. What options, if any, did God have with respect to the Incarnation? Was the particular human nature He in fact assumed – the one we have been calling CHN – the only one He could have assumed? Or is it at least possible that He could have achieved the salvation of the human race by taking on some other human nature – even yours or mine?

As I see it, Molinism forces upon its adherents no particular answers to these questions. But it does, I think, open the door to certain responses that might initially seem rather radical. Indeed, 'open the door' seems to me too feeble a metaphor. More apt would be a picture of one swimming in a river where the current will naturally take one downstream unless considerable effort is expended to go in some other direction. If the river is Molinism, the flow, it seems to me, is decidedly toward those radical downstream waters.

I propose to present the drift toward this radical Molinist stance via a series of six loosely related theses, each arguably a tad more radical than its predecessor. My contention is not that the propositions in question are connected in a tight logical sense; just about anywhere in the series, one can declare 'So far, but no farther!' without fear of logical infelicities.[14] Still, I think there is a natural momentum at work here, such that, at any point in the series, acceptance of the earlier members makes acceptance of their successor seem eminently plausible. What might have looked like a radical modification of the doctrine of the Incarnation thus begins, little by little, to appear but a natural development of the doctrine.

Thesis 1: Necessarily, being assumable is a contingent feature of any assumable individual human nature

As we have seen, a human nature is assumable just in case there is a true counterfactual of assumability about that nature. For example, (2)'s being true entails that CHN is assumable. Now, counterfactuals of assumability are one and all contingent propositions. Since their antecedents make no claims concerning the actual assumptions of the natures involved, it is possible that any such counterfactual be false. Furthermore, it seems evident that counterfactuals of assumability are logically independent of one another; the truth or falsity of one such conditional entails nothing whatsoever about the truth or falsity of any other. So it's necessarily the case that, for any individual human nature, it's possible that every counterfactual of assumability about that nature be false. From this, of course, it follows that, necessarily, every human nature is such that, in some possible world, that nature is not assumable. So if a nature is assumable, that is only a contingent fact about the nature in question.

Thesis 2: It's possible that CHN was neither assumed nor assumable

This claim is virtually impossible to deny if thesis 1 is accepted. If every individual human nature is, at best, only contingently assumable, then CHN was only contingently assumable. From this it follows that there are possible worlds in which CHN was not assumable. And it seems obvious that, if there are worlds in which CHN was not assumable, there are worlds in which CHN was not assumed.[15]

Thesis 3: It's possible that there be an individual human nature distinct from CHN that was both assumable and assumed

If God knows by middle knowledge truths about how CHN would freely act if placed in the kinds of lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances which assumption might prescribe, there seems no reason to doubt that He knows such counterfactuals about other individual human natures as well. If He does, He surely might know that one of these other human natures was assumable. But suppose He saw that one such nature (call it X) was assumable, but that CHN was not assumable. It seems natural to conclude that, under such conditions, God might choose to create and assume X rather than CHN. So there are indeed possible worlds in which God assumes an individual human nature distinct from CHN.

***Thesis 4: It's possible that CHN exist as an independent, unassumed* suppositum**

Suppose that, as thesis 2 tells us is possible, CHN were neither assumable nor assumed. Suppose also that, as thesis 3 maintains could be the case, some nature other than CHN were assumed. Would it follow that CHN does not exist at all – that God decided not to create CHN? On the surface, there seems no good reason to think so. Knowing that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are not

propitious in the way assumability requires would, of course, preclude God's becoming incarnate via CHN. But why think it would preclude God's creating CHN and interacting with it as He interacts with his other human creatures? Given God's omnipotence, we ought not postulate limitations upon God's creative freedom unless we have a solid reason so to limit His options. Thus, it seems prima facie reasonable to assert that God could have created but not assumed CHN. And from this it follows that CHN was not (in the contemporary sense) *essentially* united to and sustained by a divine person.

