

Could God Incarnate as an Animal?

Putting Bonaventure & Aquinas into Dialogue with Wallace's Christian Animism

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Abstract: In Mark Wallace's *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (Fordham University Press, 2019), two interrelated claims are pursued: (1) that Christianity and animism are complementary; and, (2) that the Holy Spirit literally became incarnate as a bird at Christ's baptism. In this paper I mostly focus on the second claim, bringing his view into dialogue with those of two mediaeval Scholastics who remain highly influential in Catholic thought: St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas. I examine what they have to say on two questions relevant to assessing Wallace's striking claim regarding the Spirit's avian incarnation: first, whether the Holy Spirit could become incarnate at all; and second, the question of whether any divine Person could become incarnate in a non-rational nature.

Keywords Animism, Animals, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Christology

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an expansion of scholarly interest in animism. This renewal began amongst cultural anthropologists and religious studies scholars,¹ but has since spread to philosophers,² Biblical studies specialists,³ and theologians.⁴ This is overdue; after all, animism has been of enormous reach and influence historically, and still today numbers its adherents in the millions. These are found chiefly amongst indigenous people groups globally, as well as assorted new religious movements (e.g., it is a common commitment of Neopagans).⁵

What exactly is animism? As with many important concepts its precise contours remain a matter of some dispute. After a review of that debate, Dumsday (2024, 96), suggests the following as a serviceable sufficient condition for a belief to be considered animistic: “A doctrine counts as a form of animism if it proposes that there exist living or even personal nature spirits that inhabit or partly constitute or are in some other way closely related to at least some *prima facie* impersonal objects, features, or processes of our environment (e.g., rocks, rivers, thunderstorms, etc.).” His formulation has the advantage of being sufficiently ecumenical as to encompass the core commitments of most self-identified animists, while sidestepping several contentious questions—e.g., the precise manner in which the nature spirit is related to its associated environmental feature,⁶ or the issue of whether *artificial* objects can have associated spirits,⁷ etc. It accommodates the core ideas of living animist

¹ For an overview of this segment of the renewal, see Laack (2020). Examples would include Harvey (2017), Rambelli (2019), and Wilkinson (2017; 2023).

² See Bretz (2020), Burley (2020, ch. 7), Dumsday (2024, ch. 3), Fales (2023), Hall (2019), Hendricks (2022), Oppy (2023), Smith (2020; 2022; 2023a; 2023b), and Van Eyghen (2023a; 2023b). Note that philosophical interest in animism could be considered substantially higher depending on how one views its relationship with panpsychism. The latter has undergone a major revival within analytic philosophy of mind, and some consider the two views closely related, with animism entailing a form of panpsychism or vice versa. Still, others are eager to hive the two views off from one another (for instance Skrbina (2020, 103–104)), and for present purposes it will be assumed that they can be addressed separately.

³ See especially Joerstad (2019; 2020).

⁴ See Beck (2015) and Wallace (2019).

⁵ On Neopagan animism see for instance diZerega (2020) and Kaldera (2012).

⁶ Fales (2023, 180) helpfully draws out some divisions on that point.

⁷ Kaldera (2012, 12) for example describes animism as the “belief that not only all living things, but all natural things, *and some man-made things*, have an indwelling spirit/soul of their own.” [Emphases added] Later he expands on this point (ibid., 52): “In an animistic worldview, everything in nature is alive—not just plants and animals, but bodies of water, stones, mountains, the dirt itself.

traditions, such as the aforementioned indigenous and Neopagan reverence for a panoply of nature spirits (e.g., river spirits, mountain spirits, spirits of particular regions, rain spirits, etc.). It also accommodates the somewhat non-standard understanding of animism employed by theologian Mark I. Wallace, whose 2019 monograph *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (Fordham University Press) will be our focus in what follows.

Wallace's interest in animism, like that of many contemporary scholars, is prompted in large part by a concern for ecological issues; in his case it is also motivated by a commitment to rethinking aspects of the Christian worldview in light of those issues. Believing that animism provides a sound basis for a robust environmental ethic (insofar as a commitment to the ensouled character of our natural environment ought to make us more hesitant to despoil or damage it), he seeks to show that animism is not only compatible with Christianity, but complementary to it. Even more ambitiously, he makes a case for there being evidence of animistic commitments within Scripture itself.

Still, those aspects of Wallace's project are not unique to him; similar claims appear in the works of Beck (2015) and Joerstad (2019; 2020), and there is earlier literature which, while not exactly animist, draws sympathetic connections between animism and Christian theology—for instance Mousalimas (1990), Twiss (2015), and Woodley (2012).⁸

What *is* unique to Wallace's Christian animism is his contention that the Holy Spirit literally became incarnate as a bird at Christ's baptism. Wallace regards this avian incarnation as enormously significant, underscoring as it does the intimate connection between God and the non-human natural world, and further supporting the environmental ethic he is promoting. Just as one commonly cited distinctively Christian justification for respecting human rights and having due regard for human dignity is the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity (God's becoming man demonstrates how much he loves us and values human nature), so likewise the third

Many man-made objects are also alive. In ancient times, every lasting man-made object was a product of many hours of concentrated work, and became alive through attention, focus, and directed energy of its making. Today, objects made in a similar way can also develop souls and life-energy, although they may or may not need human attention to keep the soul in them." Note that the universal aspect of Kaldera's own animism (i.e., the claim that *everything* in nature counts as living) is not a feature of all forms of animism. Van Eyghen (2023a, 2) points out that "animists do not always believe that *all* objects or *all* animals have spirits . . . Some (or even most) objects, plants and animals are regarded as devoid of spirits, as most westerners believe." [Emphases in original]

⁸ Moreover, depending on where one stands concerning the previously noted debate concerning the relationship between animism and panpsychism, one could also point to the work of Christian panpsychists like Leidenhag (2021).

