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LA TEOLOGIA  
DELLA  
*DEEP INCARNATION*

Indagine, dialogo e prospettive

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THE THEOLOGY  
OF  
DEEP INCARNATION

Survey, dialogue and perspectives

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# OVERVIEW

## 1. Matter

«The Word became flesh». The well-known verse from the prologue of John's Gospel encapsulates the fundamental message of the Christian faith, the incarnation of the Son of God in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. These words have always been interpreted and explained in order to gain a deeper understanding of the true meaning of the event that lies at the heart of Christianity. Even today, however, they still raise new questions and have not yet exhausted their offer of meaning. What is the true theological significance of the reality we call "incarnation"? And what is its actual relevance for today?

A serious attempt to take up the mystery of the Incarnation today in order to try to understand its relevance for contemporary humanity is being made by numerous theologians around the world, whose research can be gathered under the single heading of *deep incarnation theology*.

According to this new theological sensibility, faith in the incarnation cannot be "reduced" only to the man Jesus Christ. If the Word becomes "flesh", it means that in Jesus, in the history of this concrete human being, the Word has assumed the matrix of creaturalty that characterized every creature, human and not-human. The Word has assumed that biological stuff that connects everything that is part of this creation, everything that is "flesh" according to the deepest biblical sense. Incarnation means not only recognizing in Jesus the manifestation of God's definitive revelation but, more deeply and radically, recognizing how all that is created is assumed by the Son of God in Jesus and, consequently, is assumed by God in the Risen Lord.

This original and unprecedented reflection does not deal with a marginal aspect of the Christian faith, but implies a desire to chart a new path for theology, in order to put the salvific event of the incarnation back at the center, in dialogue with the questions, concerns and ongoing search for meaning of modern human being.

Is it possible, for example, to imagine a theology of creation – capable of addressing the great questions of evil, science, evolution, the presence of God, etc. – based not only on the first article of faith in a Creator God but more radically on the second article of the incarnation of the Son in Jesus? And if it were possible, what would be the relationship between this theology of creation and Christology?

It is evident how developing these questions and arguing a convincing answer means imagining a new path for Christian theology, to dialogue with the contemporary world and society, to reaffirm the meaning and importance of the Christian faith for every human being called to live in this history.

But what exactly is meant by “*deep incarnation*”? What are the issues addressed? And how does it relate to the theological tradition and current sociocultural questions?

This research work, through a careful, full-bodied and exhaustive survey, seeks to highlight the main features of this recent theological current, which has never been carefully and seriously investigated in its entirety before. Especially following the work of the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen, who initiated this research and coined the expression “*deep incarnation*”, this research aims to analyze the origins, objectives, developments and consequences of this eco-theological and christological sensibility, which over the years has interested many theologians who in a singular manner have tried to decline and deepen this common interest.

## 2. Outline

1. In the *first part* (*Deep Incarnation. An image to be reconstructed*) the aim is to draw as complete and exhaustive as possible an outline of the object under examination.

It is essential, therefore, to clarify in the first place the origins, cultural and theological antecedents of the proposal, as well as its aims and objectives, especially in relation to the questions and concerns emerging today and which theology can no longer avoid (CHAPTER 1).

Then, three fundamental instances are considered, which, intertwined with each other, constantly run through the deep incarnation's reflection.

Firstly, a precise analysis is offered of the biblical foundations from which Gregersen in particular starts to structure his thought. Decisive, as mentioned at the beginning, is the in-depth study of the meaning of v. 14 of John's prologue and, specifically, of two fundamental terms: *logos* and *sarx*. This expression, in fact, is the first witness always present and always called upon to imagine a new depth of the event of the incarnation (CHAPTER 2).

