

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# God Did Not Choose to Save the World by Talk: E.L. Mascall on the Incarnation and Its Consequences

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## Abstract

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## Introduction

In his obituary of Eric Mascall, John Macquarrie said of him that he was ‘a cleric who combined learning and orthodoxy with rationality, an honest regard for truth with courtesy toward those who differed, and tempered it all with a sense of humour’. Indeed, he feared that Mascall might have been ‘the last of a type which the Church of England can ill afford to lose’<sup>1</sup>.

I am inclined to think that Fr Macquarrie was right, and I hope I am able to contribute something towards making sure that does not happen. And Mascall is not the only Catholic Anglican whose work and whose memory will not survive unless we, by whom I mean Catholic Anglicans, keep them alive. We have a rich stream of Anglican writings from which to draw Catholic teaching. What follows, after a bit of scene setting in respect of the man himself, is some thinking about Mascall’s Christology, both in relation to the Incarnation and the Eucharist. I would, in fact, contend that Mascall is quite right to emphasize the importance of the permanence of the human nature taken by the Logos, and on the threefold nature of the Body of Christ: the Body as it continues to exist in heaven, the Body of Christ which is his Church, and the Body of Christ which, in the Eucharist, sustains the Church on its pilgrim way.

Mascall’s autobiography was written near the end of his long life, published by Gracewing in 1992, the year before he died at the age of 88.<sup>2</sup> The name Mascall, he tells us, shares an etymology with Marshall, which, as he said, may help with the

<sup>1</sup>*The Independent*, 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1993.

<sup>2</sup>*Saraband: The Memoirs of E.L. Mascall* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1992).



pronunciation. Eric Lionel Mascall was born in 1905 and went to read mathematics at Pembroke College Cambridge in 1924. He was ordained deacon in 1932 and priest the following year. His main teaching posts were at Christ Church, Oxford, from 1945 to 1962, during which time he took on a university lectureship in the philosophy of religion, and he went from there to King's College London to take up a Chair (invented for him) in Historical Theology. He was there from 1962 to 1973, becoming Dean of the Theology Faculty in 1968. He was still publishing until 1986, well into his twenty-year retirement; he died in February 1993.

And I would venture to say that, at the time of the publication in the early 1980s of that most important of historical documents relating to the modern Church of England, *Not the Church Times*<sup>3</sup>, he was (in a manner of speaking) a household name in Anglican circles. And yet when the SCM Dictionary of Christian Theology became the New Dictionary of Christian Theology in 1983, all of Mascall's thirty entries had been excised, and of the two most substantial, his entry on Eucharistic Theology had been replaced by one by a lay American Roman Catholic called Joseph Martos, described by the National Catholic Reporter as 'theologian, professor, sacramental scholar, businessman and social activist', and Mascall's entry on the Blessed Virgin Mary had been replaced by one on 'Mariology' by Rosemary Radford Ruether. Mascall's article began with the words, 'The references to Mary in the NT are few in number, but they are significant . . .'. The reworked article begins, 'The NT references to Mary, the mother of Jesus, are few and ambivalent'.

But let us cheer ourselves up by reflecting at this point on how Mascall viewed theology and the task of the theologian. He never wavered from his belief, set out in an early work called *Death or Dogma*, written when he was teaching at Lincoln Theological College that the purpose of theology is to 'advance our understanding of the Christian religion', and that 'theologizing is a function of [the theologian's] membership of the Christian Church [which] takes place under the illumination of the Christian religion'.<sup>4</sup> Theology is not, he believed, historical study, literary criticism, archaeology, anthropology or indeed psychology; what is needed of the theologian, he says, is 'an intense conviction of the truth and vitality of the Christian religion, a confidence in the relevance of theology to matters outside the academic sphere, and a combination of humility with intellectual integrity'.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of his time at King's College, London, he put it thus:

As I see it, the task of the Christian theologian is that of theologising within the great historical Christian tradition; *theologizandum est in fide*. Even when he feels constrained to criticise adversely the contemporary expressions of the tradition, he will be conscious that he is bringing out from the depths of the tradition its latent and hitherto unrecognised contents; he is acting as its organ and its exponent. He will also offer his own contribution for it to digest and assimilate if it can. Like the good householder he will bring out of his treasure

<sup>3</sup>1982.

<sup>4</sup>*Death or Dogma* (SPCK, 1937), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>*Theology and History* (Faith Press 1962), p. 5. This was Mascall's inaugural lecture as Professor of Historical Theology in the University of London.

things new and old. But he will have no other gospel than that which he has received.<sup>6</sup>

We might also compare a section in his book *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, which he wrote after retiring, in 1977. The section is called, 'What is Christian Theology?', and he defines it as 'an ecclesial activity concerned with the revelation given by God to man through Christ in his Church'.<sup>7</sup>

The theologian himself is a member of the Church, baptized into Christ and living by the sacraments. Since grace perfects nature and does not destroy it, whatever natural gifts he has of intelligence and judgement will find ample scope for their operation, but within the climate of faith, hope and charity and as renewed and strengthened by it. And because the world is God's world, created and renewed by him, theology will have much to say about the world and the way in which man should handle it as God's vice-gerent. God forbid that theology should be secularized, but there must be a theology of the secular.<sup>8</sup>

### The Thread that Joins them All

Mascall taught at Lincoln theological college from 1937 to 1945, and his work on natural theology, *He Who Is*, was published towards the end of his time there (1943),<sup>9</sup> but by then, he had written three short works of what might then have been termed 'popular theology', *Death or Dogma*, 1937, which was followed in 1940 by two volumes in an SCM series called 'Signposts', which he edited, namely *Man: His Origin and Destiny* and *The God-Man*. In each of these, we can begin to discern clear themes which were to maintain their place in Mascall's thinking for the rest of his life.<sup>10</sup>

As he said of the Incarnation in *Death or Dogma*, 'What man could not do for himself God has come to do for him'.<sup>11</sup> The solution to the raft of problems thrown up by human pride can only come from God through the Incarnation: 'Actions speak louder than words, and this is consummately true of the redemption of the human race. *Non in dialectico complacuit Deo salvum facere mundum*. God did not choose to save the world by talk'. There, perhaps, we have our starting point. God did not choose to save the world by talking about it.

