



Received: 27 July 2015
Accepted: 17 December 2015
Published: 18 January 2016

*Corresponding author: Michael O'Sullivan, Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong
E-mail: osullivan@cuhk.edu.hk

Reviewing editor:
Peter Stanley Fosl, Transylvania University, USA

Additional information is available at the end of the article

PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Incarnation and shame: Reading Richard Swinburne on Jesus' "divided mind" in light of Christian phenomenology and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

Michael O'Sullivan*

Abstract: This paper examines philosopher Richard Swinburne's recent account of Jesus' humanity in order to assess the reasonableness of cognitivist renderings of the religious mystery of Incarnation. Swinburne's reading is positioned alongside a phenomenological and a literary rendering of this mystery in order to show up the potential limitations of representing Jesus' Incarnation as a matter of mind, rather than a matter of pathos and embodied weakness. The paper also contrasts Swinburne's description of mind with recent neurobiological accounts of the mind. Shame is one concept in the literary and philosophical renderings of Incarnation that privileges such affective states as pathos and weakness. Swinburne's reading of Jesus in terms of "mind", "consciousness" and what he describes as Jesus' "divided mind" brackets shame by denying the Incarnate God any possibility of "do[ing] wrong" (45) while admitting that "in the situation of temptation, he [Jesus] could have felt as we do" (45). After reading Swinburne alongside phenomenological accounts of this mystery, the second half of the paper contrasts Swinburne's reading of incarnation with T.S. Eliot's literary rendering of a similar incarnational "divided mind" in *Four Quartets*.

Subjects: Arts & Humanities; Humanities; Language & Literature; Philosophy; Religion

Keywords: T.S. Eliot; Richard Swinburne; Incarnation; Christian phenomenology; shame

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael O'Sullivan is an associate professor in the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has worked for universities in Ireland, the UK, the US, Japan and Hong Kong. He has published widely in literary studies, religion and philosophy, and education. Recent publications include: *Academic Barbarism, Universities and Inequality* (2016), *The humanities and the Irish University* (2014), *Weakness: a literary and philosophical history* (2012), *The incarnation of language: Joyce, Proust and a philosophy of the flesh* (2008), and *Michel Henry: Incarnation, Barbarism and Belief* (2006).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The mystery of Incarnation is a foundational mystery for Christianity. It has inspired generations of Christian writers and philosophers. Richard Swinburne is a leading philosopher writing on Incarnation. His recent work makes important new arguments about how Jesus understood his own divinity. Swinburne chooses to focus on Jesus' mind and consciousness. He describes in a rigorous analytic style how Jesus may have understood his own "human consciousness" and his own mind. However, this paper argues that Swinburne's description of Jesus' mind and consciousness is too narrow as it neglects Jesus' awareness of his human body and his possible awareness of such human states as desire and shame. In doing so, Swinburne can be regarded as limiting the role mind plays in human life. The second half of the paper argues that literary works such as T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* can offer a fuller account of Incarnation's human side.

I

There have been many illuminating and imaginative readings of the mystery of the Incarnation in recent years. Phenomenologists and philosophers such as Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Nancy¹ employ the notion of the incarnation to describe a new understanding of flesh. In his final work, *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* (Henry, 2000), for example, Henry uses the term “flesh” to describe an understanding of the incarnational body as a “body that feels itself at the same time as it senses all that surrounds it” (8). Henry incorporates the Christian notion of Incarnation into his philosophy to describe the founding “hallucinatory proposition”—“And the Word was made flesh”—(10) of Johannic Christianity and its resultant style of thought as a philosophical style of thinking. More recently, Richard Swinburne’s *Was Jesus God?* (Swinburne, 2010) has employed a blend of natural theology and philosophy in exploring the “human consciousness” this mystery assigns to Jesus.