Secondly, the focus is on the patristic tradition. In an overview that goes from Irenaeus of Lyons through Athanasius, the Cappadocians, the council of Chalcedon, to Maximus the Confessor, the study aims to highlight the deep-rootedness of the theology of deep incarnation in the most authentic theological tradition of the Fathers. Thus, it is possible to recognize how this theological vision hides a deep rootedness in the interpretation that the Fathers had already given of the salvific economy, of God's plan of love for humanity. A unitary salvific plan, which starting from creation identifies its culmination precisely in the mystery of the Incarnate Word, and which with the resurrection of Jesus opens up to the final eschatological fulfilment of all creation. Overcoming, therefore, a reductive "metaphysical" Christology, deep incarnation intends to recover the historical and economic-salvific aspect of the event-Jesus, with its inclusive character for all creation (CHAPTER 3).

Finally, rethinking the incarnation means rethinking the relationship between transcendence and immanence and, therefore, the possibility of thinking about God's action and presence in the world. It is in this context that Gregersen's engagement in dialogue with the sciences (in particular quantum physics and evolutionary biology) in order to be able to think about the totally other being of God who is love (the dispute around the so-called "kenotic Christology") and his real relationship with the finite world in a panentheistic perspective, takes on particular significance (CHAPTER 4).

This first part ends with a hypothetical round table in which some of the leading exponents of this theology, as well as some reviewers of Gregersen's work, take part together with Gregersen himself. Among the various voices considered, ample space is devoted to Elizabeth Johnson, Denis Edwards, Christopher Southgate and Celia Deane-Drummond. *Deep Incarnation*, in this sense, truly demonstrates to be a polyphony in which different voices, one irreducible to the others, offer different points of view and insights that are each time singular and in their own way original (CHAPTER 5).

2. The *second part* of the research (*Correspondences*) is meant to be less descriptive and more critical and confrontational. An attempt is made, in this sense, to go into details of the questions raised and to put the theology of the deep incarnation "to the test".

For this purpose, on the one hand we chose to compare the deep incarnation with a different, equally recent theological project. The right partner has been identified in Paolo Gamberini and his latest work, *Deus 2.0*, in which he broadly traced the coordinates of a relative monism, with the aim of overcoming the classical theism of Christianity and offering a new spirituality capable of responding to today's human search for meaning. From the comparison between Gamberini's theological work and the proposal of the deep incarnation, an interesting picture emerges. Here lies the risk linked to a theology that is perhaps too preoccupied with reconciling transcendence and immanence and little attentive to preserving the singularity of Jesus as an unsurpassable event to tell the relationship between God and creation are clearly highlighted. Therefore, what emerges is the goodness of Gregersen's project, able precisely from the Jesus-event to rethink God's presence and his transcendence in a good and positive relationship with the whole of creation (CHAPTER 6).

This second part closes with the last chapter, committed to entering into dialogue with the deep incarnation, to highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, in order to try to articulate a theological discourse that holds firm to certain fundamental points of the proposal, but at the same time tries to balance more attention on some points that are perhaps more neglected. It is in this way that an attempt is made to trace the coordinates for a theology of the world of the Incarnate Son, i.e. the attempt to think of the world of the Son – understood as creation, as the totality of all that

exists – within the world of the Son – understood as the historical-singular existence of Jesus, who precisely as “flesh” is in turn related to all that has existed, exists and still can exist (CHAPTER 7).

### **3. Perspectives**

What is the relationship between the flesh of Jesus and the creaturely flesh of everything that exists? What is the salvific significance of the incarnation of the Word for every creature, human and non-human?

These are the questions that mark the reflection of deep incarnation theology and are developed in this research work. The value of all creatures is rooted in the mystery of the incarnation, in that “twofold assumption” whereby the Word assumed the flesh of creation as a human being, and the man Jesus is assumed into trinitarian life through the resurrection.

What we want to achieve with this broad path, then, is a Christology of creation, an eco-christology capable of founding on the story of Jesus, on the Son’s becoming flesh, the sense and authentic meaning of humanity, of our world and everything that exists in it. Everything is understood in Jesus and everything in him will find fulfilment, since in the risen Jesus every creature, which is itself flesh like the flesh assumed by the Son, already has its own place in God and in the place of the Son will find its own redemption as a new creature.