<sup>6</sup>*T & H*, p. 17. It might perhaps be worth noting that Mascall liked this idea enough to quote the paragraph in *Saraband*.

<sup>7</sup>SPCK; p. 35, within Chapter 1, 'The Nature and Task of Theology'.

<sup>8</sup>*TGC* p. 36f. Mascall goes on to criticize J.L. Houlden, D.E. Nineham and M.F. Wiles for adopting the idea that theology must be secularized and makes the point that, since Wiles 'recognizes that that outlook is itself relative and transitory [so] his own remaking of Christian doctrine will have no permanence'. (p. 39) By its own logic, this theological method quickly manifests itself as 'the first form of Christianity in which the deity of Jesus is looked upon as optional'. (p. 40).

<sup>9</sup>Longmans, Green and Co.

<sup>10</sup>For the sake of completeness, it might also be noted that he produced a volume in 1939 called *A Guide to Mount Carmel*, as an introduction to the works of St John of the Cross. (Dacre Press).

<sup>11</sup>*D or D*, p. 57.

Let us, then, turn to the work which made Mascall's name as a young theologian, *Christ, the Christian and the Church* (1946). In it, he says he attempts to 'expound the doctrine of the Incarnation as being *the re-creation of human nature by its elevation into union with the pre-existent Son and Word of God*, who is the Second Person of the Ever-blessed Trinity'.<sup>12</sup> And here he emphasizes the point that, in order to do justice to the theology of the Incarnation, we need not only to 'give full emphasis to the truth that in the Incarnate Lord the eternal Word is living a fully human life and really undergoing the whole range of experiences which a concrete human nature unavoidably entails' (expressed biblically as 'The Word was made flesh'), but we must also keep in mind the logic of the Athanasian Creed that the 'enfleshment' of the Word which we call the Incarnation took place 'not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God'. And at this point, Mascall makes the confident assertion that 'this doctrine is the essential foundation of the life of the Christian'.<sup>13</sup> And here we should note this fundamental point to which Mascall returns again and again, namely the importance of the *permanence* of the manhood taken by the Son.

Mascall notes that the truths of the Incarnation are simply stated in words of one syllable, but that those words test the human intellect: 'The Word was God', and 'The Word was made flesh'. He guides the reader through the theology of the Council of Nicaea, whose primary concern was the first of those statements, and then of the Councils of Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon, whose primary concern was the second. And Mascall defends orthodox Christian doctrine against those who would claim that all this must necessarily involve a change in the Godhead, that the Incarnation renders it impossible that God can continue to be immutable and impassible.

For Mascall, as later for his doctoral student Fr Thomas Weinandy, such a change would involve 'an importation into Christianity from the post-Cartesian period, with its reluctance to conceive of God as truly infinite and as essentially of a different order from his creatures'.<sup>14</sup> And because the Incarnation takes place 'not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God', we can also affirm that included within that immutability is an understanding of (quoting St Thomas) 'The Word of God proceeding forth, yet leaving not his Father's side'.<sup>15</sup> He goes on to take issue with a contemporary trend among English theologians which turns the Incarnation into 'a degradation of the divine Person rather than an exaltation of the human nature. It is therefore hardly surprising that so many of them condemn scholastic Christology as monophysite in tendency, and that they are on the whole so sympathetic to Nestorius and so critical of St Cyril'.<sup>16</sup>

Rather, the Incarnation is an adding-to of the work of the Second Person of the Trinity, who does not cease to be the creator and sustainer of the universe, but who now accrues the living of a human life which, 'like the creation of the world . . .

<sup>12</sup>*Christ, the Christian and the Church* (Longmans, Green & Co), p. 68. My italics.

<sup>13</sup>CCC p. 68.

<sup>14</sup>CCC p. 14.

<sup>15</sup>CCC p. 15, quoting the office hymn *Verbum supernum*.

<sup>16</sup>CCC p. 15. He is taking issue with, among others, W.R. Matthews and H.M. Relton, and to an extent Charles Gore – to which theme he warms further in Chapter 2.

manifests his divinity, [but] does not either augment or diminish it. Both creation and incarnation have their *terminus ad quem* within the finite order'.<sup>17</sup> And whilst God creates beings-in-time, he does not do so from within the limitations of time, and the same is true of the Incarnation: it is not 'in time' for the eternal Word, but it is 'in time' for the human nature assumed by him.<sup>18</sup> And that human nature is particularized not in any pre-existing human being or beings, but in 'the one and only historical individual in whom the Word was made flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary',<sup>19</sup> and therefore concrete in that Person, but universal to mankind. Just as creation involves not only the act of creating but also of sustaining in being that which has been created, so too 'incarnation can either mean the act by which, at a particular moment on the first Lady Day, the divine Word united human nature to himself in the womb of Mary, or it can mean the continuous act by which from that moment until the end of time his human nature is bound to his divine Person, so that he is man for evermore'.<sup>20</sup>