In this paper, I firstly want to read Swinburne’s account of incarnation in terms of “mind”, “consciousness” and what he describes as Jesus’ “divided mind” alongside more phenomenological readings of incarnation that focus on the body and on the affective states of weakness, humility and embodied pathos. Readings of the incarnation that focus on the body typically remind us of the sense of shame associated with human flesh. Swinburne does regard guilt as essential to the logic of incarnation since the incarnation is the result of a process of atonement that moves through “repentance, apology, reparation” and finally “penance” (Swinburne, *Resurrection*, 39). However, even though Swinburne describes a combination of subjective and objective guilt as the worst kind of guilt, a human guilt derived from original and actual sin that somewhat counter-intuitively then has Swinburne’s God offering God the Son’s “perfect life” back to humankind in atonement, Swinburne says very little, if anything, about the *feeling* of such guilt. Swinburne’s “cognitive” examination of Incarnation by way of the “mind” and “consciousness” of the Incarnate God brackets shame to a degree by denying the Incarnate God any possibility of “do[ing] wrong” (45) even though, Swinburne argues that “in the situation of temptation” the Incarnate God “could have *felt* as we do” (45) [Swinburne’s emphasis]. Swinburne therefore falls prey to a desire to want to ascribe so much humanity to the God Incarnate that humanity itself becomes diluted in the process; he runs the risk of cheating the “human” of its awe-inspiring complexity in assigning it to a God Incarnate with a “mind” and a “consciousness” that must yet be denied the “possibility of his doing objective or subjective wrong” (45). This paper therefore asks how useful are readings of the Incarnation that promote cognitive approaches to the God Incarnate by employing reductive versions of “mind” and “consciousness” in order to make the mystery more palatable to contemporary readers caught up in the recent neuroscience revolution. Descriptions of mind and consciousness in renderings of incarnation are just as likely to engage in biomythologies or to neglect the neurobiological foundations of mind completely. As Antonio Damasio argues, “[b]ringing the body to mind is the ultimate expression of the brain’s intrinsic aboutness, its *intentional* attitude regarding the body” (90) (Damasio, 2012). Surely there is no figure in religious, philosophical and literary texts that is as compelling as “bringing the body to mind” as incarnation. Swinburne’s focus on the “mind”, “consciousness” and “divided mind” of Jesus in his account of why the incarnation was necessary does not describe in any great detail this mind’s connection with the embodied and passionate life of Jesus. Swinburne is also unwilling to linger over the feelings resulting from the guilt that sets up the logic of atonement as the backdrop to his description of incarnation. Damasio argues that any theory of consciousness that does not integrate “body-to-brain mapping” or the body as “content” in its descriptions of mind is “doomed to fail” (90). Since phenomenology is a philosophical discipline that also focuses on consciousness but in its neurobiological or embodied context, the first section of this paper reads Swinburne’s rendering of incarnation alongside phenomenological readings of incarnation, some of which have directly influenced Roman Catholic thinking on Incarnation. The second part of the paper employs T.S. Eliot’s literary exploration of Incarnation in *Four Quartets* (Eliot, 1959) to demonstrate how literature’s shared interest in the notion of a “divided mind” for an incarnational understanding of life can be more enabling for the reader. Eliot’s literary description of his “incarnational vision” can be regarded as responding to many of the dilemmas raised for the reader by Swinburne’s account of the God Incarnate’s “divided mind”.

Richard Swinburne's *Was Jesus God?* presents us with some new features of incarnational thought. Swinburne goes further than many in presenting us with the "mind" of the "divine person become incarnate". He sets himself the difficult task of presenting to the reader how Jesus thought and how he embodied divine omniscience, omnipotence and a "human consciousness". He writes that "God Incarnate could do no wrong" and that such a "divine person" must:

remain omniscient, but he could allow his human actions to be guided only by his humanly acquired inclinations to belief. He must remain omnipotent, but there is a limit to what he could do in a human way and, when he acts in a human way, he need not always be fully aware of having more power than that. Being divine, he must remain perfectly free, but he could, in perfect freedom and because of the perfect goodness of doing so, allow himself to make a choice under the influence of a desire to do a lesser good (46).

Swinburne argues that it would have been "wrong of a divine person to allow himself to become incarnate in such a way as to open the possibility of his doing objective or subjective wrong" (45).² From the outset, then we have a bracketed understanding of the human. Surely it is the capacity to resist such temptations that believers recall most poignantly from Jesus' ordeals in the Judaeen Desert and in Gethsemane. However, Swinburne does go on to state that God Incarnate could "feel as we do when we are tempted to do wrong, and he could have been tempted to do acts other than the best ones available. He could have yielded to these latter temptations; and if he did any super-erogatory acts he would probably do them by resisting such temptations" (Swinburne, 2010, pp. 46–47). Of course, such a detailed description of the mental state of God Incarnate always begs the question. We might ask ourselves whether such a God Incarnate can truly "feel as we do when we are tempted to do wrong" when he may only be "tempted to do acts other than the best ones"? One is inclined to ask whether it might be possible for such a God Incarnate to be tempted to do not only "less than the best" but also what is "wrong"? Swinburne also argues in an earlier book that one condition of this incarnation for atonement is that Jesus must live a "truly perfect life" (42) (Swinburne, 2003). If the divine person become Incarnate is only allowed to be tempted to do "less than the best" and not what is "wrong" in living a "truly perfect life", what kind of human nature does such an Incarnate God share in?

John Paul II's very different reading of the Incarnation mystery is more phenomenological in tone; it focuses on the body instead of the "mind" or "consciousness" of those involved in the Incarnation. John Paul II argues that the "body entered theology [...] through the main door" because of the "reality of the Incarnation" and because of the "fact that the Word of God became flesh" (Paul, 2006, p. 221). In arguing that the ancient text of Genesis constitutes "the 'beginning' of the theology of the body", he therefore describes a continuity between the Old and New Testaments around the "reality of the Incarnation". The "redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23) that Paul refers to in the "Letter to the Romans" describes the redemptive vision that haunts man after the original failing through the "body" in Eden. There is then a subtle connection between the body made in the "image of God" in Eden and the body of Christ that Swinburne suggests above must possess or embody this dual consciousness. In placing these two readings of the body as mediated through Incarnation side by side we can explore what their differences entail for Incarnation. John Paul II is eager to privilege a description of the "human person as a living subject" (Paul, 2006, fn. 146). He consciously departs from readings of man that fail to account adequately for this man as such a "living subject", arguing that we have the "right to speak about the relationship between experience and revelation" (Ibid., fn. 146). This is a perspective that John Paul II shares with Michel Henry who employs the notion of incarnation to describe a material phenomenology where the living subject is privileged in terms of the "pathetic immediacy in which life experiences itself" (Henry, 2008, p. 3). Henry argues in *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* that the "question of the In-carnation [in-corporation] is one of the most profound because it describes at the same time the nature of the relation of mankind to God - that is Christ - the possibility, finally, of salvation, but also the possibility of fault and loss. This ambiguity of the flesh that is susceptible to signifying for mankind both salvation and loss was raised by the first Christian thinkers. It is with singular force and clarity that Ireneus affirms this double

potentiality.” [translation mine] (245) (Henry, 2000). It is this “double potentiality” of Incarnation that often seems occluded in Swinburne’s reading.

