

# CHALLENGES TO THE TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF HISTORY

*by Jan-Olav Henriksen*

*Abstract.* Present knowledge of evolutionary history challenges traditional concepts of the Christian salvation history. In order to overcome these challenges, theology needs to articulate a wider, more open and more universal approach to the understanding of God's salvific action. One way of doing this is to employ the notion of "deep incarnation" suggested by Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen. His suggestion may also blur the lines that mark a sharp distinction between the history of creation and the history of salvation, in a way that safeguards some of the basic tenets of classical theology.

*Keywords:* Augustine; Terrence Deacon; deep incarnation; evolution; Niels Henrik Gregersen; salvation history

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Christian theology speaks of history as having its origin and its end in the acts of the trinitarian God. This means that history has its origin in God's creation, and its end in the final consummation of the world, in order for history to become realized so that "God can be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). Hence, to speak of history is to speak of the reality of God's total creation as it becomes fulfilled in salvation, and of God's work as we may know it from past to future. It is against this backdrop that it also becomes understandable how German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, in one of his early and most programmatic writings called "Redemptive Event and History," could start out as follows:

History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology. All theological questions and answers are meaningful only within the framework of the history which God has with humanity and through humanity with his whole creation—the history moving toward a future still hidden from the world but already revealed in Jesus Christ. (Pannenberg 1970, 15)

Pannenberg's statement, which I think still deserves to be quoted, summarizes the basic understanding of the importance of the historical

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dimension of reality for theological reflection. His position underscores how one cannot avoid addressing historical questions when one asks about in what way and to what extent Christianity can still be a viable religious option. Moreover, he also clearly defines the Christian understanding of history in relation to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christian theology holds that God has not only created the world and initiated the historical process that we are part of and can experience on the common level and as part of all of humanity. God has also a special project going within creation: God wants to lead creation to its fulfillment, and this fulfillment is called salvation. This is not possible without the initiative and act of God: creation cannot fulfill itself. Accordingly, there is a close relationship between creation and salvation, between the world and the church as sign of the coming Kingdom of God (which is the main symbol of salvation), as both have their origin in the initiative and activity of God.

During the last decades, however, and not only due to the success of the Darwinian paradigm, the whole notion of a specific salvation history has been jeopardized. Recent insights into the evolution of humanity (see, e.g., Fuentes 2013b) as well as the evolution of religion (cf., e.g., Barrett 2000, 2002, 2004; Boyer 2001; Murray and Schloss 2009; Bellah 2012) suggest that it is increasingly more problematic to understand salvation history as something that can be distinguished from the rest of human evolutionary history. In this article, I will address the challenges following from this situation, addressing how theological ideas of the Fall, of sin and of election need to be reconsidered. The constructive part will lean on Niels Henrik Gregersen's recent suggestion for a notion of "deep incarnation" (Gregersen 2010, cf. 2013, 2013). This suggestion opens up a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of God's work for all of creation, which is rooted firmly in the most central doctrine of Christian faith, namely, the notion of God becoming human, and thereby part of creation. Accordingly, the following is sketching an argument about how one can meet the challenge to the traditional theological concept of history in a constructive manner that pays respect to the stand of contemporary knowledge about the evolution of religion and humanity. The following is, of course, not a comprehensive or in-depth treatise of all topics that need to be addressed.

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE FALL

Several problems are related to this understanding of the historical reality as salvation history as it is understood by Christian theology. One of the main problems has to do with the reason for making the distinction between creation history and salvation history. Traditionally, the cause for making the distinction was seen in the so-called Fall of humanity. A distinct version of the predicament of the Fall is present in the Augustinian (Western)

tradition, where the conception of the Fall is of crucial importance: After being created by God, humanity separated from God, and fell into sin. In many traditional approaches to history, the Fall was, against the backdrop of this approach, considered the event in history that led to humanity's need for becoming restored. Thus, history was not only the ongoing process of God's continuous creation any more, but also interpreted as a story of God calling humanity back into community; the restored community and participation in the reality of God is then the effect of this specific salvation history. Although some of the classical interpretations of the Fall did not take it to be a literal account of what happened (e.g., Augustine reads the account in Genesis 3 about what happened in the Garden of Eden as a symbolic myth, cf. Teske 1999), there nevertheless seems to be agreement in most of the traditional sources that the Fall did take place within the sphere of human history, and did so in a way that subsequently altered the human condition and provided the opportunity for God to initiate a specific salvation history. The peak of this history is then in Christian theology to be found in the presence of God in history, as this presence can be witnessed in Jesus of Nazareth—a point that I will return to later.