The human nature and the divine nature are united in one divine Person, and

The Person of the Word and his divine nature are, in the scholastic phrase, really identical and only logically distinct. . . . The divine Person and the human nature, on the other hand, although they are united to each other in the most intimate way . . . are not absolutely identical. The divine nature belongs to the Word from all eternity, in virtue of the very fact that he is the Word . . . while his human nature was taken by him at a particular moment in the world's history.<sup>21</sup>

There was a point, in other words, at which the Word became man, whereas there was never a point at which he became God. But from that point at which the Word was made flesh, the divine Word is the subject of two natures, as defined by the Council of Chalcedon, 'unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, the difference of the natures being in no way removed because of the union but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring into one Person and one hypostasis'.<sup>22</sup>

Mascall has no truck with those who would seek to reinterpret or abandon the Chalcedonian definition, which is a key element in his work, as, for instance, when he is unpicking the Kenotic Christology of the likes of Charles Gore, H.M. Relton and 'even' Frank Weston. 'Kenotic' Christology, for Mascall, arises from a subtle deformation of Chalcedonian dogma: 'In theology, as in other intellectual pursuits, cooking the working is disreputable; but cooking the question is unforgiveable'.<sup>23</sup> The human nature is an instrument, not a fetter.

<sup>17</sup>CCC p. 16.

<sup>18</sup>Cf CCC p. 17.

<sup>19</sup>CCC p. 19.

<sup>20</sup>CCC p. 19. My italics.

<sup>21</sup>CCC p. 20.

<sup>22</sup>From the Definition. See, for instance, J. Stevenson, *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies*, SPCK 1989, p. 353.

<sup>23</sup>CCC p. 48.

## The Importance of Chalcedon

As we have come to the Chalcedonian definition, allow me to draw the reader's attention to a work of Mascall's from 1956, *Via Media*, and in particular to the chapter called 'Unconfused union'. The Son of God is at once God and man:

the whole of the incarnate life is the life of God-made-man, and Christ's acts are the acts of God-in-manhood. Some of them may show more clearly than others that the personal subject of these acts is not a man but God; none of them, however, are acts of the divine nature operating independently of the manhood, for any such acts would, like the act by which the divine Word sustains the universe, fall outside the sphere of the Incarnate life altogether.<sup>24</sup>

This is of great importance in understanding Mascall's emphasis on the permanence of the human nature taken by the Word.

Chalcedon, Mascall would say, took the steam out of the controversies it set out to resolve. As he put it succinctly in *The God-Man*:

It [the Chalcedonian Definition] means simply this: Jesus Christ was not a man who became God or was given the honorary rank of God; nor was he God taking the appearance of man without really being man. He is God who became man. He has been God from all eternity, and he always will be God. But at a particular moment of time he took to himself a human nature, and in that human nature he died and rose again and ascended into Heaven. He always was God; he has become man; and he remains God and man forever. That is all that the Chalcedonian Definition proclaims, and it is something that a child can understand.<sup>25</sup>

Mascall wants to defend the Chalcedonian Definition from the charge of formalism.<sup>26</sup> 'The fundamental wonder and mystery of the Incarnation is that it is possible for a created nature, without being destroyed or absorbed, to inhere in an uncreated Person. 'God has become man; a man has not become God'.<sup>27</sup>

On this matter, it is helpful to remember, as Mascall notes in *The God-Man* in a straightforward defence of the Virgin Birth, that what lies behind this doctrine is not an impossibly complex point: the Word who takes flesh is a pre-existing Person, the Second Person of the Trinity. 'The procreation of an ordinary human being means not only the beginning of a human *nature* but also the production of a human *person*; until we were conceived by the action of our parents we simply did not exist at all. In contrast to this, the Son of God existed from all eternity as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; all that he had to do in order to become man was to acquire a human nature, and this human nature was taken by him in the womb of

<sup>24</sup>*Via Media* (Longmans, Green and Co, 1956), p. 97f.

<sup>25</sup>*The God-Man* p. 37f, at the end of Chapter II, The Man who is God.

<sup>26</sup>Cf Prestige: the final chapters of both *Fathers and Heretics*, from which Mascall quotes at length (*Via Media* p. 100f) and *God in Patristic Thought*. 'Formalism triumphs, and the living figure of the evangelical Redeemer is desiccated to a logical mummy'.

<sup>27</sup>VM p. 109.

Mary' . . . 'the Incarnation does not mean the beginning of a new person; it means the provision of a human nature for one who already existed as God'.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, Mascall tests the point that 'In God, we have said, nature and Person are substantially identical; and what else can we say, since God is all that he has? In him there are neither accidents nor mutability'.<sup>29</sup> 'In God, nature and Person are identical as regards their *substantia* or *ousia*', and the 'union of humanity and divinity in Christ takes place in the divine Person of the Son, and not in the divine nature'.<sup>30</sup>

So 'the Person of the Son is substantially identical' with the other Persons of the Trinity, but 'human nature is not united directly to the divine nature – for in that case the whole trinity of Persons would be incarnate – but to the Person of the Son'. Hence, the 'Unconfused Union' of the chapter title. The rest of the Trinity does not become incarnate,<sup>31</sup> yet, given the communication of idioms, we are able to say that 'God has suffered', or that 'The Ancient of Days is an hour or two old', whilst being aware that it is in his human nature (only) that God suffers or is a particular age. There are things that can be said of the nature that cannot be said of the Person, and vice versa. There is a distinction between the divinity which is common to the Persons of the Trinity, and Mascall teases these themes out drawing on Louis Bouyer and Jean Galot in *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*. We can indeed say, 'God has suffered', but we cannot say that 'Godhead' or 'Divinity' suffered. Likewise, we can say that a man, Jesus, sustains the universe in being, but we cannot say that his manhood sustains it. 'By the attribution to either personal name of the properties of both natures we maintain the unity of the Person; by refusing to attribute the properties of either nature to the other we maintain the distinction of the natures'.