John Paul II does not speak at any great length about Jesus’ consciousness of his divinity, as Swinburne does above, or about whether Jesus is tempted to do not only “less than the best” but “wrong” acts. He focuses on the dual nature of the body as “perceptible verification of man’s original ‘solitude’” and “through masculinity and femininity” as “transparent component of reciprocal giving in the communion of persons”. The body, then, through “the mystery of creation” that it embodies through its “masculinity and femininity” carries “within itself an unquestionable sign of the ‘image of God’” (Paul, 2006, p. 241). This, once again, recalls Antonio Damasio’s neurobiological description of consciousness where the body as “content” in the mind brings the body to mind through body to brain mapping; in a sense we all walk around with imaginal bodies in our minds that restore us to ourselves, imaginal bodies that, for believers in incarnation, recall another primordial body. John Paul II is here implicitly linking the original body of man that contemporary believers inherit and Christ’s body around the “image of God”. Both must mediate and embody the “image of God”. However, what is noteworthy for John Paul II is not the delineation of the “consciousness” that must embody this image but instead the nature of the body that does so. It is a body that knows this “image” through an incarnational giving, what is called a “reciprocal giving”. However, because John Paul II’s Incarnation is known primarily through the body and not the consciousness, it is made to experience a notion of shame that does not appear in Swinburne’s examination of Incarnation via the “human consciousness”.

John Paul II describes shame as the “first source of the manifestation of man-in both the man and the woman-of what ‘does not come from the Father, but from the world’” (Paul, 2006, p. 238; 1 Jn 2:16–17). Shame is grounded in the body. It is traced back to the loss of original innocence in the “beginning”. However, we might well ask, what kind of body manifests and possesses such “immanent shame”? John Paul II describes the body in positive and negative terms: “from the beginning” it is “marked, so to speak, as the visible factor of transcendence, in virtue of which man, as person, surpasses the visible world of living beings (*animalia*)” (Ibid., p. 241). However, shame also arrives through the body and it allows man to acknowledge that “for the first time [...] his body has ceased drawing on the power of the spirit, which raised him to the level of the image of God. Its shame bears within itself the signs of a specific humiliation mediated by the body” (Ibid., p. 244). This vulnerable or weakened state that results from “immanent shame”, where man is conscious of the fact that he may no longer be “drawing from the spirit”, is central to John Paul II’s understanding of the Incarnation.

Swinburne’s reading of Incarnation does ultimately speak for what he describes as a momentary loss of contact with divinity for the “human thinking” of Jesus. The question then is what kind of emotion such a “loss of contact” grants to the “mind” of the Incarnate God. In recalling Bernard Williams’ reading of a pre-Christian notion of shame found in Greek fictional work, we discover that, for Williams, the “root of shame lies in exposure in a more general sense, in being at a disadvantage: in what I shall call, in a very general phrase, a loss of power. The sense of shame is a reaction of the subject to the consciousness of this loss” (42). Shame becomes, what Gabrielle Taylor calls, “the emotion of self-protection” (in Williams, 2008, p. 220). How is this description of shame, as opposed to John Paul II’s earlier account of shame, relevant to what Swinburne describes as God Incarnate’s “loss of contact with divinity”? Does such a “loss” amount to a feeling of a “loss of power”, and hence to a feeling of shame? Swinburne does not go so far, however, he does suggest that “[i]t might be” that a God Incarnate possessing such “human thinking” was “not always conscious of his own divinity”. He goes on to add that such a God Incarnate “would clearly need to be conscious of it *some of the time* in order to show his followers that he believed himself to be divine [my italics]” (Swinburne, 2010, p. 46). One wonders, therefore, how, what John Paul II calls, the “first man[’s]” first realisation, through shame, that “his body has ceased drawing on the power of the spirit, which raised him to the level of the image of God” equates with the “human thinking” of Swinburne’s God Incarnate who “might” also at certain times not be “conscious of his divinity”.

If we can entertain for a moment the possibility that these two descriptions of a loss of connection with divinity are in some sense equivalent, then it is worth investigating why Swinburne's Jesus might not, at certain times, be "conscious of his divinity". Can we infer that Swinburne's "mind" of the God Incarnate is propelled through shame to this momentary forgetting of his "divinity"? However, for Swinburne's reading it would not then be shame in a deed performed (since Swinburne denies Jesus shameful acts), or in an original state of "immanent shame" inherited, but perhaps then shame in a state of *being*, shame in what one is inherently connected with, namely humanity? This would seem to be the only possible way for Swinburne's God Incarnate to share in this essential shame of mankind? However, it is unlikely that Swinburne is suggesting any such tendency in Jesus. The only reason for such a God Incarnate forgetting his divinity might then be that Jesus would sometimes become so caught up in his "human consciousness" that he would on occasion forget himself. However, if this is the case then we are led back to the question we asked earlier about how much we can presume to know about such a God Incarnate's "human consciousness". This brief reading of the two senses of loss of contact with divinity or with "spirit" around the notion shame, what, for John Paul II, is a defining feature of the first human body that prefigures the Incarnation, also seems to reveal certain limitations in regard to the exploration of Jesus' "human consciousness". Any evaluation of Jesus' "human consciousness" that neglects the potential for feelings of shame or guilt that accompany his possible momentary states of loss of contact with divinity only appears to reveal that human consciousness appears empty if it is not grounded in an experience of the body.

