

Lux Mundi

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Lux Mundi (“Light of the World”) is a collection of 12 essays written by a group of 11 Oxford theologians in the late 1880s. The collection was edited by Charles Gore, the Principal of Pusey House (named for E.B. Pusey, the Tractarian) and Fellow of Trinity College (which had admitted John Henry Newman to its honorary fellowship in 1878), later a founding member of the Community of the Resurrection and successively Bishop of Worcester (1902), Birmingham (1905) and Oxford (1911).

The essays center on the claim that the Incarnation is the central tenet of Christianity. Incarnation informs and shapes all aspects of Christian thinking and life. The essays presented an attempt at sympathetic engagement with contemporary thought, by presenting the Catholic faith (as understood by Anglo-Catholics) as thoroughly consistent with developments in science and politics. Because of this willingness to assume the propriety of evolutionary science and Biblical criticism, the essays occasioned a despondent response from an older generation of Anglo-Catholics, especially H.P. Liddon, who had been Gore’s patron (Ramsey, 7). Whatever disappointments they may have occasioned the essays were a publishing success, running through 10 English and several American editions in the first year. Although the essays were published as a joint venture, including criticism of them as works in progress by the group as a whole, each stands on its own as a distinct treatment of specific themes.

Shunning the obscurantism of those who would fight against the growth of knowledge and its incorporation into theology, the *Lux Mundi* group saw themselves as engaging the new knowledge fully and faithfully. Their long-term contribution is found less in the details of their arguments, than it is in the quality of engagement with contemporary thinking. They argued simultaneously for a vigorous creedal orthodoxy and for the full incorporation of new ways of thinking into theology. Because the former characteristic was so visible, the *Lux Mundi* group was easily distinguished from the authors of *Essays and Reviews* (1860), who, although their predecessors in attempting to use modern

knowledge in theology, never escaped the image of being less than genuinely committed to the Church. The *Lux Mundi* essays are not written as answers to the earlier collection, but one often senses it in the background in both constructive and cautionary ways.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey, himself something of a theological descendant of the *Lux Mundi* group, notes three weaknesses in the theological content of the essays: an overemphasis on kenotic understanding of the method of Incarnation, an inability to distinguish meaningful difference between divine revelation and human ways of knowing in general, and a downplaying of the importance of the cross (Ramsey, 8-9). To these criticisms should be added a more fundamental problem the essays encounter as a whole. Little attention is paid to the question of what is meant by the notion of “historical event” in discussing the Incarnation. If when we speak of history we normally mean a closed continuum of events, “historical” may not be the proper term to use when speaking of divine activity. It is interesting that for all of their insistence on the existence of a spiritual dimension to reality, the essayists do not use it as an avenue of exploration when speaking about the presence of the divine in the person of Jesus. It is odd that a group of theologians who were deeply committed to an undefined doctrine of Christ’s “real presence” in the Eucharist, failed to discover in it a helpful parallel way to grasp what it might mean to say that God was “really present” in Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, it is worth noting how frequently the essays address the issue of the way Christianity is to be viewed from the perspective of the study of the religions of the rest of humanity. Christian superiority is assumed and language which denigrates is frequently employed unthinkingly. However, from the essayists’ perspective, the willingness to consider how other faiths bear on Christian claims, and the genuine, even of qualified, approbation they show far they are removed from English theologians of even a generation before them.

Lux Mundi (10th ed., 1890).

The details of the *Lux Mundi* essays often seem antiquated. For example, Gore’s confidence in the authority of the NT places far too much reliance on the now discarded notion of its apostolic authorship. However, the overwhelmingly positive tone of the essays remains an inspiration for theology. The essayists were willing to embrace developments in science and historical research on several levels. First, they understood that evolutionary theory and historical consciousness were increasingly part of the intellectual and cultural climate in which they lived. Second, beyond that recognition, they found in science and history new paths to understanding theology in positive ways. Evolution was not simply something to which they had to become reconciled; it was a new way to think about the nature world and the Incarnation.