And in the Incarnation, 'The humanity of Christ fails to personalise itself in a human person not because anything is lacking in it, but because it has been exalted to the stupendous dignity of being personalized (*enhypostasized*) in the Person of God the Son'.<sup>32</sup>

And Mascall would have us keep in mind the relevance of the union of the two natures, since our many (human) natures as individual human beings are united in the one human nature of Christ, and hence worship the divine Person and receive divine grace.<sup>33</sup> 'That we are here confronted with a most profound mystery we should be only too eager to admit; what could be more amazing than that the Creator should become subject of a created nature which can exist at all only as completely dependent on him?'

<sup>28</sup>*The God-Man* p. 42f. Mascall goes on, 'And it is true as a matter of experience that, when anyone claims to believe in the Incarnation but not the Virgin Birth, he is nearly always found, on closer examination, to be really an adoptionist . . .'

<sup>29</sup>*VM* p. 109f. The section which begins here is called 'Unity in the Person'.

<sup>30</sup>*VM* p. 110.

<sup>31</sup>*VM* pp. 109–111.

<sup>32</sup>*VM* pp. 112–114. The hymn from which Mascall quotes 'The ancient of days is an hour or two old' is 'The great God of heaven is come down to earth'.

<sup>33</sup>*VM* p. 156 This is from Chapter IV, 'Deified Creaturehood', on Grace. 'The union of two natures, a human and a divine, in one person infinitely exceeds in its wonder and its mystery the union of many persons in the human nature of Christ, which is what we normally have in mind when we speak of grace'. As Mascall says at the end of the book (p. 165), his four 'problems' (Creation, Incarnation, Trinity, Grace) 'are themselves interrelated', and 'discussion of any one of them throws light upon the others'.



Beata mater munere,  
 cujus supernus artifex,  
 mundum pugillo continens,  
 ventris sub arca clausus est'.<sup>34</sup>

### Mascall and Other Theologians

The author of Mascall's entry in the Dictionary of National Biography, Brian Hebblethwaite, divided his work into 'positive' theology, and theology which by implication he regarded as 'negative'. I am more inclined to believe that Mascall was doing a great deal of positive theology when he took on other theologians. I think it is worth noting that Mascall is less interested in German liberal protestants than he is in (for instance) Catholic theologians in the French-speaking world. I might have gone into his work on Sonship and Sacrifice, and his interest in the work of Eugène Masure, who was director of the Grand Séminaire at Lille, who wrote *Le Sacrifice du Chef* in 1932 and *Le Sacrifice du Corps Mystique* in 1950.<sup>35</sup> Mascall writes on the question of what sacrifice fundamentally *is*, which is very much to the fore in the earlier of the Masure books, and then the matter of the sacrifice of Christ as it gives context to his discussion of the Eucharist.

And we might refer to Mascall's friend Dom Gregory Dix here. Dix brings us back to Mascall's persistent theme of the eternal manhood of Jesus Christ: for Dix, the picture-language of the entering-in of the eternal Saviour into his eternal Kingdom that we encounter in scripture is the attempt 'to represent that real entrance of the temporal into the eternal, which is just as much a consequence of the incarnation as the irruption of the eternal into time. There is about them a "once-for-all" quality in consequence of which there is (paradoxically) something new but permanent in eternity, just as there is something new but enduring in time'. And Dix ties the themes together: 'It is this *double and mutual repercussion of time and eternity upon each other* in that act of God which is the redemption of the world by Jesus of Nazareth, that is the essence of primitive christian eschatology. And of this the supreme expression from the beginning is the eucharist'.<sup>36</sup>

I think the point about who Mascall chose to draw on in his writing is an important one, not least in relation to his ecumenical engagement. Anyone interested in his thinking on Grace should look not only at *Via Media*, but also at a brief lecture series he gave in 1973, published as *Nature and Supernature*, at the invitation of St Michael's Jesuit School of Philosophy and Letters at Gonzaga

<sup>34</sup>VM p. 118 Quoting a verse from the office hymn for the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Quem terra, pontus, aethera* which may be more familiar in J.M. Neale's translation: How blest that Mother, in whose shrine/the great Artificer Divine,/whose hand contains the earth and sky,/vouchsafed, as in His ark, to lie.

<sup>35</sup>Both were translated into English by Dom Illtyd Trethowan, respectively, as *The Christian Sacrifice* (1944) and *The Sacrifice of the Mystical Body* (1954). Mascall lists other contemporary authors at the beginning of Chapter 4 of the second edition of *Corpus Christ*, both Catholic and Protestant. 'One of the most remarkable celestial phenomena in the theological firmament today is undoubtedly the multiple conjunction that has taken place between a large number of Catholic and Protestant luminaries on the subject of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, a conjunction that is all the more striking because it does not seem in all cases to have been either intentional or even recognised'. (p. 82).

<sup>36</sup>*The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dacre Press 1945 p. 747–748. (Dix's italics.)



University in the American State of Washington. He was only the second lecturer, the first having been the Canadian Jesuit Fr Bernard Lonergan, who had sought to draw out the relationship between natural theology (as a philosophical discipline) and theology itself. Mascall's first lecture, as was the intention of the series, responded to Lonergan, then he went on to discuss nature, supernature and grace. His engagement with Lonergan is interesting in its own right, and he writes two long sections on him in *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, but I think it's also worth noting the ecumenical contact – and this was by no means the sum of it – which I fear may be almost inconceivable now.