There is another aspect of Swinburne's "divided mind" of the God Incarnate that also deserves attention. In defining such a split-personality between a divine consciousness and a human consciousness in the person of Jesus, Swinburne also suggests that the human consciousness is perfectly knowable when situated alongside a "divine consciousness" that can never be fully known. However, is this to misrepresent the vastness of the human consciousness even when it is, for the sake of the clarification of a theological mystery, positioned alongside a divine consciousness? Swinburne does attempt on numerous occasions to limit the "human consciousness" that he assigns to his God Incarnate. He suggests, among other things, that such a God Incarnate is one who is "subject to no irrational desires except in so far as, uninfluenced by such desires, he chooses to allow himself to act while being influenced by such desires (though not compelled to yield to them)" (Ibid., p. 46). However, how does this serve to produce a picture of a God Incarnate who possesses less than human restrictions on his actions, and who possesses an understanding of "irrational desires", whatever these might be, without ever experiencing the results of acting on such desires?

Swinburne's detailing of the "mind" of the Incarnate God is grounded on his framing of Incarnation in terms of what he describes as a "divine consciousness and a human consciousness of God Incarnate", (43) what we might describe as a divinely ordained split-personality (Ibid., p. 43). God Incarnate is expected to embody such a split-personality, but Swinburne tells us that "the separation of the belief systems would be a voluntary act, knowledge of which was part of God Incarnate's divine belief system but not of his human belief system"; we are told that the "human consciousness" does not include the "divine consciousness" (Ibid., p. 43). In other words, Swinburne asks us to conceive of a "divided mind" that engages in "voluntary actions[s]" that are only evident to one part of this "divided mind". The "human belief system" does not have "knowledge" of this "voluntary act" that separates it from the "divine belief system" even though both belief systems co-habitate this "divided mind". In other words, since this whole model of God Incarnate's "divided mind" is presented in terms of consciousness and belief systems and all things human, the reader has great difficulty in understanding how such human notions as "voluntary" acts and "belief systems" can apply to a "mind" that has no knowledge of what its more influential half is up to. We should also recall that in an earlier book Swinburne argues that "the incarnate life of God the Son" was "necessarily - not voluntarily - begotten by the Father" (42). This clear distinction between actions made out of necessity and not voluntarily by members of the Trinity obviously further distances Swinburne's use of these terms from the purely human realm. How effective is it then to render Incarnation in terms of "consciousness", "voluntary acts" and "belief systems" when the resulting metaphorical

system unsettles our capacity to understand the original and very “human” meaning of these terms? In other words, how are we to understand a mind, even if divided, that does not have full “knowledge” of its “voluntary acts”; is such an entity still a mind as we understand it? How are we to understand a mind that does not have any “knowledge” of, or access to, the most influential side of its “consciousness”?

II

Literature has always offered theology and philosophy a less “rationalistic” means for examining such mysteries. T.S. Eliot’s exploration of the mystery of Incarnation in his poetry gives another account of a speaker’s struggles to reconcile incarnational visions with a sense of shame and an all too human “divided mind” that looks forward to “further union” with God. Eliot can be regarded as giving us the view from the porch, as opposed to Swinburne’s and John Paul II’s view from afar. The Incarnation he describes is one deeply embedded in the daily lives of his protagonists. However, these figures share the sense of the “divided mind”, and the sense of momentarily forgetting one’s “divinity” that Swinburne’s God Incarnate possesses. Eliot’s speakers inhabit what one might call the visceral biopolitical order of the Incarnation. Eliot describes a type of “divided mind” as speaker in *Four Quartets*, one that can be regarded as exploring shame as it is mediated by a vision of the Incarnation that disowns the shame associated with what the speaker calls the “weakness of the changing body”.

A. David Moody argues that the “Incarnation” “became the governing idea of T.S. Eliot’s poetry after 1925 (Moody, 1995, p. 132). Moody’s reading of Incarnation in Eliot is in terms of what he describes as a “poetics of self-negation”. Moody argues that the Incarnation in Eliot must most typically be read in terms of a dying towards life; *Ash-Wednesday* describes “the revelation of a new life and the awakening from a dead world” (Ibid., p. 157). Moody writes later of this “poetics of self-negation”:

I am not sure that it is altogether orthodox, but certainly the meaning here is consistent with that of all the verse since 1925: that it is only in his death that man can be united with the divine. This is the *human* aspect of Incarnation, the aspect open to poetry. We miss Eliot’s meaning if we think only of the divine aspect, which is theology or mysticism. (Ibid., p. 195.)