Whereas there are also other and admittedly “softer” understandings of the Fall in the history of theology—e.g., Irenaeus (*Adversus Heresim* 2,28.1)—that see human nature as implying growth and as having an explicitly evolutionary dimension, and thereby do not view the Fall as so tragic as does Augustine, nevertheless a basic problem with the assumption of a Fall in early human history is, to put it bluntly, that it did not take place.<sup>1</sup> To quote Christopher Southgate: “The evolutionary narrative of the long history of life on Earth banishes forever the notion that it was human action, human sin, that caused the presence of violence and suffering in nature” (Southgate 2011, 372). There is no empirical evidence for this Fall, as biblical scholars also have been pointing out when they have pointed to the mythological and etiological character of the story. There are, however, no reasons for dismissing the story's potential theological or philosophical significance, as has been pointed out by several more recent contributors (cf. Ricoeur 1967; Edwards 2004; Southgate 2008, 2011; Webb 2010). But there are, at the same time, reasons for being critical toward theological attempts that suggest that the Fall took place within the realm of human history. Such attempts are hardly anything other than artificial attempts to read Genesis in a manner both misguided and obsolete.

For more than a century then, theological anthropology has accordingly taken notice of the fact that there is no viable way to uphold the notion of “a Fall” that changed the subsequent course of human history. Today the narratives in Genesis 1–3 are interpreted by the majority of scholars as etiological reflections that were established in order to interpret the basic life conditions of humanity: they do not offer an account of past historical circumstances, but rather of present conditions for human life, be it in

terms of the experience of life as good, of being created by God in God's image, of being connected to all life on Earth, and of sharing in the state of sin as lack of trust in God. Accordingly, notions of the Fall are used in order to describe the imperfect state of humanity, and not to pinpoint a certain point of time in human history.<sup>2</sup> The Fall is about the *present* state of humanity, and not about its past.

This leaves any theologian who wants to make a distinction between the history of creation and the history of salvation in a predicament: on what basis is it possible to make such a distinction? One of the possible ways to solve this problem is to point not in the direction of the Fall, but in the direction of an *election*. This is an approach that also finds considerable support in the biblical witness of both the Old and New Testaments.

#### ELECTION AND SALVATION HISTORY

The notion of election in the biblical witness is related to several different strands of thought, all of which have to do with the interpretation of the historical process: Israel's exodus out of Egypt is interpreted as an expression of God's love for this people, and also taken as a sign of how God has a preference for Israel over other nations. Hence, election is the selection of the one out of the many, in a way that then in turn makes it possible to see the many as an expression of creation and the elect few as an expression of salvation. Thus, salvation as election history becomes possible against the general backdrop of creation. "It is the goal of such selection that the beloved one is to belong to God and to share community with God" (Pannenberg 1977, 48). In a crude fashion, this notion of election can be read as ethnocentric and as privileging the one over the many. Mostly, however, this is not the case. The reason is that the exodus is not the only historical event that is interpreted as an election; also stories about Abraham and Jacob are interpreted along similar lines. Of specific importance here is the election of Abraham, as this election has a universalistic tendency: not only Abraham is elected, but, in him, all peoples of the Earth as well are promised a blessing. This suggests that already in the biblical material itself there is a tension between a particularistic and a more universalistic interpretation of God's election, which then in turn has consequences for how one sees the relation between the history of creation and the history of salvation. The New Testament interpretation of election favors the latter, universalistic tendency: "The particularism of the love of God for the elected one is to be related to the more comprehensive horizon of God's love for all mankind. The chosen one, then, is assigned a function for that wider context. He is elected in order to serve as God's agent in relation to a more comprehensive object of God's love" (Pannenberg 1977, 49).

This understanding of election as a background for making a distinction between universal history and salvation history then has two important

consequences. First, it serves to interpret specific events in history as events that relate to and are part of salvation history; specific events are constitutive for being chosen (called), and accordingly also for developing a concept of salvation history. Second, this also ties together the understanding of election and the understanding of the elected person's mission. This calling to mission in turn also presupposes his or her ability to respond adequately to the election. Salvation is thus intimately bound up with serving the universal purpose of God, which is to call all humans into community. The personal dimension here is important to underscore, as this means that history is the history of God with people who are free to respond to God's own free election and calling. Human freedom and responsibility, as general features of being and becoming humans, are thus also involved in the carrying out of God's salvation history. History is not going on according to a predetermined, fixed pattern of events, but involves free beings who can make history—and who therefore also become included in salvation history, given their response to God's initiatives and calling. The course of events is nevertheless to be understood in such a way that God leads, calls, and lures creation toward God's *telos*.

Given this alternative to the understanding of the relation between salvation history and universal history as conditioned by the fall, we can, with Pannenberg, describe the historical process as one in which God acts for *all* people, not only for those God elected. The elected are elected to act for the benefit of all. "Thus, the chosen individual is related to the people and the people to mankind in a similar way. At the same time, the interrelation of election and mission entails the consequence that the elected one is accountable to God for his mission to the world and may be rejected again in case of his failure. Yet the act of election is meant to be definitive. Even in the case of failure there is still a chance in calling upon the faithfulness, self-identity, and perseverance of God" (Pannenberg 1977, 51f.)