I have already mentioned Jean Galot, another Jesuit, Belgian this time, and *Theology and the Gospel of Christ* also contains a long analysis of his work on the person of Christ. And he goes to Orthodox sources too, among them Vladimir Lossky, of whom we read in a number of Mascall's works, including *The Christian Universe*.

### Voici le Temps des Assassins

But it would be remiss of me not to mention some of Mascall's English contemporaries with whom he disagreed and whom he took on in print. And some of those books, in spite of the DNB entry, are among his best-selling and most translated works. But I ought to set this section in the context of his quotation from someone else: 'We must love them both', the Angelic Doctor writes, 'those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have laboured in the search for truth, and both have helped us in the finding of it'.<sup>37</sup>

In 1962, a group of theologians published a collection of essays under the editorship of A.R. Vidler called *Soundings, Essays concerning Christian Understanding*.<sup>38</sup> The seventh essay was by a future Bishop of Birmingham, H.W. Montefiore, and was entitled 'Towards a Christology for today'.<sup>39</sup> Early in the essay he begins a consideration of the Chalcedonian Definition by quoting J.M. Creed's statement<sup>40</sup> that it had 'wrecked the unity of Christendom and bequeathed a legacy of distracting controversy to the Church', and that, although it had had the positive effect of safeguarding certain 'valuable elements in the tradition', was nonetheless obsolete: 'our age is not theirs, and the doctrinal history of the last hundred years does not encourage the supposition that we can treat our problems in their terms'.<sup>41</sup> Montefiore then goes on to balance that opinion with one of Eric Mascall's, quoting from *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, in which Mascall says that the Chalcedonian Definition is 'a statement which, while its explanation to the world of the present day may need patient effort of exposition, does not, I would most emphatically urge, require either apology or modification'.<sup>42</sup>

Montefiore points to the Chalcedonian Definition as a starting point which was designed to safeguard the 'three vital dogmas which seemed to be imperilled: the

<sup>37</sup>*Up and Down in Adria*, (The Faith Press, 1963), p. 15, thanking his interlocutors in the words of St Thomas for their invitation to criticize their work.

<sup>38</sup>CUP, 1962.

<sup>39</sup>*Soundings*, p. 147ff.

<sup>40</sup>In *The Divinity of Jesus Christ*, 1938. John Creed was Ely Professor of Divinity, d. 1940.

<sup>41</sup>Quoted in *Soundings*, p. 152.

<sup>42</sup>Quoted in *Soundings*, p. 152, from CCC p. 41.

Unity of God, the Divinity of Christ and the Unity of Christ's Person'.<sup>43</sup> Even so, he sides with those who had concluded that the Definition was a 'smokescreen' (G.L. Prestige) and a representation of 'the bankruptcy of Greek patristic theology' (W. Temple). His own judgement was that the Fathers of Chalcedon 'were trying to define the mystery of Christ's person by the same kind of procedure as when a child attempts to force together two pieces of a jig-saw puzzle'.<sup>44</sup> Towards the end of his essay, he notes that 'We have been careful to avoid saying that Jesus has a "divine nature" or that he is "of one substance with the Father"'. His knowledge was human knowledge, his actions were human actions. Yet in Jesus the divine activity was fully present so far as is possible in human personality'.<sup>45</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the following year, Faith Press published Dr Mascall's response to the contributors to *Soundings*. Taking his cue from his interlocutors, he went for his title to Chapter 27 of the Acts of the Apostles, in which St Paul and his companions run aground on the Island of Malta. And in the fourth chapter of *Up and Down in Adria*, he takes on Montefiore's argument.<sup>46</sup> Mascall gives him credit for wanting to reinterpret the traditional doctrine of the Church rather than 'substituting a different and more "up to date" doctrine for it'<sup>47</sup>, but he takes him to task for his contention that the Definition is undermined by its very positivity, that Jesus is complete in both his humanity and his divinity.

*Up and Down in Adria* came out in 1963, which, as it happened, was the year that the then Bishop of Woolwich, Dr J.A.T. Robinson published *Honest to God*. Mascall set about responding to it straight away, but *The Secularisation of Christianity* did not arrive on the shelves until 1965, since Mascall in the meantime also had sight of a work by an American Episcopalian cleric by the name of Paul van Buren called *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*,<sup>48</sup> which had less popular appeal, but was a more substantial work covering comparable ground.

'The matter is the more important', says Mascall, 'since these two books do not stand alone; they are outstanding expressions of a radical and destructive attitude to traditional Christianity which has obtained a foothold in many academic circles in the United States and the United Kingdom, though until the publication of *Honest to God* it was little known to the general public and to the majority of the parochial clergy'.<sup>49</sup> And, unfailingly courteous though he is, Mascall sees his work as no mere disagreement with fellow academics. 'What I have sought to destroy is itself destructive, and what I have denied are negations. I must refer the reader to other books which I have written for more positive and systematic expositions and commendations of the Church's faith'.<sup>50</sup> Even so, there is positive theology being done here, albeit in the context of refutation.

<sup>43</sup>*Soundings* p. 152, quoted in *Up and Down* at p. 64.

<sup>44</sup>*Soundings*, p. 156.

<sup>45</sup>*Soundings*, p. 171.

<sup>46</sup>The title is from Acts 27.27, after which we read that the shipmen take soundings and cast anchor 'fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks' (verse 29).