This negating or dismissal of the animal and physical worlds, and ultimately too of the world of passion and love between man and woman, is regarded as the result of events and experiences in Eliot’s life that Moody traces to one of Eliot’s letters to Paul Elmer More, from “Shrove Tuesday, 1928”. In the letter, Eliot writes of “the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill. I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive towards ascetism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting” (see Moody, 1995, pp. 11–12). It is then a deeply felt sense of shame in what is “disgusting” in human life that drives Eliot to a reconceptualisation of Incarnation in his poetry. Moody goes on to argue that it was the “basic doctrine of Incarnation” that “confirmed and formulated his [Eliot’s] already developed convictions. Moreover, it did not take the place of his ‘inspiration’, or become what he had to express. It simply contributed to his poetry, to the articulation of his deepest feelings, a more conscious and definite understanding” (Ibid., p. 12). However, it is notable that Eliot’s regard for Incarnation is a “negative variation” on the contemplation of the Word (Ibid., p. 135).

Moody sees “Word made flesh” in Eliot as “the antonym of the world” especially for such characters as the Magus, Gerontion and Simeon. He suggests that this is the cause of the “poet’s transference of his love from the woman to the Word”. In *Ash-Wednesday* “the essential impulse” then is in terms of a “need to renounce human love which is a torment; to idealise the beloved; and to achieve a transcendent harmony and wholeness ‘in His will’” (Ibid., p. 140). This is, of course, related to impersonality and the “continual extinction of personality” (Eliot, 1975, p. 40) that Eliot speaks of in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where the individual must give way to the tradition that speaks

through the poet. However, on the other side of this incarnational spectrum is the sense of a living community that Eliot also privileges. As he describes in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, the potential Christian society is “not a society of saints, but of ordinary men, of men whose Christianity is communal before being individual” (see Moody, 1995, p. 233). Eliot then also wants to rescue back into his incarnational understanding of Christianity some of the uniquely human attributes that shame alerts his speakers to. However, one question Eliot’s reading raises for the reader is how he or she is to discover a communal sense that is both Christian and incarnational in the sense Eliot describes where there is this renunciation of the flesh and of any privileging of “human love” above “His will”? It is often the personal struggle that lends credence to the necessity to be part of a communal and Christian society. One is reminded of the words from John Donne’s Meditation XVII that “no man is an island”.

We find a more affirmative reading of Eliot’s incarnational poetics in Vincent B. Leitch’s essay “T.S. Eliot’s Poetry of Religious Desolation”. In recognising that poems such as “The Hollow Men” and “The Journey of the Magi” give us characters who “have no apparent access to religious consolation”, Leitch reads the “symbolic journey of the Magi” “as a bridge between the secular and the religious phases of Eliot’s developing consciousness” (Leitch, 1979, p. 38). Leitch argues that the final phase of a move “from self to God” is realised in *Ash-Wednesday*: “This gradual shift from a self- to a God-centred world is revealed in the Incarnation. With the introduction of Incarnation into his poetry in “Journey of the Magi”, Eliot commences his journey towards the “joyous incarnational visions” of God that recur so strikingly in *Four Quartets*. Eliot’s understanding of Incarnation is now seen to exhibit the “strikingly” “joyous incarnational visions” of the later poems as well as Moody’s “negative variation” and “poetics of decarnation”. This privileging of Incarnation in Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is also found in possibly the first important reading of the sequence, namely, F. O. Matthiessen’s “Eliot’s Quartets” (Matthiessen, 1943) that also speaks of the “doctrine of the Incarnation” as the “pivotal point on which Eliot’s thought has swung well away from the 19th Century’s romantic heresies of Deification”. Matthiessen notes that Eliot saw the “reckless doctrine” of Deification, where every great man is “a Messiah”, as something that has “led ineluctably to Dictatorship” (171) and he suggests that Eliot speaks for a “reestablished social order in which both rulers and ruled find their completion in their common humility before God” (171). However, as *East Coker* suggests, it is in the suffering towards death that man finds ultimate completion in a community with God.

Eliot’s Incarnation then is one that offers “visions”, but visions that must be arrived at, or experienced, after an ascetic journey of suffering. Man must come to salvation “by the way of dispossession” (Ibid., p. 169) and desolation. As Eliot suggests in citing the ascetic St. John of the Cross as an epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*: “Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until I has divested itself of the love of created beings”. Leitch supports this view by referring the reader to Eliot’s essay on Dante of 1929 where Eliot describes the suffering of the inhabitants of Purgatory as different from the suffering of those in Hell; as Eliot puts it, they “wish to suffer, for purgation”; they suffer more actively and keenly, being souls preparing for blessedness” (Leitch, 1979, p. 41). Therefore, even though Leitch has spoken of how the doctrine of the Incarnation enables Eliot to commence his journey towards “the joyous incarnational visions of God”, even he must end his essay on Eliot by describing how his chief characters must strip themselves, through what Matthiessen describes as a formal process of “incremental repetition”,³ of “external support and comfort” (Leitch, 1979, p. 42) because “paradoxically, the ascetic experience causes severe desolation because a soul close to God suffers more keenly and actively” (Ibid., p. 43). It is, once again then, a sense of shame that is being offered up as a means through which the subject receives these “joyous incarnational visions”. However, Eliot gives us the reverse image of the incarnational journey Swinburne has described. Whereas Eliot’s all too human protagonists must experience a sense of “desolation” and thus a form of alienation from God in striving to move closer to God, Swinburne’s God Incarnate, a being also deeply embedded in the human experience, must sometimes be forgetful of his “divinity” in coming to terms with the full nature of his human “mind” and “consciousness”. However, Swinburne denies such a “mind” the sense of shame that accompanies, and drives, the human striving towards self-perfection in Eliot. Leitch sums up this philosophy of the self through Incarnation as

follows: “Eliot stressed the anxiety and suffering of desolation more fully and more frequently than the peace and joy of consolation and union with God” (Ibid., p. 43). Eliot emphasises that the redemptive suffering and anxiety is experienced after the “I” has divested itself of the “love of created things” and the “weakness of the changing body”. One might suggest then that the shame the body incurs is revoked by Eliot’s speaker in *Four Quartets* as “disgusting” before it can be incorporated into an investigation of the “human person as a living subject” that, we recall, John Paul II believes is essential for understanding Incarnation.