Salvation history then exhibits three elements that are all important features for understanding the relation of God to history in general, and for the understanding of salvation history as well. We can list them thus:

- (A) God is love. As love, God creates the universe, makes history possible, and provides the opportunities for a salvation history, which means that creation is called into full community with God.
- (B) God is free, and as free, God elects by specific events in history, in order to realize God's love to all of creation. As free, God's election has to be seen as contingent, and not dependent upon any kind of merit on the side of God's elected people. Furthermore, this election history also testifies to a major trait in history in general, namely, that history is made up of contingent events, and that new things can happen that were not possible in the past.

- (C) God is faithful. Accordingly, it is possible to rely on God as the one who persistently calls God's elected people, and who wants them to be serving God's universal salvific purposes. Furthermore, the regularities and the stability in the experienced world can be seen as God being faithful to the basic conditions on which the created world, including human beings, live and flourish.

The function of election, seen against this backdrop, is that the elected are called to be witness to God and God's desire for community—and thereby fulfill the calling to be and become the image of God (*imago Dei*). This is the prerequisite for establishing a full community with God that includes full participation in the community with God and salvation from all that is contrary to God's will and God's destiny of humankind. Sin and eternal death are still understood to be the basic sources of the separation of humans and God. Both sin and death need to be overcome in order to realize salvation in history. Death is lack of participation in life in and from God, whereas sin is lack of faith and trust in God, which in turn also becomes expressed in moral failure and lack of righteousness before God.

#### SIN AND DEATH AS PROBLEMS IN SALVATION HISTORY—AND THE CHALLENGE FROM THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION<sup>3</sup>

In Christianity, sin and death are usually seen as constituting the need for a salvation history. There are, however, problems here also. The main reason is that there is presently no way we can imagine human life without death as an operative device. *Death* is an instrument in the evolutionary process, and pivotal to the development of life in its variety, diversity, and plural forms. However, from a theological point of view, death has traditionally been seen as *contrary* to God's will for humanity and the realization of salvation history. Accordingly, in death we are confronted with a concrete and distinguished phenomenon that allows for a clear distinction between processes of creation (which implies and includes death) and salvation (where the power of death is overcome). Contemporary theology has to realize that an evolutionary view on death presents significant problems for a traditional interpretation of death as the consequence of the Fall in sin (Romans 5).<sup>4</sup> Even those who hold that suffering, death, and extinction are not *in principle* the necessary features or drivers of the mechanism of natural selection will have to admit that given the present conditions of the world, this is the case.<sup>5</sup> And theology needs to relate to and interpret the present conditions and make sense of them, also as they are articulated in natural sciences.

When it comes to *sin*, there is a quite common understanding of sin as moral failure that is pervasive also in many Christian circles. However, a distinctive *theological* notion of sin has to be located in the distorted

relationship between God and humanity. Sin is all that restricts creation from partaking in community with God as the source of life. Sin implies the already mentioned lack of faith in God, and the insubordination to God's calling to be and become God's representatives (the image of God in the world). The basic condition for believing in God, though, and to have this relationship restored, is that oneself (or one's representatives as in infant baptism) is able to understand that it is God that one relates to. This condition is nevertheless presenting us with another problem when it comes to the question about how to understand salvation history, a question that is closely related to the emergence of religion in general in human history.

The problem has to do with the quite common idea that one has to believe in God in order to be saved. It can be stated thus: (1) At what stage in human evolution was it possible to develop something that we can call religion in the sense that we understand it on present terms; and (2) given that the development of the Christian message about salvation in Jesus Christ emerged 2000 years ago, how are we to understand the fate of all those living beings who lived prior to Christ, and who were part of the earlier stages of human history or the stages that cannot be described as salvation history—including the stages before there was anything like "organized" or assembled and traditioned religion? Answers to these questions may contain far more implications than those usually identified by questions related to the origins of humanity as presented in discussions about religion and the Darwinian heritage.<sup>6</sup> They have to do with the relation between salvation history and universal history, and more concretely, with how the latter (universal history) also has brought forth elements that were conditions for living with religion and developing a spiritual attitude toward reality that can be seen as features of salvation history. I will dwell some more on these problems.

Religion as a phenomenon is conditioned by specific developments in (human) evolution. To take this insight seriously means that we have to see not only the capacities for religion, but also the content of religion, as something that has a history, and something that has changed over time. When it comes to the latter, Christian theology has in later decades usually not had much difficulty realizing the historical development of the content of religious conceptions, including acceptance of the development and changes in the doctrine of God. But when it comes to the former, that religion—including religion as it presents itself in the clothes of Christianity—is also dependent upon and conditioned by features in human evolutionary history, the implications of this insight for how to assess the content of Christian doctrine has not been considered very often. As an interpretation taking the different sources of knowledge about religion seriously, theology is nevertheless also fallible and revisable.<sup>7</sup>