For Anglicans in particular, *Lux Mundi* maintained the centrality of the Incarnation in such a manner as to allow it to serve as the integrating doctrine for the whole of theology. The Incarnation is understood throughout the essays as the touchstone for

doctrine. The ways in which the Church lives out the implications of the Incarnation may change radically from generation to generation. But that only demonstrated the powerful nature of the proclamation that God shared fully in the human story.

Gore's prefaces introduce the major themes of the collection and set a tone which at the time was theologically revolutionary in England. If today they seem mainstream, this points to the success of the volume (alongside numerous others) in shaping subsequent theological explorations. The Bible remains the central text of theology, but its inspiration is in its substance, not in its details and present form (xxi). It must be read in the same spirit in which it was written, as a witness to God's activity in Christ (xxxii). While it is true that the Bible is textually central to Christianity, it is Christ, and not a book, that is the center of faith (xxxiv). Christ himself is the revelation (xxxv). Thus "the central question [is] whether the Divine claim made for Jesus Christ by the Church is historically justified" (xxxv). As a result, progress in theology is seen as a return to the source, not in adding new doctrines but in more deeply comprehending the meaning of the Incarnation (xxxix). The task of theology is to proclaim the truthfulness of the Incarnation in each generation in a way which responsively assimilates advances in knowledge generally (xliii).

Faith is an "energy of the soul" (7) in which humans sense that they are creatures of a creator (12) who they approach as a son does his father (15). It entails personal active trust in (15) and adherence to (30) God. Friendship with God can be cultivated (34-39). The evidence upon which faith is built is always corroborative and accumulative (5), indirect (7) and of "tentative probation" (11). In some ways this does not vary greatly from science viewed as a progressing process of inquiry. However, there is a genuine difference between theology and science in that whereas science is ideally always open, theology has a note of finality given by its *telos*.

The Christian understanding of God takes its distinctive character from the Incarnation. This anchors Christian understanding in history in a way which can be thought of as final. There is no more to be revealed. However, each generation must articulate its concept of God in a way consistent with its understandings of knowledge as a whole. There is, thus, a sense in which Christian doctrine ought to always be progressive (48). Although he does not suggest what it might mean for theology, Moore does note that other religious traditions have concepts of God which are parallel to Christianity (e.g. Hindu *avatars* and Tibetan Buddhist *bodhisattvas*) (74).

Pain is an essential part of the development of moral character. It can be seen in three lights: as punishment, as a corrective, and as a purgative (96). Christianity shares with other religions the tendency to connect the experience of pain with belief in a future life devoid of suffering (98) and an understanding that the true service of God often involves voluntarily accepting suffering (102). It must also be realized on a practical level that genuine communion between people is more frequently based on common pain, than it is on shared joy (103). The Incarnation provides Christianity with the unique claim that God in Christ has suffered pain on behalf of humanity.

The proclamation that “the Word was made flesh” is more than Christological in nature; it requires an understanding of the relationship between Christ and human history (107). There is an immediate question as to what would count as evidence in answering such a question. At least one aspect of this evidence is the ability to see the world as having been prepared for the Incarnation to occur in the time and place that it happened (108). Evidence of this can be found in a process of redemption that unfolds in Israel’s history (113), as well as in the philosophical receptivity (118) of classical civilization, together with its frustrated attempt to articulate a moral philosophy without an adequate religious basis (121). The truthfulness of Christianity is reflected in both a “tendency towards” (i.e. acceptance) and a “tendency to produce” (i.e. creativity) Christian theological understandings consistent with classical thought (124). Although Judaism might in some dimensions be regarded as capable of producing a universally attractive theology, Jewish nationalism prevented its general acceptance. Freed from these nationalistic concerns, Christianity was able to become a universal religion built upon the attractive features of Judaism: prophecy which was fulfilled, law as the basis of morality, and an historical sense of divine action in the world.