Thesis 5: There are in the actual world individual human natures distinct from CHN that were assumable

Even if, as thesis 3 asserts, there are possible worlds in which a human nature other than CHN is assumable, it could be that no such nature actually exists. The fact that, in some possible world, God creates and assumes X gives us no right to conclude that God even creates X in the actual world, let alone that He assumes it here. Still, it seems hard to believe that, aside from CHN, *none* of the individual human natures God in fact created were, like CHN and X, assumable. We know that God has brought into existence billions and billions of such natures. While it is undeniably possible that not a single one of these natures (other than CHN) was assumable, such a claim hardly seems plausible. To be sure, we have no way of knowing *which* individual human natures were assumable – no way of knowing for sure, say, that Billy Graham *was* assumable, but Bill Clinton *wasn't*. Still, it would be highly presumptuous of us to suppose that *none* of the body–soul composites we bump into on a daily basis was such that the Son might have assumed it as easily as he in fact assumed CHN. Though not demonstrably true, then, thesis 5 still seems eminently reasonable.

Thesis 6: Necessarily, every human nature is possibly assumed

This claim follows from two other necessary propositions which, once one has moved through thesis 5, must surely seem credible. The first of these propositions is the claim that:

(a) Necessarily, for any individual human nature N, it's possible that N is assumable.

That is, for any human nature, there is a counterfactual of assumability about that nature such that, in some possible world, that counterfactual is true.

Now, to reject (a) would be to say that, in some possible world, there is an individual human nature which is not even possibly assumable. To say that a nature is not possibly assumable, though, is to say that, in every possible world, every counterfactual of assumability about that nature is false. But this would in turn be to say that every counterfactual of assumability about that nature is necessarily false. Since counterfactuals of assumability are only contingently true

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or false, though, the denial of (a) hardly seems reasonable. And the same, one might argue, goes for:

(b) Necessarily, if an individual human nature N is assumable, then it's possible that N is assumed.

To say that a certain nature is assumable, of course, is just to say that there are lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances in which that nature could be placed and in which it would remain sinless.Obviously, the fact that a nature is assumable hardly entails that the nature *is* assumed.But it seems far more reasonable to say that assumability entails at least the *possibility* of assumption. If God is omnipotent, and if He knew by middle knowledge that a certain human nature was assumable, then He would know that there is a feasible world in which that nature is assumed, for He would know that assuming the nature was one of the options open to Him.[16] To deny such an option to God would be once again to restrict divine freedom without reason.[17]

So there seems to be a strong case for saying that both (a) and (b) are true. And if they are, then thesis 6 can hardly be denied. We thus seem justified in concluding that, in every possible world, every individual human nature is such that it is assumed in some possible world. And this means, among other things, that each and every one of us is much more similar to CHN than we might have thought. For each of us is such that we are possibly united to a divine person in precisely the way that we believe CHN is in fact united. And that, it seems to me, is a claim that should, for most of us, alter our perception of the doctrine of the Incarnation – not in the sense of being at odds (so far as I know) with any official Church teaching concerning the Incarnation, but in the sense of construing that doctrine in a far more inclusive manner than most of us would reasonably have anticipated. To return to one of our earlier examples, we can hardly look at Bill Clinton in quite the same way if we believe that this very man is in some other possible world assumed by the Son of God.

Two objections to radical Molinism

There are many objections that might be raised to these six theses, or to the manner in which I have ordered them, or to the grounds offered in support of them. I propose here to address only two such objections. As we shall see, the first of these criticisms can be met much more readily than can the second. My intention, though, is to show that neither is fatal to the radical Molinist claims I have just outlined.

The first objector suggests that the radical position we have proposed is indicative of the arrogance endemic to academics engaged in philosophical theology. For what have we defended if not the idolatrous claim that each of us might have been God? Every individual human nature, according to thesis 6, is possibly assumed. But I, of course, just am an individual human nature. So *I* am possibly

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assumed. That is, in some possible world, I am united to the Son of God. But this means that, in some possible world, I am divine. But surely, the objector concludes, no true Christian can possibly agree to so patent a clouding of the distinction between the divine and the human. As our colleagues and spouses will quickly attest, we philosophers may often *act* as if we think we're God, but not even the most conceited among us *really* believes that such an identification is a genuine possibility. Since thesis 6 requires that this ludicrous position be embraced, none of us can reasonably view it as a live option – however much we might *wish* it were true.