The approach to religion favored in present scholarly and scientific work sees it as linked to an evolved capacity of humans. This point could be summarized in the truism “We would not have religion if we did not have evolution.” Evolution is what has made the distinctive human mode of being in the world possible, and this mode is expressed in a profound manner also in the human capacity for religion (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006). Recent contributions have thus surprisingly vindicated the claim for the existence of what theologians used to call natural religion: to be religious is quite natural, and to be expected (cf. Barrett 2004; Pyysiäinen 2009). Humans are hard-wired for religion. But to have religion as part of one’s historically given capabilities is not sufficient to solve the problems of sin and death as described in traditional Christianity: what is required for such a solution is to have a specific relationship with God reestablished through the specific history of salvation. That means that salvation history is not only dependent upon certain features we may find in universal history, but also more concretely on features that are linked to the evolution of humanity. The seminal work of Terrence Deacon may shed light on how the development of religion that makes the idea of salvation history possible is related to capacities that have emerged in human evolution. Deacon writes:

Though we share the same earth with millions of kinds of living creatures, we also live in a world that no other species has access to. We inhabit a world full of abstractions, impossibilities, and paradoxes. We alone brood about what didn’t happen, and spend a large part of each day musing about the way things could have been if events had transpired differently. And we alone ponder what it will be like not to be. (Deacon 1997, 21f.)

Deacon here points to how humans share a lot with other living beings, but also to what separates humans significantly from them. He goes on to underscore that if we are to understand the evolution of language in humans, we fail to understand it properly unless we see it as *more* than a mode of communication. Language is an outward expression of the mode of thought that comes to the fore in symbolic expression, and the capacity of this type of expression allows us to live in a virtual world. In this he sees a specific human capacity that no other species have. Symbolic thought, writes Deacon, does not come as built innately into humans but develops when we are internalizing the symbolic process that underlies language. Humans are the only species that have acquired the capacity for symbolic thinking, and therefore the only species that is able to think about the world as we do.<sup>8</sup> These symbolic abilities help us to recode experiences—a point of main interest if we are to understand the role of religion for human orientation in the world and for our own ability to understand ourselves as part of a historical process and in relation to God (cf. Robinson 2010). These capacities also guide the formation of skills



and habits, which are features important for human cooperation, and for the development of ritual, and in turn for morality. Deacon calls this “the world of the abstract” (which I do not think is a totally apt description, as relationships, elements of causation, and so forth are also something very concrete and determining for most of our behaviors), and underscores how “this world is governed by principles different from any that have selected for neural circuit design in the past eons of evolution” (Deacon 1997, 423).

Probably the most important feature emerging from the symbolic capacity is the ability to articulate selfhood, or subjectivity—“our inner realm or world.” According to philosopher of religion Ingolf Dalferth, subjectivity is a typically theoretical notion, and thus, given the perspective here presented, dependent upon symbolic capacities. The meaning of subjectivity depends on the theoretical context. Dalferth’s (1994) definition works well with regard to what I am after here: “By subjectivity I understand the structure of an entity that is able to thematize itself in the medium of consciousness (conceptions) or language (communication). When understood thus, subjectivity is a given, actual capacity, that coexists with other competences.”<sup>9</sup> Dalferth’s understanding of subjectivity is thus shaped by the ability of the subject to make herself the theme of her reflection (*Selbst-thematisierungsfähigkeit des Subjekts*). That is not possible without having some kind of symbolic representation of the self, of which Deacon displays the origins. For his part, Dalferth points to how subjectivity is related to semiotic activity. This is probably in turn an important condition for the development of specific human intuitions about our being, and for being able to experience something as *my own* experiences in a thematic way, as elements in a specific history of our own.<sup>10</sup>

One important inference from this situation is that we are not determined simply by our biological past. Instead, the fact that we may enter different symbolic universes that allow for specific types of experience may be life changing. Symbols may change lives and make history. This also goes for the part of reality that is inhabited by or employs religious symbols. The ways we use language represent not only objects and immediate situations, but relationships and events, as well as abstractions. Deacon points to how our mode of using language “offers a means for generating an essentially infinite variety of novel representations, and an unprecedented inferential engine for predicting events, organizing memories, and planning behaviors” (Deacon 1997, 22).

If we take seriously these insights into what the capacity for symbols mean for being and becoming human, we are immediately faced with the theological question: Is it this feature that also has made it possible for God to relate to human beings and for humans to relate to God? It is advisable to not answer this question too quickly in the affirmative: We know that today, as well, there may be people with impeded capacities for symbolic thought or for having a “theory of mind” perspective on others (including

God). But to use their lack of capacities as a reason to conclude that they are not in a relation with God would be to make a specific empirical feature a reason for making a serious theological judgment. Accordingly, we should not dismiss immediately the fact that God relates to them or that they may relate to God. Instead, we should pursue other options for addressing this problem. One would be to adopt a more gradual approach. Then one can suggest that God relates to all living beings and all living beings are able to relate to God on the basis of their given capacities—in different modes, manners, and ways. Furthermore, by allowing for different stages of evolution to appear, God may also be seen as having made it possible for human beings to relate to God in increasingly more varied ways—both by relating to God's gifts in the physical world, by partaking in the social and cultural realm, and by contemplating God in the “inner realm,” as well as by allowing us to imagine and partake in a spiritual realm of being. The fact that humans do this in varied ways, to a different extent, and by different means (including symbolic means) is in itself not sufficient to reject the claim that they have a share in a relation with God that is theologically significant. Such a rejection would be based on a very selective—and actually also very arbitrary—way of delineating who is participating in the reality of God or not, and for what reasons.