Evolutionary theory is a scientific necessity which theology cannot ignore (151). In fact, rightly approached, evolutionary theory is helpful in understanding the development of doctrine. Theology’s interest in history is not simply antiquarian. Rather, it is a dynamic engagement with how humans know. Thus, it is essential to note two principle differences between science and theology. First, science cannot know what lies prior to the beginning (157), because a finite intellect operating only in its own frame of reference cannot comprehend it (156). However, theology can address this with certitude (157) through the indwelling of Christ in the believing mind (165). This allows the Christian to see design in the evolutionary process, where science sees only undirected evolution. Second, evolutionary thinking lacks the note of finality; it is not heading toward a known goal in the way religious understanding does (172).

However, there is an important parallel between scientific and theological knowing: science relies on experiment to test hypotheses and theology relies on the experience of personal transformation (164). An evolutionary model allows us to see that the true successors of Plato and Aristotle were the Fathers of the Church, rather than the philosophically grounded critics of the early church (167). Specifically, one can see in early Logos-Theology a perspective on Incarnation which reaches full bloom in the Platonizing theology of the 4th Century. Evolutionary theory also helps interpret the relationship between Christianity and other religions. Buddha and Zarathustra (i.e., Zoroaster) should be regarded as great teachers of spiritual truth (170). Unlike a view which regards other religions as demonic (an error into which even the Fathers fell), evolutionary theory accounts for them as steps along the way to the universal claims of Christianity (171).

Finally, a very bold claim is set forth in evolutionary language: the Incarnation can be seen as the emergence of a “new species” of human, one in which the divine and the human co-exist (172). As with all origins this is regarded as mysterious (173). It is not

proved by miracles, rather, the Christian believes in miracles on the basis of having first believed in the Incarnation, not the reverse (173). But the proof of this new humanity of found in Jesus' claim to be the authorized agent of our present experience of forgiveness (173-174).

Religion is based on trust, understood as an "exercise of reason up to a certain point" (186). The creeds are authoritative in two ways. First, they speak with clarity; second, the consequences inherent in believing them are life changing (188-189). Theology is based on more than historical continuity and logical argument; it is ultimately founded on the resurrection, because it demonstrates that at the very beginnings of Christianity it was taught that Christ was divine. It is essential to realize that the denial of Christ's divinity is as dogmatic a position as is belief in it (203). Belief in the Incarnation is the historical starting point of Christian theology, even if it does not provide the logical starting point provided by Trinitarian doctrine (204). It should be recognized that the creeds are historically conditioned because of the nature of the language they employ (212). However, they are retained because they contain in nascent form the deeper truths that remain obscure until a later generation articulates them (213).

Sin involves alienation (230) and guilt (231). The response to sin is sacrifice which seeks renewed union with God through expiation (232) and a genuine surrender to God (236). Consciousness of guilt leads to a need for personal satisfaction of sin. Christ's death is propitiatory in his offering of himself as a sacrifice for the needs of others. Substitution fails to capture the sense involved in this propitiation. Christ offers what humanity cannot offer and is thus a representative of the humanity which is taken up into him in the Incarnation (252). Viewed in an Incarnational perspective, what is vicarious in the Cross is less Christ's bearing the punishment which should have fallen on humanity (though he did do that), than it is on his offering of himself on behalf of humanity (257). In other words, it is the offering on behalf of others, rather than suffering on behalf of others, that is the key element. This is, perhaps, essentially a matter of emphasis, but it is a crucial shift which allows us to understand how the Incarnation itself is an element of Christ's ability to represent humanity in sacrifice.

In theology experience is not an excitement of feeling, but a permanent transformation of the believer (263). It is an essential element in Christianity, because Christianity claims to be a religion which transforms people. Spirit should be positively understood as experience which is penetrating, profound, invincible, rational, and conscious of God (264). The Holy Spirit in the church is social (269), "nourishes individuality" (269), "consecrates the whole of nature" (273), and operates gradually (274). To believe in Scripture requires a prior belief in the church for which the Scripture was written (283). The inspiration of the Bible corresponds to the perspective from which it views things. Gore does not doubt the apostolic authorship of the NT, and thus attributes its authority to the training the apostles received from Jesus more than to the idea that the Holy Spirit inspires their writing (290-291). The OT suffers from imperfect perspective, because the Incarnation had not yet occurred (292), temporal distance between its being written and the events which are recorded (294), and biases and inaccuracies

(295). However, it retains a special, even if limited, value, especially as the prophetic basis of Christianity. The inaccuracies of the OT do not disqualify the claim that it is inspired, because the errors are not fraudulent. Even such matters as pseudonymous writing can be acknowledged, because literary convention, rather than deception, is involved (295).