It is this paradox that I wish to examine for the remainder of this essay. How does Eliot’s “divided mind” enable him to produce an incarnational vision that offers the potential for the “communal” society that he speaks of in *The Idea of a Christian Society*? Since his characters have to renounce “external support and comfort” (Ibid., p. 42) and since *Dry Salvages* is, as Moody suggests, descriptive of “the metaphysics of Incarnation, [where] ‘Incarnation’ is being declared, not as an idea or belief simply, but as a way of life, a mode of existence” (235), what is the nature of this mode of existence? How is this “way of life” as Incarnation to realise itself? Even Moody in his summing up of the Incarnation dichotomy at work in Eliot’s work must ultimately suggest that “Here words in their ordinary sense must fail”. His extended reading of the philosophy of Incarnation in Eliot even details how processes of life themselves have been stripped of their natural dimension: “This allusion to the process of birth – conceiving, bearing and begetting – is fundamental to *The Dry Salvages*, only it has been wholly converted from the natural to a metaphysical sense” (Moody, 1995, p. 232).

How does Eliot’s representation of this incarnational “divided mind” embrace both the harsh asceticism that advocates a renunciation of the attachment to “created beings” and “external support” while also working to form a “communal” spirit built on humility while negotiating “a lifetime’s death in love”? Does Eliot show us how it proceeds in a life? Eliot appears to simply lay out the paradox before the reader. Most of his characters end with a feeling of desolation and his own more autobiographical poetic voice in the later poems is too authoritative in its description of the communion as an “impossible union” (Eliot, 1959, “The Dry Salvages”, p. 33). In other words, Eliot’s vision for incorporating the doctrine of the Incarnation not only into a poetics but into what Moody regards finally as “a way of life” must be complemented by recent theories of Incarnation that ask for an embrace of embodiment and the “human living”, as John Paul II suggests above.

In moving now to a closer look at Incarnation in *Four Quartets*, I want to explore how this tension in his poetry in representing this “divided mind” speaks for a sense of shame that is discovered in what Eliot describes as the “weakness of the changing body”. Denis Donoghue takes the central “meaning” of the *Four Quartets* sequence to be located in the following lines from section III of “The Dry Salvages”:

At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: ‘on whatever sphere of being’
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death’ –that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others (Ibid., p. 31.)

If the time of death is every moment and if, as Donoghue suggests, we must be “intent upon the highest sphere of being” at every moment, then according to the Dantean promise, this “‘intention’ will fructify in the lives of others”. Donoghue argues that this “is another version of the promise made in section II, after the equation of ‘the meaning’ with ‘the one Annunciation’” (Donoghue, 1969, p. 220). He is equating the “meaning” here with the time of that “one Annunciation” that made manifest or realised the Incarnation. The suggestion in “The Dry Salvages” might then be that the “approach” to the meaning we have overlooked—“We had the experience but missed the

meaning”—“restores the experience/in a different form”. Eliot’s important reading of Incarnation then becomes evident in these lines. It is one that echoes the “social idea” of Matthew Arnold; it is an approach to “meaning” as mediated through Incarnation that has a communicative and communal emphasis: “I have said before/That the past experience revived in the meaning/Is not the experience of one life only/But of many generations” (Eliot, 1959, “The Dry Salvages”, p. 28). One can see the traces of Eliot’s various theories of literature and criticism colouring this understanding of meaning through Incarnation; the importance of tradition and impersonality are evident in this approach to experience and meaning. Perhaps Eliot is responding to the all too personal contemplation of the “past experience” that Bergson and Proust describe.