<sup>47</sup>*Up and Down in Adria*, p. 63.

<sup>48</sup>DLT 1965.

<sup>49</sup>*Secularisation*, p. viii.

<sup>50</sup>*Secularisation*, p. xii.

Mascall is not closed to the idea that the unchanging Christian Faith needs presenting afresh in a changing world. Such re-presentation is necessary for teaching those who are already Christians, communicating with those who are not, and enabling social action in the context of the problems of contemporary society. Nonetheless, 'this does not mean that the Christian is, in St Paul's phrase, to be "conformed to this world"'.<sup>51</sup> And yet we see the evolution of a movement 'which takes as its starting-point the outlook of contemporary secularised man and demands that the traditional faith of Christendom should be completely transformed in order to conform to it'.<sup>52</sup>

This radical desupernaturalization of Christianity that we find in Bultmann opens the way to Robinson and Van Buren, and Mascall marvels that its exponents should want to continue to use the word 'Christianity' of this movement at all, let alone 'say that this thing is "real Christianity" or "authentic Christianity" or "the essence of Christianity"'.<sup>53</sup> It 'embodies a policy of unconditional surrender by the Church to the world'.<sup>54</sup> And in following this one-way street, Van Buren 'provides a *soi-disant* Christianity in which there is no such being as God, nobody survives bodily death, nobody hears us when we pray, there is no risen Saviour and nothing for us when we are dead; but only, while we are in this life, an undefined "freedom" which is alleged to be contagious and to give us the same "perspective" on the world as was possessed by a Galilean peasant who no longer exists'.<sup>55</sup> The language may be combative, but Mascall is clear about his battle-lines, and they are as much Christological as philosophical. And, although the Van Buren book failed to gain much traction among a general readership, 'the Bishop of Woolwich's famous little book'<sup>56</sup> certainly did, and Mascall was of the opinion that that very fact made it all the more important to subject it to detailed scrutiny.

And, Mascall says, this desire to cling onto something of the pleasure which is to be derived from the mythology whilst rejecting the 'supranaturalism' of the doctrine, 'does credit to the warmth of his [Robinson's] human emotions, but on the plain of belief it would seem to involve him in sheer naturalism . . . [For] if the whole notion – however spiritually or metaphysically understood – of God as visiting the earth in the person of his Son is incredible to the modern mind, then the obvious conclusion would seem to be the naturalistic view that Jesus is nothing more than a man'<sup>57</sup> – even if he is 'the most God-like man that ever lived'. That, notes Mascall ruefully, is a long way from saying that he was and is consubstantial with the Father.

For Mascall, Robinson's book is (to borrow a phrase of his from elsewhere) 'bombinating in a vacuum', and 'the programme which he sets forth . . . so far from transforming the secularised world in which we live by transfusing into it the

<sup>51</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 4, quoting Romans 12.2.

<sup>52</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 7. Mascall takes issue with Van Buren's metaphor of 'contagion' in his book *Jesus, Who He Is and How We Know Him*, (Darton: Longman and Todd, 1985), since later patients need have had no relationship or contact whatever with the originator of the disease: 'far from having any immediate personal relationship to us now, he has not even existed for more than nineteen hundred years'. (p. 23).

<sup>56</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 106.

<sup>57</sup>*Secularisation* p. 145.

redemptive power of Christ, would simply reduce Christianity to a position of impotence by conforming it to the pattern of the secularised world.<sup>58</sup>

Even so, it was not until the publication in 1977 of *The Myth of God Incarnate* that the public were offered an explicit repudiation of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. The editor of that volume was John Hick, and contributors included Maurice Wiles, Don Cupitt and Denis Nineham. Mascall does not spend long on *The Myth of God Incarnate* – he addresses it in Chapter 4 of *Whatever Happened to the Human Mind?*<sup>59</sup> – but he does express a degree of frustration with the ‘elasticity’ of its use of the word ‘myth’, and he is critical of its application not straightforwardly to the narrative, but to the doctrine: ‘the sentence “Jesus is God incarnate” does not recount a narrative; it makes a straightforward assertion, though it is one with which a great deal of narrative is connected’.

But once its meaning has been ascertained it must be either true or false in the old-fashioned sense in which truth is the correspondence of the mind and its assertions with reality. And no introduction of more esoteric senses of “truth” . . . should be allowed to obscure this primary question. I am inclined to think that the ultimate achievement of this book will be to have made it quite clear where you are likely to end up once you abandon the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation.<sup>60</sup>

It will not surprise readers that Mascall was appalled when both Regius Professors of Divinity, Maurice Wiles in Oxford and Geoffrey Lampe in Cambridge, declared themselves unable to believe the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1976, Lampe had delivered his Bampton Lectures on *God as Spirit*, in which he upheld a unitarian view of the oneness of God, and rejected any idea of the Holy Spirit being a distinct divine person, and of Jesus being the eternal Son and Word, and having become incarnate in human nature. Jesus of Nazareth ‘is simply a man in whom God as Spirit was uniquely and incomparably active. That is to say, Dr Lampe, as he declared himself in his lectures, was both a unitarian and an adoptionist and he was much more lucid and uncompromising in stating his position than many who share these views’.<sup>61</sup>

Lampe and Wiles, Mascall said, were right to stress Christ’s humanity; their error was in denying his divinity. They were right too to emphasize the unity of God, but wrong to conclude that there was no Trinity of Persons in the one Godhead. ‘And since, both historically and systematically, there is an extremely close connection between trinitarianism and orthodox Christology, it is not surprising that their extremely reduced Christology and their extremely reduced theism fit quite neatly together. Accordingly, in comparison with the richness and fecundity of traditional Christianity both their Christology and their theism appear sterile and bleak. For all that our leading Anglican unitarians have to offer us in its place is one third of the Church’s God and one half of the Church’s Christ’.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup>*Secularisation*, p. 178f.