People do not come to faith on their own initiative; they do so because others introduce them to the faith (305). The essential task of the church is worship (307), especially sacrament life (327). The church is the place where the perfection of love and holiness are pursued. In order to understand the life of the church, it is essential not to separate the ideal and the real. The ideal is the basis of the real; the real is the incomplete expression of the ideal. This corresponds to envisioning an ideal church which is invisible and a real church which exists in historical imperfection. One must not use the ideal-invisible church as a means to dismiss the real-visible church.

The unity of the visible church is based in apostolic ordering, sacraments and common faith. The Reformation churches are not founded by Christ, because they have no apostolic order (320). Because a need for reform can never justify schism (320), the C of E is defined as a “national expression” of the Catholic Church, but not a “full and complete representation” of it (320). The church bears witness to the truth as it is received from the apostles through the Bible. This truth can be divided into two classes: central and deductive. An example of a central truth is the doctrine of the Incarnation; deductive truth is the mode by which the divine and human in Christ are seen to be related. Deductive truth is always open to new formulation (323-324). Although history would judge that they do not have the power of long-term preservation, it is essential to recognize “how much of deep spiritual truth there is” (326) in other religions.

The sacramental system is the “regular use of sensible objects, agents, and acts as being the means or instruments of Divine energies” (340). Baptism and Eucharist are the distinguishing acts of the church. There is an inner logic to sacramentalism, especially when it is connected to a vibrant Incarnational perspective, which can be summarized under three points. First, God works through material and visible means (353). Second, Christianity maintains a high value on the physicality of human bodies; the notion of disembodied souls as the concern of theology is serious error (356). Third, sacramental action is a prophetic statement of the transforming glory which is at the heart of theology (359).

Christianity is not simply a religion; it is also a civilization. However, in contemporary thought and life it is now normal to make a distinction between the sacred and the secular (365). Understanding how Christianity relates to this new social situation involves a fresh examination of the Incarnation, which can be seen as speaking two distinct, but complementary, truths. First, the Incarnation addresses the restoration of the order of creation. Second, the Incarnation is the beginning of a new order (366) which allows the church to embrace a new situation. The church has two tests of government to apply in specific cases. The state must “not hinder free and peaceable practice of Christian religion” and it must work for the common good, rather than the

good of a privileged few (382). However, it must be recognized that government shapes society based on the low motive of avoiding punishment, whereas the church shapes society through the high motives of Christian practice. The church must be cautious in endorsing any specific theory of government. Thus, the Caroline Divines were wrong to advocate the divine right theory of the early Stuarts, James I (1603-25) and Charles I (1625-49). This essay contains an extended treatment of the arguments for and against the establishment of the C of E. It is interesting to note that the specifics of this argument persist to this day.

Jesus is regarded as the “first to point humanity to an unfailing source of moral power” (391). There is a need to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian ethics. Christian ethics are part of religion and as such are based on the dual realization that God is personal and ethical (395). In the Incarnation, Christ is the true pattern of human goodness (398). It is essential that he is both like and unlike others, allowing him to identify with us and yet also permitting him to be authoritative. Holiness is the process of being made like Christ (423). It is essential to remember that Christianity does not simply supply a moral standard; it provides for the moral education necessary for human transformation.

Gore, C.G. ed. 1890. *Lux Mundi*. Tenth ed. New York: United States Book Company.

Ramsey, Michael. 1960. *An Era in Anglican Theology: From Gore to Temple*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

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