The question of how one should live becomes a question about meaning itself. One must maintain a wary eye on past experience even in the face of the “assurance/Of recorded history”: “not forgetting/Something that is probably quite ineffable:/The backward look behind the assurance/Of recorded history” (Ibid., p. 28–29). Leading commentators on the poem have questioned whether the “Voice of the *Quartets*” is “consistently parodic”. Hugh Kenner argues that the “recurrent illumination” of “Burnt Norton” and the “pervasive sombreness” of “East Coker” are to be taken as opposing terms, “alternative ways in which the mind responsible for their existence deceives itself”. However, Denis Donoghue takes this reading to imply, for Kenner, “that everything leading up to the last section of ‘Little Gidding’ from the first words of ‘Burnt Norton’, is, more or less, parody; the disclosure of moral positions which Eliot – the suggestion runs – has never inhabited or form which he has detached himself” (see Donoghue, 1969, p. 227). Kenner (1969) is eager, for Donoghue, to rescue over some trace of Eliot’s earlier voices, such as the speaker of “Prufrock” who is simply a “name plus an I”, into his reading of the *Quartets*. However, it is Eliot’s words on humility from “East Coker”—“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (Eliot, 1959, p. 18)—that most forcefully suggests for Donoghue that all cannot be parody. However, Eliot reminds us that parody has become simply one element of the poetry and not its guiding mood. In having revealed something of the central “meaning” of his poem—“That the past experience revived in the meaning/Is not the experience of one life only/But of many generations”—Eliot reminds us that in recognising such a “truth” about “meaning” we must not forget “something that is probably quite ineffable”, namely “[t]he backward look behind the assurance/Of recorded history, the backward half-look/Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror”. One must ask what the “primitive terror” is here; it is, we are told, what is outside of, and unsettles, “recorded history”. One is inclined to read “the assurance/Of recorded history” here as a non-parodic statement of the speaker’s perspective; Donoghue says the style in general at such points is “a preceptorial voice making our clichés uninhabitable” (Donoghue, 1969, p. 228). At such points, it is important to recall the “new element” in Eliot’s later poetry, the element of Christian belief. We might recall Orwell’s words on the progress of writers like Eliot: “after a certain age one must either stop writing or dedicate oneself to some purpose not wholly aesthetic” (Orwell, 1969, p. 85). Because Eliot’s writing has changed and because it now must accommodate this dedication to something “not wholly aesthetic”, whatever this might constitute, one must distinguish the speaker in *Four Quartets* from the disembodied speaker of the earlier poetry.

However, another aspect of the poetry that has changed, what gets subsumed by this “not wholly aesthetic” purpose, is the poetry’s state of being “innocent of public spirit”, an aspect E. M. Forster praised in “Prufrock” (see Orwell, 1969, p. 84). The extract on “meaning” from section II of “The Dry Salvages” demonstrates clearly Eliot’s new awareness of a “public spirit” in relation to his guiding theme of Incarnation. It is worthwhile noting Eliot’s advice to the reader here when reading religious poetry in his essay on Dante: “You are not called on to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a groat’s worth more of understanding and appreciation; but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can read poetry as poetry, you will ‘believe’ in Dante’s theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief” (see Moody, 1995, p. 242). But what is the new understanding of the “public spirit” that Eliot puts forward? The sense of “public spirit” or the “social idea” that the *Four Quartets* harbours in relation to Incarnation is one that differentiates between the “many generations”, those past that

we must listen to for the “past experience revived in the meaning”, those to come in whom our thoughts on death will “fructify”, and those immediately about us in this generation through whom we “appreciate” “better” that “the moments of agony” are “permanent” (Eliot, 1959, p. 29). In other words, the different generations that can be aligned with “the assurance of recorded history” both past and to come are bound up with the notions of tradition that Scriptures, the literary canon and even Incarnation embody. However, it is the generation that is bound up in the here and now that is somewhat removed from this “assurance” and ultimately becomes more closely associated with the “primitive terror” that the speaker is trying to keep at bay.

I believe this is where the new central tension lies in the *Four Quartets* in terms of understanding Eliot’s use of Incarnation. At what point does the “assurance” of the past generations and of the fructifying generations to come give way to the “agony of others”? How much space or time does Eliot give to the process by means of which the “agony of others” becomes “the assurance/Of recorded history”, what Yeats, who appears in Eliot’s ghostly vision in “Little Gidding” describes elsewhere as those “dying generations at their fall”? How does Eliot’s vision of the Christian Society accommodate a notion of Incarnation that is not only viable for the lives of those represented by the “assurance” of “recorded history” but also for the life of the “human person as a living subject” that John Paul II privileges above? I believe that the “desolation”, the “lifetime’s death in love”, and the “agony of others, *nearly* experienced,/involving ourselves” of Eliot’s incarnational vision in *Four Quartets* results from this unresolved tension between the “agony of others” and “the assurance of recorded history”. The unresolved tension in the poetry arises then in regard to how an inherited sense of shame, one that is as deeply felt as the shame that arises for the speaker in the present who finds everything human “disgusting”, can be dispatched to “recorded history”. The speaker’s efforts to balance these competing emotions while striving for incarnational visions is what makes the “further union” his poetry is calling for possible.

John Paul II and Michel Henry regard love as central to a fuller understanding of Incarnation, however, the speaker of “East Coker” says “Love is most nearly itself/When here and now cease to matter”. The “intensity” “for a further union, a deeper communion/Through the dark cold and the empty desolation” (Eliot, 1959, pp. 22–23) that Eliot’s speaker seeks is always a “further union” with the self’s meditative understanding of death. Eliot may not be Orwell’s man for whom “the next world is as real as this one” (Orwell, 1969, p. 86) but his speaker too often flees to a contemplation of death to escape the “primitive terror” and the “agony of others” when these are possibly more effective states and events for realising a “further union” or “deeper communion” with the “time of death [that] is every moment”. Ultimately, it might be because the “weakness of the changing body” of “Burnt Norton” is being misrepresented. The speaker says that “the enchainment of past and future/Woven in the weakness of the changing body,/Protects mankind from heaven and damnation/Which flesh cannot endure” (Eliot, 1959, p. 10). If Eliot’s art is the “Puritan art” A. Alvarez describes it as and if it “lacks the dimension of human error” (Alvarez, 1969, p. 243) then it may very well be precisely because the “weakness” of Eliot’s “changing body” is tied up completely with “the enchainment of past and future” which living flesh simply does not endure. The weakness of a changing body in the lived moment, the event, or *lieu vague*—whatever phrase one chooses for such a moment—is a body that must directly confront the “primitive terror”, and the “agony of others” and not reduce it to “recorded history” or to “the mental emptiness” of commuters giving in to “the growing terror of nothing to think about”. When Eliot comes to define his Incarnation, the description is revealing for his Christian society. It is “hint half guessed, the gift half understood” but the “hints” are moments “in and out of time”, that do not involve other people; the hint can be “[t]he distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,/the wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning/Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/While the music lasts” (Eliot, 1959, p. 33). It is interesting to note that these are the “hints” half guessed that are “Incarnation” while the “rest/Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action”, (Ibid., p. 33) action coming last in this series of private tasks. What promises to be a more anthropocentric reading of the Incarnation in Eliot’s poetry, one that points us to a “joyous, incarnational vision” that is accommodating the shame that the “weakness of the changing body” reveals, is ultimately one that sounds ascetic and