Perhaps the first thing to say in response is that, if one is overly concerned about 'clouding the distinction between the divine and the human', one's problem is apt to be more with the doctrine of the Incarnation itself than with our Molinist extension of the doctrine. More seriously, though, I think the charge that thesis 6 clouds this distinction more than a Christian can tolerate is without foundation. For that thesis simply does not entail that there is a possible world in which I am God. What it entails is that there is a possible world in which I am assumed by a divine person. But to be assumed by a divine person is not to be a divine person; nor is it to be divine.

Take the case of CHN, which we Christians believe was in fact assumed by a divine person. Is CHN *itself* a divine person? No, for CHN is not a person at all; *pace* Nestorianism, the *only* person involved in the Incarnation is the second person of the Trinity. Is CHN *itself* divine? Again, I think we must answer, no. CHN is united to the Son in an unfathomably intimate way, but not in such a fashion that CHN is no longer distinguishable from the Son. And one of the principal ways in which the two are to be distinguished is that only the latter is strictly and unqualifiedly divine.

What is in fact true of CHN, according to thesis 6, is possibly true of each of us. But then, in affirming that each of us is possibly assumed, one is not saying that each of us is possibly divine, or possibly a divine person. And so our first objection has been met. Molinists, like other philosophers, may still need to plead guilty to the charge of arrogance, but it is at least not arrogance on quite so gargantuan a scale.

The second objection contends that the radical position outlined above is committed to a noteworthy ontological claim: that *being a person* is a quality which an individual human nature either has or lacks contingently. As we have seen, orthodoxy entails that CHN is not itself a person, for there is only one person involved in the Incarnation, and that person is the Son. Even so, if thesis 4 is true, CHN could have been a person, for it could have been created without being assumed by God, in which case it would have been a *suppositum* in its own right. So, according to thesis 4, an individual human nature which is *not* a person contingently *lacks* the property of being a person. Thesis 6, on the other hand, entails that human natures which *are* persons *possess* this property only

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contingently. If every human nature is possibly assumed, then each human nature is such that it could have existed without itself being a human person. For if a nature is assumed, that nature is not itself a person, but is instead sustained by the Son. If thesis 6 is accepted, then, human natures which are persons are only contingently so. Therefore, theses 4 and 6 taken together entail that individual human natures cannot be either essentially persons or essentially not persons.

Why think this commitment puts the radical Molinist in jeopardy? Because, some would argue, being a person cannot have so tenuous a tie to a nature. Alfred Freddoso, for example, asks us to consider the following valid argument which Socrates might offer:

(3) I am identical with Socrates.
(4) I cannot exist without being a person.

So,

(5) Socrates cannot exist without being a person.

The radical Molinist view we have examined would accept (3) but reject (5); hence, it must be denying (4) as well.[18] 'But this', says Freddoso, 'is a manifest repugnancy which flouts our deepest convictions about ourselves and which the doctrine of the Incarnation can in no way be thought to sanction'. Such a view, he concludes, is 'utterly bereft of merit'; it is, as he puts it elsewhere, 'extraordinarily implausible' and 'wholly unacceptable'.[19]

Freddoso's attack is clearly rich in rhetorical flourishes. Unfortunately, it seems relatively poor in logical force. Freddoso is surely right in suggesting that (4) seems to have the ring of truth to it, for denying it might be thought equivalent to asserting that I could exist in an utterly non-personal manner. But reflection on the Incarnation should teach us, if nothing else, that we need to lend an especially close ear to propositions involving natures and persons. In fact, those who reject (4) needn't claim that a human nature could exist where no person exists. They might instead be maintaining only that the human nature need not be identical to that person. That is, they might be replacing (4) with:

(4*) I cannot exist without either being a person or being sustained by a person.

Human natures which are not assumed satisfy (4*) by themselves being persons. Natures (such as CHN) which are assumed satisfy (4*) by being sustained by a divine person. So far as I can see, (4*) adequately supports the intuition Freddoso sought to encapsulate via (4), and manages thereby to defend the radical Molinist stance in a manner which is neither unacceptable, nor implausible, nor repugnant, nor bereft of merit.