Furthermore, an understanding of salvation history that implies that only people who have lived within the realm of a Judaeo-Christian culture in the last 4,000 years (and not those in the many thousands of years prior, when humans with our capacities were emerging) have been partaking in the reality of God becomes increasingly more problematic when we consider the history of humanity, and also the history of pre-human forms of life. To say that God only adopted one group of people for salvation (an election of a selection of the *Homo sapiens sapiens*) at a very limited time-span in history (and evolutionary history) and has only made it possible for these to relate to God and to obtain salvation, seems quite problematic—and arbitrary, given that there were then a lot of predecessors in the history of evolution who only served an instrumental purpose for those who were “elected” to realize, thematize, and make religiously significant the conception of their own election.<sup>11</sup>

We can develop this line of argument further by asking: Where do we draw the line? Or rather: Where *can* we draw the lines? Where do we draw the line between humans who can be elected for salvation history, and the primates that have made these humans able to understand themselves as elected? Given the gradual biological evolution from primates to humans (Fuentes 2013a), can theology avoid making an arbitrary decision as to who belongs within the sphere of God's salvific activity and not? And given that there is a gradual cultural evolution of which religion is part, can theology avoid making an arbitrary decision as to when in the past we had a group that could be said to hold the “true” religion that expresses the

adequate understanding of God, of salvation, and of what it means to live in community with God? These are questions that emerge from biological knowledge of human history and pre-history, but they have bearings on how we try to address the theological questions about to what extent the unique, distinct or separate character of being human and belonging to the human race are relevant to how we think about how God relates to the world.

DEEP INCARNATION: THE UNITY (BUT NOT IDENTITY) OF THE  
UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF CREATION AND SALVATION HISTORY

In Christian theology, the focal point for developing any theology is the triune God. The Trinity is a symbol that has significance for understanding human reality (the economic Trinity) as well as for understanding God as revealed in Jesus Christ and in the works of the Spirit (i.e., the internal relations between the three divine persons—the immanent Trinity). Furthermore, we would have no notion of the Trinity unless there had been an incarnation of God in the human person Jesus of Nazareth. The preaching of Jesus is therefore crucial for the understanding of God's acts in universal history as well as salvation history.

The above reflections on problems resulting from an evolutionary approach to issues of election, sin, and death provides us with a specific context for the notion of *incarnation*, which then takes on quite concrete meaning. It means that God becomes part of the material world, and joins with it in a way that make the two inseparable from an experiential point of view henceforth. However, the notion of incarnation can furthermore be seen as reflecting the experience that the world as creation is intelligible, structured, and ordered—because the notion of incarnation in Christian theology is deeply integrated with a specific notion of Christ as *God's logos*. In the following, I will present and analyze an understanding of *deep incarnation* that can be said to build upon these experiences, develop insights in the Christian traditions, and try to overcome some of the dangers of *anthropocentrism* in a traditional notion of incarnation. This will in turn also provide us with reasons for not drawing any lines that exclude any living beings from the creative and salvific work of the Trinity.

A starting point for the discussion of incarnation—and the joining of the divine and the human—is the realization that there can be no life which is not dependent upon God the Creator as the source of life in one way or another. When Jesus of Nazareth was born, his very existence presupposed both the course of evolutionary history that led to the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and God as the one who made it possible for him to come alive and become part of human history. There are two direct inferences from this point. First, this means that there can be no restricting anthropocentrism at the basis of how we develop Christology

in contemporary terms: no human life is unrelated to other forms of life and the process of human life taking place in evolutionary history. Second, there can be no understanding of the human being Jesus of Nazareth that ignores how his life, as well as the life of any other living being, has its source in God. Taken together, these two inferences imply that we need a *theocentric* understanding of both human beings and of incarnation. Accordingly, we can have no sufficient vision of human life unless it is developed within an interpretative horizon where both evolution and incarnation (in the expanded sense) are seen as manifest in all of nature.

Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen (2010, 2013a, 2013b) has recently published work on deep incarnation that I think is in accordance with the above points, and which help us develop them further.<sup>12</sup> He points to how “The Prologue to the Gospel of John” (John 1:1–14) starts out by placing the significance of the historical figure of Jesus in a *cosmic* perspective. This means that the “universally active divine Logos” has become “flesh” (*sarx*) in the life story of Jesus of Nazareth (1:14) (179). As we shall see below, his understanding of flesh underscores the cosmic dimension more than what is apparent at first sight.<sup>13</sup>