even solipsistic. The Incarnation that Eliot describes is forgetful of interpersonal affection and communication that falls outside the reader/text paradigm. In the end, however, in reading Swinburne's and Eliot's incarnational philosophies side by side, we are left with a greater appreciation of the kind of human nature each writer is inclined to discard in describing either the Incarnate God's "mind" or the human understanding of "Incarnation". In both cases, it is those aspects of human nature that create a sense of shame that end up being either incomprehensible to the "mind" of the Incarnate God or reprehensible for the human protagonist committed to "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action".

The philosophical investigation and poetic treatment of this mystery both then seem to hover around, or voice in its absence, a moment of "primitive terror" or shame when incarnation's human face is being contemplated. It is this grounding, corporeal human moment that readings of Incarnation struggle to incorporate the more the mystery is humanised in terms of a description of consciousness and the mind. Such readings can only go so far before the human consciousness's roots in the body emerge in all their "primitive terror", whether it be in the shape of the "agony of others" or the "weakness of the changing body". In the end, it seems that the author's own sense of shame in assigning too much humanity, too many of the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, to his or her God leads to an instinctual, and very human, recoiling. Perhaps Eliot speaks justifiably on so many levels when he acknowledges that the mystery may only ever be a "hint half guessed, the gift half understood".

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Michael O'Sullivan¹
E-mail: osullivan@cuhk.edu.hk

¹ Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Incarnation and shame: Reading Richard Swinburne on Jesus' "divided mind" in light of Christian phenomenology and T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, Michael O'Sullivan, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1134391.

Notes

1. For Nancy (2008) this mystery of the Incarnation reveals, in an age where "we have no sacrifices", (79) "the body as revealed mystery, the absolute sign of self and the essence of sense" (87).
2. In denying his God Incarnate any unjust acts, Swinburne reminds us of the famous Socratic paradox according to which "no one does wrong willingly". The paradox supposedly allowed Socrates to rule out akrasia or weakness of the will. However, recent commentators have argued that the paradox should be understood in terms of a series of "reactions to positions taken by Socrates' opponents". It is then possible to show that "Socrates endorses neither the implausible doctrine that has come to be known as the denial of akrasia nor the host of other odd ideas associated with it" (Weiss, 2008, p. 22). However, Swinburne's bar on unjust acts for his Incarnate God runs much deeper since it is not concerned with dialectical tactics but rather with a mode of being.
3. Matthiessen, p. 172.

References

Alvarez, A. (1969). A meditative poet. In B. Bergonzi (Ed.), *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets. A casebook* (pp. 240–244). London:

Macmillan.

Damasio, A. (2012). *Self comes to mind: Constructing the conscious brain*. London: Vintage.

Donoghue, D. (1969). T. S. Eliot's *Quartets*: A new reading. In B. Bergonzi (Ed.), *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets. A casebook* (pp. 212–238). London: Macmillan.

Eliot, T. S. (1959). *Four Quartets*. London: Faber & Faber.

Eliot, T. S. (1975). Tradition and the individual talent. In F. Kermode (Ed.), *Selected prose of T. S. Eliot* (pp. 37–44). London: Faber & Faber.

Henry, M. (2000). *Incarnation: une philosophie de la chair* [Incarnation: A philosophy of the flesh]. Paris: Seuil.

Henry, M. (2008). Material phenomenology. (S. Davidson, Trans.). In *Perspectives in continental philosophy*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Kenner, H. (1969). Into our first world. In B. Bergonzi (Ed.), *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets. A casebook* (pp. 168–196). London: Macmillan.

Leitch, V. B. (1979). T. S. Eliot's poetry of religious desolation. *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 44, 35–44.

Matthiessen, F. O. (1943). Eliot's *Quartets*. *Kenyon Review*, 5, 161–178.

Moody, A. D. (1995). *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511597671>

Nancy, J.-L. (2008). *Corpus*. (R. A. Rand, Trans.). New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Orwell, G. (1969). T. S. Eliot. In B. Bergonzi (Ed.), *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets. A Casebook* (pp. 84–86). London: Macmillan.

Paul, J. II. (2006). *Man and woman He created them; A theology of the body*. (M. Waldstein, Trans.). Boston, MA: Pauline Books.

Swinburne, R. (2003). *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0199257469.001.0001>

Swinburne, R. (2010). *Was Jesus God?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weiss, R. (2008). *The Socratic Paradox and its Enemies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, B. (2008). *Shame and necessity* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.



© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