Of course, one might seek to push the radical Molinist in an even more radical direction, and seek thereby to discredit the position itself. For example, one might

argue that, if we grant that an individual human nature might be only *contingently* a person, we have no reason to doubt that such a nature might be only *temporarily* a person. That is, the radical Molinist should concur with Scotus and Ockham in contending that assumption could be a temporary episode in a nature's life – that the nature might be, say, unassumed (and hence a person) on Monday, assumed (and hence not a person) on Tuesday, and then unassumed (and hence once again a person) on Wednesday.[20]

While I concede that the radical Molinist *could* adopt this position, it seems to me that she *needn't* do so, and hence needn't be marred by the blemishes which allegedly disfigure it. Indeed, she might think there is good reason *not* to adopt the Ockhamist view that personhood could be temporary, for she might think there are sound moral or metaphysical reasons for God not to treat a human nature in this way. On the one hand, to 'cut loose' an assumed nature would surely be a most ungracious act on God's part. For to dissolve so intimate a union with a human nature would be to deprive it of an infinite good, and to do so without sufficient moral cause, for, as we have seen, an assumed nature commits no sin. On the other hand, to assume a nature which at first existed on its own would be to eliminate that nature's personhood. What was a human person would, via assumption, cease to be one. Where we once had two persons – the Son and the nature in question – we would now have only one. To be sure, if union with the Son really is the infinite good we asserted it to be, then God could hardly be thought to have harmed a nature by assuming it, for the nature would have lost a finite good (being a person), but gained an infinite one (being sustained by a divine person). Still, I think one can justifiably doubt that a good God would play this game of metaphysical tag with His universe. Far better and wiser, one might think, would be a God who creates certain types of things – iguanas, rabbits, human persons – and endeavours to perfect them as they are, without robbing them of the goods they naturally possess.

Indeed, it seems to me that the position I have suggested here – that being a person is always a contingent but never a temporary feature of an individual human nature – has a notable proponent in Thomas Aquinas. As Freddoso has shown, there is strong textual support for the claim that Aquinas would have rejected the Ockhamist contention that a human nature could be temporarily assumed.[21] But does it follow that Aquinas would also have denied the radical Molinist claim that personhood could be a contingent feature of a human nature? 'Here', Freddoso concedes, 'things get a bit murkier'.[22] Indeed they do. Freddoso attempts to extend St Thomas's arguments against the Ockhamist position into arguments against the radical Molinist one, but it is far from clear that such extensions are justified. Furthermore, Freddoso offers not a single passage from Aquinas which seems at odds with the radical Molinist claim. This is especially interesting since there *are* Thomistic passages that prima facie seem to be assuming that what I have called CHN *could* have been a human person. For

example, in his reply to the third objection to the Second Article ('Whether the Son of God Assumed a Person') of Question 4 in Part III of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas says:

> **Absorption does not here imply the destruction of anything pre-existing, but the hindering what might otherwise have been. For if the human nature [i.e., CHN] had not been assumed by a Divine Person, the human nature would have had its own personality; and in this way is it said, although improperly, that the Person *absorbed the person*, inasmuch as the Divine Person by His union hindered the human nature from having its personality.**[23]

As Freddoso notes, the Latin term *personalitas*, unfortunately translated here as 'personality', has nothing to do with 'character traits and temperament', but instead stands simply for *personhood* – i.e. for the property of being a person.[24] On the surface, then, it surely looks as though Aquinas is, in effect, saying here that CHN might have existed as an unassumed human person. Freddoso would no doubt respond that St Thomas may have been thinking of the conditionals involved here ('if the human nature had not been assumed') as having impossible antecedents.[25] While I grant that this is possible, Aquinas gives us absolutely no hint in such passages that he thinks of the antecedents as impossible. Hence, it seems to me that a philosopher with no axe to grind would be unlikely to see him as making such a tacit assumption. And thus my inclination (for what it is worth – this is really a matter for Thomistic scholars to decide) is to see St Thomas as an advocate of the radical Molinist claim that a nature could contingently lack personhood.