<sup>59</sup>SPCK 1980.

<sup>60</sup>TGC p. 206.

<sup>61</sup>WHHM p. 98f.

<sup>62</sup>WHHM p. 127.

## The Body of Christ: Mascall and the Theology of the Eucharist

Allow me to finish by looking at two aspects of the Body of Christ which, as Mascall sees it, are intimately related: the Body of Christ of which Christians partake in the Eucharist, and the Body of Christ which is his Church. The former, of course, takes place in the context of the latter, and the idea of receiving the Body of Christ in the Body of Christ is a small but significant theme in Mascall's writing.

The sacrament of the Eucharist is dealt with extensively in an influential work entitled *Corpus Christi*, dedicated to the then Bishop of Exeter, Robert Mortimer, and which was first published in 1953. A revised edition, which is substantially enlarged, came out in 1965. The revision was prompted in part by the momentum caused by the publication of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in 1963, the first of the major documents of the Second Vatican Council. And Mascall also discussed Eucharistic theology and ecclesiology in *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, and in *The Recovery of Unity*<sup>63</sup> and in *Growing into Union*.

But I shall begin with his essay 'Theotokos', in the volume which he edited in 1963 with H.S. Box, *The Blessed Virgin Mary, Essays by Anglicans*. Taking his cue from R.H. Lightfoot<sup>64</sup> ('whom certainly no one ever described as an extreme Anglo-Catholic'<sup>65</sup>), Mascall sees the Blessed Virgin Mary and St John, given to each other by Jesus from the Cross, as 'the nucleus of the Christian Church, and she is given to the household of the Church as its mother. To them, that is to say to the Church under the motherhood of Mary, Christ hands over the new dispensation of the Spirit'.<sup>66</sup>

But of course, this Mystical Body is not a new incarnation.

Christ was not becoming man a second time, he was not assuming a new human nature; the human nature which he had taken from his mother, in which he had died for our sins and risen again for our justification, was being made present under a new mode. There are not, strictly speaking, two bodies of Christ, a natural and a mystical, but one body of Christ which is manifested in two forms. Nor does the story end here, for that part of the Mystical Body which is on earth needs to be continually nourished and sustained, as Christ's body did before its glorification. It is through the Eucharistic Body of the Blessed Sacrament that this takes place. Here again, there is not a new incarnation, but in the Eucharist the human nature which Christ took from his mother is made present in yet another form, a form through which that part of the Mystical Body which is still *in via* on earth is repeatedly sustained and renewed.<sup>67</sup>

I quote that passage at length because it seems to set the scene for Mascall's thinking in this area. And he relates each part to the descent of the Holy Spirit: on Mary at the

<sup>63</sup>Longmans, Green and Co, 1958.

<sup>64</sup>Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture from 1934.

<sup>65</sup>E.L. Mascall and H.S. Box, eds, *The Blessed Virgin Mary, Essays by Anglicans* (Darton: Longman and Todd, 1963), p. 22.

<sup>66</sup>*BVM* p. 23.

<sup>67</sup>*BVM* p. 24.

Annunciation, on the Apostles at Pentecost and on the Eucharistic elements at Mass. Each of these are manifestations and expressions of the same Body, which was first formed in Mary's womb, and Mascall makes a rather attractive link with the first Adam: 'when we return from the Altar, having received the Sacramental Body of Christ and having thereby been received more firmly into his Mystical Body, we can say with a new emphasis the words that, in the Genesis story, Adam said after he had tasted the food given him by the first Eve: "The woman gave me and I did eat." For it is the very body, the human nature, which Christ took from his mother, on which we are fed in the Holy Eucharist. And Jesus and his members are one Body, the Whole Christ, and Mary is his mother and theirs'.<sup>68</sup>

Mascall remakes a point that the virginal conception of the divine Son 'is thoroughly coherent with the conditions of the incarnation, which involves not the procreation of a new human person but the taking of a complete human nature by the pre-existent Son of God'.<sup>69</sup> And elsewhere, Mascall draws attention to the declaration by Pope Paul VI in 1964 that Mary is the Mother of the Church. These points have a particular relevance to the theme of Mascall's that human nature, taken by the pre-existent Son of God, is given to him by Mary who gives birth to him, and therefore to the Church, the mystical Body of Christ.

## The One Church

Mascall's *Corpus Christi* is subtitled *Essays on the Church and the Eucharist*, and their 'one over-arching conception', Mascall tells us, is that of the Church as 'a reality of the sacramental order, the mystical Body of Christ, preserved and nourished by the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood'.<sup>70</sup> And he begins by addressing the matter of the unity of the Church in the profession that Christians believe in 'one, holy Catholic and apostolic Church'. That statement means more than that the Church is *numerically* one; it is 'an organism, a coherent whole and not merely an aggregate of items'.<sup>71</sup> On the contrary, Christians are bound by a 'supernatural principle which makes the unity of the Church'.<sup>72</sup>

And to understand that principle, Mascall takes us to the High-Priestly Prayer found in John 17. The context of Jesus' prayer for unity is that he has prayed 'not for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine', that they may be one; and Jesus has gone on to pray for those who will become part of that category through the work of the Church, that they all may be one. This unity is that in which Father and Son are already united. And the disciples are to be united in 'the glory which thou gavest me', which is the glory from all eternity, from the moment that the Son was begotten of the Father, and so it is the glory of the Trinity-in-Unity which is God himself.