Gregersen accordingly defines deep incarnation in a programmatic contrast to more anthropocentric concepts of incarnation in a very perceptive reading of the biblical sources. As he says, “the New Testament nowhere states that God became human. Rather the Logos of God ‘became flesh’ (John 1: 14a)” (174). Furthermore, he holds that any “high” Christology, “which presupposes the full presence of the divine Logos in Jesus, will need to acknowledge that God’s incarnation also reaches into the depths of material existence.” He sees this as a necessary consequence of the affirmation that Jesus was dwelling among us (John 1: 14b). By insisting on this point, Gregersen enables us to see how Jesus’ life was not in any way “abstracted from the creaturely nexus in which he came into being” (174). And interestingly enough, he therefore is able to maintain how evolutionary continuity between Jesus and the rest of the world (not only human beings) “is as important for Christology as are the discontinuities provided by human uniqueness” (174). Furthermore, this means that “by becoming ‘flesh’ in Jesus, the eternal *Logos* of God entered into all dimensions of God’s world of creation” (176). Read in this way, this understanding “would cover the whole realm of the material world from quarks to atoms and molecules, in their combinations and transformations throughout chemical and biological evolution” (176). We could add that it would cover all living beings at all stages of evolution, development, and capacities. The cosmic relevance and significance of Christology can be articulated thus. For the notion of deep incarnation, this also means that God’s Logos was united with Jesus throughout all dimensions of his life story:

So the divine *Logos* became a human being, but by implication also entered a world filled with fields, foxes, and sparrows, conjoined in its destiny even with the growing and withering grass. Indeed, the *Logos* of God became Earth in Jesus. Jesus was 'not of this world' (John 17:14) – the human world of sin – but he certainly was conjoined fully with the material world in which he was 'at home' (John 1:11). (177)

To speak of God's deep incarnation accordingly implies not only that God becomes human, but it means becoming a human who is embodied in such a way that this embodiment also is related to everything—from atmosphere and water to the DNA that human beings share with other species, and the DNA and life that humans share with the species that were their predecessors or ancestors. This universal significance of the incarnation thereby relates to the belief that the conditions for the life and being of Jesus are exactly the same as for every other human. The uniqueness of the incarnated divine *logos* is thus partly constituted by what he shares with the rest of the created world, albeit simultaneously constituted by his individual conditions. It is this combination of universality and individuality that makes it possible for theology to identify Christ's truly cosmic significance: in him, all of creation takes part, just as all of creation may take part in him and has contributed to who he became in the individual Jesus of Nazareth. The universal significance of Christology is thus related to how nature and grace are conjoined already in creation. In the incarnation, however, we can see how the chances for their cooperation and perfection are deepened and brought to fulfillment.

For the concrete understanding of Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnation of the divine and eternal *logos*, this means that the fulfillment and realization of the second person of the Trinity is to be identified in the incarnation. On the other hand, this incarnation also reveals the destiny of every human being: here is experienced, in historical time and space, the realization of what human life is meant to be and become in terms of faith, hope, and love. As *immaterial* or *spiritual* features, these phenomena are basic experiences that God has offered through God's own grace in order to bring creation to its perfection. In this sense, the human calling to be and become the image of God is a calling to realize God's *telos* for creation in faith, hope, and love for all that exists—because all emerges out of the divine *logos*. This may also have implications for how one, from the point of view of Christian theology, understands and interprets the history of religions in general, of which Christianity is but one of many interacting elements.

The proposal of deep incarnation thus provides us with a concept where the universal history of creation and salvation, nature, and grace runs parallel and deep and offers a deeper understanding of salvation history as encompassing the physical, the social, the psychological, and the spiritual dimensions of reality. The future salvation of humanity is then made

manifest in the reality of the resurrected Christ, who then, by taking all that is up in himself points to the goal of all of creation as to display unambiguously the glory, goodness, and love of God that transforms our reality into the new creation. Thereby, Christ is also the very witness to how humanity's fate is not yet fulfilled, and to how creation is in need of the restoring and renewing creative act of God in order to become so.

### CONCLUSIONS

If we take seriously the above suggestion that human history is still an unfinished business and that we do not yet know what will be the concrete final outcome of history, this perspective may also add some significant weight to the understanding of historical consciousness as it now impacts the understanding of religion and theology. As history has not yet come to an end, there is always more to know, and more reflections to deepen and develop further. In one way, this is old news: already in the biblical material we can see how past events in history are reinterpreted in light of new and more recent ones. The development of the Christian theological tradition is a good testimony to this feature. When the New Testament authors interpret history on the basis of past predictions or prophecies, we can see displayed how the Christ events are taken to be fulfillments of past prophecies in the structure of promise and fulfillment. Although there may be much said about the accuracy of specific prophecies adapted to specific events recorded in the New Testament, it is nevertheless the case that the present and the future are always interpreted in light of what has already been said. Thus, the past matters. But the past is never fully determining. There is in Christian theology always openness toward the future—the future will always hold more than the past. This surplus is to be seen as a condition for history to be more than the unfolding of what were past conditions: it also makes possible the distinction (but not the separation) between creation history and salvation history.

This notion of salvation history as an ongoing process on many levels is deeply connected with the different realms of human experience I hinted at earlier. Given that the historical reality in which humans find themselves provides us with opportunities for experiencing ourselves as taking part in both physical, social and cultural, inner psychological and spiritual realms of reality, there will always be more to explore and experience, in our need for renewal and liberation. Salvation history is the history in which the present and the past interact in liberating and renewing ways that open up to the surplus of that which is yet to come. Hence, history is open. There is no closure as long as there is history.