I see no reason to assume, then, that one who thinks of personhood as a contingent feature of a human nature is thereby committed to thinking of it as possibly only a temporary feature.[26] The radical Molinist view seems to be genuinely independent of the Ockhamist stance, and thus not automatically discredited by the supposed implausibility of the latter. And so our second objection to our six theses seems inconclusive at best.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Molinism seems naturally to engender an understanding of the possibilities of Incarnation that, I suspect, few Christians consciously embrace. We have examined two objections to this radical Molinist view, and seen that neither offers a convincing refutation of it. Of course, it hardly follows that the Molinist would be fully justified in wedding herself to such a view. Perhaps one of the objections we have explored can be easily recast in a more potent fashion; perhaps other difficulties with one or more of our six theses can be readily detected. Still, until such objections can actually be mustered, I think the radical view is well worth the Molinist's serious attention. And, of course, since I also think Molinism is well worth the attention of every serious Christian, it follows that, on my view, the radical position is one that all Christians would do well to consider carefully.[27]

Notes

1. For much richer presentations of the issues addressed in these three sections of the paper, see my '"A death he freely accepted": Molinist reflections on the Incarnation', *Faith and Philosophy*, **18** (2001), 3–20.
2. See Thomas P. Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 40.
3. Why do I say 'speaking loosely' here? Because the counterfactuals cannot refer to the creatures themselves. Why not? Because they need to guide God in His creative decisions; hence, they need to be available to Him logically prior to His determining which beings to create. Some of the counterfactuals, then, will turn out to be about 'possible but non-actual beings'. If we feel (as we should) that, strictly speaking, there *are* no possible-but-not-actual beings, then we can stipulate that the relevant counterfactuals refer to creaturely essences rather than to creatures themselves. For more on this issue, see Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 46–50.
4. For more on Molina's view as set forth in his *Concordia*, see Alfred J. Freddoso (ed. and transl.) *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). Further references to this work will refer to it simply as *Concordia*.
5. The position sketched here is defended in much greater detail in my *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Pts 1 and 2.
6. Contemporary readers inclined to read the term *nature* as referring to a type of property should make special note of the fact that the kind of natures I am thinking of here are concrete particulars, not abstract objects.
7. Many contemporary theorists would deny this traditional understanding of the Incarnation. For example, some would say that the Son did not assume a distinct created human soul, but simply acquired particular properties (e.g., being related to a specific human body in a certain way); taking on such properties, they suggest, is sufficient to make the Son human. (See, for example, Richard Swinburne *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), ch. 9, especially 212–215.) Though entering this controversy is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems clear to me that the alternatives are markedly inferior with respect to avoiding Christological heresies.
8. I have chosen to avoid masculine pronouns for CHN in order to preclude Nestorian readings of sentences involving such pronouns. Hence, I shall consistently refer to CHN as *it* rather than as *he*.
9. For Molina's discussion of this issue, see *Concordia*, 265–273.
10. I am assuming here that Jesus had a moral obligation to abide by the Father's will that he accept death on a cross. In other words, the refusal of the human will to align itself with the divine will would have been sinful. Like Molina (and, I might add, his opponents such as Zumel), I find this assumption eminently reasonable. Those who doubt it, though, should note that the puzzle we are discussing remains so long as we grant that, at *some* point in his life, Jesus was free with regard to *some* morally significant activity.
11. By *lifelong* circumstances, I mean circumstances that specify a complete set of situations in which CHN might be placed over the course of its life.
12. Note an important fact about the antecedents in (1) and (2). Middle knowledge, as we saw, is knowledge of contingent truths. So (1) and (2) are part of middle knowledge only if they are contingently true or false. But neither of these conditionals could be contingent if the circumstances mentioned in their antecedents included CHN's being assumed, for as we have seen, it is impossible for an assumed human nature to sin. Neither *C* nor *D*, then, can include CHN's being assumed. And from a Molinist perspective, this restriction makes perfect sense. For the circumstances in which a creature acts includes only those states of affairs over which the creature has absolutely no control *B*, that is, only those states of affairs that still would have obtained no matter what action within its power the creature had performed. But *CHN's being assumed* is not a state of affairs that was in this sense beyond CHN's power during CHN's earthly existence. For if CHN was significantly free, then it had the power to do something (namely, sin) such that, were it to have done it, it never would have been assumed. *CHN's being assumed*, then, was not a hard, fixed, settled state of affairs so long as CHN was significantly free, and hence cannot plausibly be included in the circumstances in which CHN acted. For a related discussion, see my 'A new anti-anti-Molinist argument', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 299–305.