<sup>68</sup>BVM p. 25.

<sup>69</sup>A. Richardson, ed, *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (SCM, 1969), p. 207.

<sup>70</sup>*Corpus Christi*, Preface to the first edition, p. xi in the second edition. References are to the second edition, Longmans, 1965.

<sup>71</sup>CC p. 3.

<sup>72</sup>CC p. 4.

In other words, the unity with which the Church is one is nothing other than the unity with which the Persons of the Holy Trinity are one, and this unity is communicated to men, as it were, by a bridge with two arches. The first is the arch of the Incarnation, by which the divine Person of the eternal Son unites human nature to himself in Jesus Christ – the hypostatic union; the second is the arch of our adoption into Christ, by which we are incorporated into his human nature.<sup>73</sup>

And that means that the very principle behind that unity is one of love: ‘that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (Jn 17.26). And we are back to the idea that, in Christ, human beings can be partakers of the divine nature: ‘what is involved in the existence of the Church is nothing less than the fact of the Infinite Being really imparting himself to the finite being without destroying the finite being’s finitude. And so ‘the life of the Church, the organic act which constitutes its unity, is the life of the Holy Trinity imparted to men in Christ’.<sup>74</sup>

Mascall’s proposition, then, is that human beings can enter into the very unity of the Godhead itself, not by a ‘moral’ act, which is to say by faith and repentance (necessary though they may be in living the Christian life), but by a sacramental act, an act of God performed by human agents and using material instruments – baptism. That is not to say that the human race is identical with the Church, and Mascall addresses that issue in a number of places, including the first chapter of *Corpus Christi* and in his chapter on the existentialism of St Thomas Aquinas in *Existence and Analogy*<sup>75</sup>.

The fact remains that the human race is not the Christian Church, even though the Church is meant for all men and claims them all, and although there is no man who is altogether excluded from the Church’s redemptive life, which, like a river in flood, overflows its formal boundaries and irrigates the surrounding land. There is a sense in which Christ’s redemptive work has communicated the divine life to all mankind. There is even a sense in which the act of creation itself has communicated the divine life to the whole created order: “that which was made was life in him”, according to a very probable reading of the prologue to St John. But, as a fully operative reality in the historical order, it is the Catholic Church that is the supernatural organism in which men, by sacramental incorporation into Christ, are elevated into the life of the Holy Trinity and, by the Sacrament of the Eucharist, are maintained therein.<sup>76</sup>

And as he says in *The Importance of Being Human*, ‘the basic question with which a man is concerned is not “What must I do to be saved?” but “Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?” And ultimately, ‘if not here, then in the resurrection at the last day, a man must be a member of Christ’s body if he is to be a member of Christ, and he must be a member of Christ if he is to be a son of God’.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup>CC p. 6.

<sup>74</sup>CC p. 8.

<sup>75</sup>*Existence and Analogy*, Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1949. See especially p. 58.

<sup>76</sup>CC, p. 12f.

<sup>77</sup>OUP, 1959 p. 103f.



Finally, whatever we may claim for the Church, that is not to suggest that her members are free from fault, since when we are incorporated into Christ, that is the beginning of our sanctification, not its end'. And, as he said in *Corpus Christi*, it is the inner reality of the Church which we are addressing here, 'in which the Son of God patiently and tenderly draws men and women into his own perfect nature and offers them to the Father as his members made one with him and clothed with his glory'.<sup>78</sup>

And in the sacramental life of the Church, the body is 'constantly renewed by her glorified Head who has taken his human nature with him into the heavenly realm. If the incarnation was only an episode in the life of the divine Word, if he became man at his conception but ceased to be man at his ascension, the doctrine of the sacraments would be cut at its roots. It is because he is still man, though glorified by his resurrection and ascension in a way that we can hardly conceive, that men and women can be incorporated into his human nature today, and that the Church is truly, and not by a vague and inexact metaphor, the Body of Christ'.<sup>79</sup>

Towards the end of *Saraband*, Mascall reflected on some hopeful signs for the future, but also on what he believed to be the worrying tendency of many in modern church life 'to make decisions with reference not to the teaching of Christ but to the pressures of contemporary secularised society'. And he went on: 'For the question which faces every Christian body today and which underlies all individual practical issues is this: is the Christian religion something revealed by God in Christ, which therefore demands our grateful obedience, or is it something to be made up by ourselves to our own specification, according to our own immediate desires? When we assent, as I am convinced we must, to the first alternative, we must also insist that the second is not only false but bogus, and that our true fulfilment and happiness is not to be found following our own whims but by giving ourselves to God in Christ, who has given himself for us. For, once again, grace does not destroy nature but fulfils it'.<sup>80</sup>

Mascall, I believe, offers us a theological toolkit for dealing with these challenges, which remain pressing in the Church of today. We face a complex ecclesial situation in which Western church attendance is (apparently) in freefall, even if it has grown elsewhere. The time is coming when the matter of divisions between ecclesial communities will surely be overshadowed by the importance of unity in the face of unbelief and narcissistic selfishness. Mascall's Christology undergirds his confidence in the truth of the orthodox Christian Faith, revealed in the human nature taken by the divine Word, and lived out in the Body of Christ. And to receive the Body of Christ within the Body of Christ is not the means by which we cut ourselves off and shore up the cult against outsiders; it is the sacramental expression of the truth that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

<sup>78</sup>CC, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup>IBH p. 104f.

<sup>80</sup>*Saraband* p. 380.