This position furthermore means that salvation history is identified in the liberating and renewing events that lead to faith, hope, and love. Salvation history is not a supra-historical, or merely individual, personal

or existential phenomenon. Salvation history is God's active partaking in the universal history—including the different evolutionary stages that conditions what we now call history—in order to lead it beyond its present conditions. Only when creation is fulfilled, is salvation realized fully. Hence, the future yet to come, still unknown, is decisive for the content of salvation history.

Against the backdrop of the above, Christ's universal significance may be articulated along the following lines. Christ is both the one who manifests the peak of creation, and the firstborn of the new creation. As the one who sums up all of God's work in creation and reconciles it, he summons and encompasses all that is as the manifestation of the divine *logos* that displays the beauty of the Creator and gives witness to it in faith, hope, and love. Thus he is also the true image of God (Cf. Col. 1:15–20). The focus of the process of creation and salvation is Jesus Christ: in Him, everything is summed up; all that exists is participating and coming to expression in Him in a way that also testifies to God's close relation to the world and to humanity.

This Christological approach allows for two consequences when it comes to the questions which were raised at the start of this article: first of all, it allows us to see all living beings as encompassed by the creative and saving work of God. Accordingly, there is no need to draw any "lines" that exclude part of creation from this work. *Primates, animals and humans are all included.* This is also a consequence of the insight found already in the Hebrew Scriptures, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" (Ps. 150:6). This praise can become realized as a consequence of God's work, when all of creation displays the will God has for justice, community, and life.

Furthermore and second, according to these suggestions it will, not be possible to determine the distinctive or unique character of humanity with regard to specific *human* salvation, but only with regard to which way and to what extent human beings can be witnesses to God's works for other creatures, and perform the tasks they are called to perform in other ways and on another basis than do other living beings. As created in the image of God, human beings can understand themselves as exactly that—and they can do so because they have their unique symbolic capacities. Human beings are the species with the symbolic capacities to represent God in creation and to represent Creation before God in a form of worship that includes prayers for the pre-human and the post-human as well. The true form of this mode of being in the world was revealed in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

The advantage of this proposal is that we then do not have to see salvation as exclusive in a way that makes it relevant only to those living beings who have our specific symbolic capacities, as they become expressed in a specific version of Christian faith. Whereas there are no reasons to

downplay the importance of Christian faith for the interpretation of human experience in all its richness, the interpretation of reality that emerges from an understanding of the deep incarnation and the universal significance of the work of Christ will suggest that all life is in some way or another included in the salvific process. This may also make sense in more ways than already indicated. Given that we see salvation as overcoming estrangement from God (sin), which in humans comes to a concrete expression in their lack of trust and faith in God, salvation can be seen as a process that God instantiates and fulfills on many levels and in different realms of reality. On the level of other species, it will mean that God eventually will restore their life in a way that brings unambiguous witness to God's goodness and power, whereas in humans, it will mean that God provides the opportunities for healing and restoration that lead to the same consequence.

Salvation may accordingly be seen as expressed in deep incarnation in the following way. Salvation in Christ means that through his death and resurrection, humans are liberated from the consequences of sin, as these are also expressing themselves in suffering, alienation, and death. But on a more general level, Christ as the partaker in all of creation also through the resurrection opens up the new salvific reality in which all beings are liberated from suffering and death. By taking up in himself (*assumptio*) the whole of the evolutionary process and expressing it in his own being, Christ exists in solidarity with all that suffer, including the victims of evolution (cf. Gregersen 2001). Salvation is accordingly not to be liberated from a historical Fall, but from the negative features on which the present creation is working (cf. Southgate 2008). Deep incarnation means both that God recognizes the suffering of God's creation and suffers with creation, and that God opens up the possibility of new life beyond the present conditions of creation. In this perspective, the death of Christ on the cross can be seen as the place where God concretely interacts with the negative features of human life in order to change them (cf. Henriksen 2006). It is only on the basis of the resurrection, however, that this can be acknowledged as providing creation with new and different conditions.

One of the consequences of this argument is that salvation will also be available for those who now lack faith in God for various reasons: experiences with people of faith that have made it impossible for them to have because of abuse or misbehavior (thereby taking into account that we may lack faith due to the sins of others and not only because of our own inherent condition); lack of capacity due to biological or mental impediments; inability to know God due to their specific time and place in history and evolution; and so on. Salvation then includes the promise that creation will continue to evolve, that there will be psychological, social and spiritual growth and development also in the future. Salvation thus has to do with all of life, and includes elements of growth, maturation, and reorientation in terms of values and understanding, as well as in terms of



how nature will be when consummated in the presence of God, when God is all in all.