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13. I presuppose here that if a nature freely refrains from sin, then the circumstances in which it acts leave it genuinely free to sin. A nature can be in lifelong freedom-retaining circumstances, then, only if it faces morally significant choices.
14. I say 'just about anywhere' rather than simply 'anywhere' because it is very hard to see how a Molinist could deny thesis 1, or (having accepted thesis 1) deny thesis 2.
15. It should be obvious in any event that there are worlds in which CHN isn't assumed. For surely there are worlds in which there *are* no individual human natures. In such worlds, of course, CHN doesn't even exist, and so a fortiori isn't assumed.
16. To say that a world is feasible is to say that the world is one which God in fact has the option to actualize, given the truths He knows via middle knowledge. Given Molinism, the set of feasible worlds is necessarily a proper subset of the set of possible worlds. (For more on feasibility and possibility, see my *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, 51–54.) As the discerning reader will note, the argument in the text would support a claim somewhat stronger than (b), namely, (b*) 'Necessarily, if an individual human nature N is assumable, then there is a feasible world in which N is assumed'. Since (b*) is not needed to support thesis 6, though, I have focused on the weaker (b) instead.
17. Could it be that assumability is but *one* of *several* necessary conditions for being assumed? Perhaps. But, defenders of thesis 6 might ask, what would the *other* necessary conditions be? More precisely, what other conditions might there be which a human nature that was assumable might fail to satisfy? If we cannot come up with some plausible candidates, then why think there *are* other interesting necessary conditions?
18. In saying that the radical Molinist accepts (3), I mean, of course, that she would think that (3) is true when said by Socrates. And in saying that she rejects (5), we are assuming that 'Socrates' is being used as a name for the relevant body–soul composite.
19. Alfred J. Freddoso 'Human nature, potency and the Incarnation', *Faith and Philosophy*, **3** (1986), 37.
20. *Ibid*., 30–38.
21. *Ibid*., 45–48.
22. *Ibid*., 48.
23. Translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, in *Summa Theologica*, vol. 4 (Westminster MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 20–47.
24. Freddoso 'Human nature', 50, n. 7.
25. For Freddoso's discussion of such conditionals, see *ibid*., 43–45.
26. Not surprisingly, there *are* some interesting properties in the neighborhood that *do* seem to be temporary properties. For example, it *does* seem plausible to say that *being human* (i.e., *being a man*) was an on-again, off-again property of the Son. The Son was not human (prior to the Incarnation), then human (from the birth to the death of CHN), then not human (from the death of CHN to the Resurrection), then human (after the Resurrection). Or so at least Aquinas (quite reasonably, I think) believed; see *Summa Theologica*, Part 3, Q. 50, Art. 4. It's also intriguing to note that, even if *being a person* is a property that *cannot* be a temporary feature of an individual human nature, *being part of a person* is a property that *can* be a temporary feature of a *part* of an individual human nature. The human soul, as part of an individual human nature, is part of a person before death, and part of the same person once reunited with its body after the general resurrection. But between death and resurrection, there is no body–soul composite, and hence no individual human nature, and hence no person. The sole exception here would be the soul of CHN, which remained united to the Son during the three days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The typical human soul that survives death, though, is (prior to the resurrection) neither a person nor a part of a person. (See again Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt 1, Q. 29, Art. 1.) Thus, the soul is first part of a person, then not part of a person, then once again part of a person.
27. A version of this paper was given at the Wheaton College Philosophy Conference in October 2000. In addition, earlier versions of a much longer essay that included an ancestor of this paper were presented to the Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion Discussion Group and at the Society of Christian Philosophers session at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meetings in December 1998. I am grateful to those who attended these various sessions (especially the members of the Center for Philosophy of Religion) for their help with the paper. Special thanks also go to David Hunt, William Craig, William Hasker, Hugh McCann, Scott Davison, Stewart Goetz, and Paul Griffiths for stimulating and challenging comments and questions.