Moreover, as long as humans are still developing (and we are, both in an evolutionary sense and in other ways), we cannot reasonably claim to know all there is to know about God, or what it means to be a human in all contexts. Neither our understanding of ourselves nor of God can function in a significant manner without adaptation to different experiential and interpretative contexts. Against this backdrop, it becomes also significant to see religion's employment of the symbol God as something that is not primarily about *another* world, but about being in this world in a specific way. It implies an argument that religion mainly should be understood as different ways of engaging in and with this world. Religion does so in ways that may provide opportunities for personal growth, for social and cultural development, and for charging human experience with multiple layers of significance.

The first mode in which God presents Godself to us is by means of a word—the word “God.” It is the use of this word that gives us our basic access to the reality that we may call God's. We cannot experience such access without simultaneously having some kind of experience of ourselves. The experience of self and of God has evolved though the evolutionary process that led to our symbolically mediated mode of being in the world. God can be known to humans because evolution has made it possible. Thus, *in order to experience God, this experience has to be mediated by means of a symbol that also serves to order our perception of ourselves and the future for ourselves as well as for the rest of reality.* Christian theology deepens this insight by developing a notion about God as incarnated—as deeply incarnated with the present world and its conditions, not only identical with these conditions, but also fulfilling them in a manner not previously realized.

Theological anthropology can, against this backdrop, be understood as a way of making sense of the basic and most important identity-shaping features of human experience, without neglecting the continuation between humans and other living beings. In a modern world, shaped by natural science, this “making sense of” is, as indicated above, provided by means of symbols that are developed through—and must be seen in their relation to—human evolution. Against such a backdrop, religion is not only a part of the development of culture—it is, as indicated, a mode of being in the world that makes sense of (interprets) human experience, as well as opening up new experience(s) in specific ways. Put in the terms of philosophical theology, Religion contributes to the constitution of a specific mode of being human—in agency, interaction, reflection, and the experience of being part of network of the natural world and the past and future generations of living beings.

## NOTES

A previous version of this article was presented and discussed at a research seminar at the Center for Naturalism and Christian Semantics at the University of Copenhagen in December 2013. A special thanks to Joshua M. Moritz, who offered extensive comments there.

1. Cf. R. J. Russell, who speaks of “the problem of the Fall without the Fall” (Russell 2006, 28).

2. Two references that show this development away from more “literal” or “historical” accounts of the Fall: Kierkegaard 1980, and most recently, Kelsey 2009, 205ff.

3. Some of the reflections from this and the following sections have also been developed in a somewhat different context in a lecture at the 10th Annual Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies in Gent, Belgium, June 2013, with the title “History as a Challenge to Buddhism and Christianity.”

4. For a recent and thorough discussion of issues related to this topic, see Southgate (2008, 2011). Cf. also for an extensive discussion on the problem of death Salvesen (2012).

5. Cf. Jeffrey Schloss’ questioning of whether death plays a central role in the mechanism of natural selection (2012).

6. Cf. for an orientation in these issues, Cunningham (2010).

7. Cf. for further on this understanding of theology, Gregersen (1994, 125), where he states: “Theology is more than the interpretation of texts. Theology is the interpretation of existence, and as such it contains a redescription of the world, one which is formulated on the basis of a religious semantics which in our case is that of Christianity.”

8. Deacon (1997, 22). For an appropriation of Deacon’s work within the context of a Peircean-shaped systematic theology and theological anthropology, cf. Robinson (2010), especially 147ff.

9. ‘Unter Subjektivität’ verstehe ich die Struktur einer Instanz, die fähig ist, sich selbst – im Medium des Bewußtseins (Vorstellungen) oder der Sprache (Kommunikation)—zu thematisieren. So verstanden ist die Subjektivität eine Fähigkeit, die es tatsächlich gibt, allerdings nicht isoliert als solche, sondern nur zusammen mit anderen Fähigkeiten” Dalferth (1994, 21). For further on how he sees the self as emerging out of communications with others that enables differentiation, cf. also Dalferth (2006, 66f).

10. For more on the understanding of religious experience along these lines, cf. Eikrem (2013, 160ff).

11. In order to understand the evolutionary significance of religion prior to this time, see Fuentes (2013b, 1), who suggests that the possibilities for “the emergence of a human metaphysics, as a necessary precursor to religion, can be facilitated via recognition of the increasingly central roles of niche construction, systemic complexity, semiotics, and an integration of the cognitive, social, and ecological in human communities during the Pleistocene (~2-.01 million years ago).” Fuentes uses the term “human metaphysics” in order “to describe the cognitive and behavioral process wherein experiences in, and perceptions of, of the world for humans exist in a context in which the ‘material’ world is never without semiotic markings. For human beings, even early ones, their social relationships, landscapes, and the biotic and abiotic elements they encounter are embedded in an experiential reality that is infused with a consistent potential for meaning derived from more than the material substance and milieu at hand. This results in a distinctive way of being in, and perceiving of, the world for humans relative to other mammals and primates, and even other hominins.”

12. The following builds on Gregersen (2010). References in brackets in the text in the following are to this work, until further notice.

13. An extensive discussion of Gregersen’s position with special attention to how deep incarnation relates to other topics in classical Christology is found in a recent issue of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (2013), as well as in *Theology and Science 11* (2013). See especially Peters (2013).

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