Person's incarnation as a bird can help provide a distinctively Christian justification for respecting animal rights and having due regard for the animal kingdom, and indeed the natural environment more broadly.

This is quite a striking claim, in part because of its originality: so far as I am aware, no prior theologian in the history of the Church (east or west) has advocated the idea of a literal avian incarnation on the part of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Now, for the traditionally minded, that by itself is cause for pause and a raised eyebrow. (Obvious concerns regarding the piety of the view might also be brought up.) That said, many past theologians have speculated on the abstract possibilities both of the Holy Spirit becoming incarnate, and of a divine Person becoming incarnate in a non-rational animate nature. These include two of the most significant mediaeval minds of the Roman Catholic Church, namely St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas. Their writings on these matters are directly relevant to Wallace's claims, and it will be profitable to consult them, even though they proceed on the basis of a very different methodology than Wallace's. It is often useful to assess striking new theological claims in light of older authors and established traditions, if only as an initial strategy to help get one's bearings. And while other mediaevals could certainly be called upon, since both incarnational issues were frequently discussed in Scholastic theology,¹⁰ Bonaventure and Aquinas are especially apt for consideration due to their ongoing influence within Catholic thought.

I should clarify at the outset that my main concern in this paper is with Wallace's thesis regarding the Holy Spirit's avian incarnation. Thus for present purposes I will not take up the further questions of whether he is correct in thinking animism compatible with Christianity (I am inclined to agree that it is), nor the question of whether he is correct in thinking animism complementary to Christianity (I am inclined to disagree on that front), nor the question of whether animism provides the best framework for Christian environmental ethics (I remain sceptical). My focus will instead be on the most radical and original aspect of his project, namely avian incarnation—though to the extent that Wallace sees that aspect as connected with the others just mentioned, a negative judgement regarding literal avian incarnation

⁹ By contrast, other religious traditions routinely affirm divine embodiment as animals. A number of Hindu gods (such as Krishna) took as avatars various animal forms. For instance Wainwright (1999, 188) writes: "Vaisnavas assert that God (Vishnu) sometimes assumes an animal or human form for the benefit of creatures. These 'descents' (avatars) are grounded in God's compassion. By assuming the form of a creature, God reveals His beauty and splendour and makes Himself accessible. The descents are real (not mere appearances), and the most important (Rama and Krishna) seem to be regarded as historical figures."

¹⁰ Henry of Ghent for example is another important locus of discussion here; see the valuable treatment by Cross (1999).

will inevitably impact his larger case for Christian animism.

My own thesis is that Wallace's claim regarding literal avian incarnation is false (though not strictly heretical), and that his environmental concerns can be addressed using existing theological resources and without resort to animism. Moreover, I believe an examination of the aforementioned Scholastic sources will help us to see why these points hold.

The remainder is divided as follows: in the next section, I provide a concise summary of Wallace's animism, focusing on his case for avian incarnation. Then in section three, I put him into dialogue with St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas, mining their writings for work pertinent to Wallace's claim. A concluding fourth section sees an overall assessment of Wallace's theology in light of those Scholastic insights.

2. Wallace's Animism & Avian Incarnation

Wallace's principal motivations for exploring Christian animism are ethical and pragmatic; that fact is made apparent from the first pages of his introductory chapter (2019, 1):

In a time of rapid climate change and species extinction, what role have the world's religions played in ameliorating, or causing, the crisis we now face? It appears that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, bears a disproportionate burden for creating humankind's exploitative attitudes toward nature through otherworldly theologies that divorce human beings and their spiritual yearnings from their natural origins. In this regard, Christianity is today viewed as an unearthly religion with little to say about everyday life in the natural world.

Among the Christian apologist's obvious responses to this opening accusation is 'but the incarnation!' After all, the faith maintains that God became man in Jesus Christ, thereby entering deeply into the natural world and historical process. Can such a religion really merit the 'otherworldly' tag? Wallace is ready with a counter-reply (ibid.):

In principle, Christian belief in the incarnation of God in the human Jesus renders biblical faith a fleshy, this-worldly belief system. In reality, however, Christianity is still best known for its war against the flesh by denigrating bodily impulses as a source of temptation and by dismissing the material world, while not fully corrupted, as contaminated by sin and inimical to humans' destiny in a far-removed heaven of bodiless bliss.

A better reply, he suggests, is the following, which still makes use of the concept of incarnation but relies more heavily on a *different* divine embodiment (ibid., 2):

[T]his picture of Christianity as hostile to the creaturely world, while accurate to a point, misses the supreme value biblical religion assigns to all of the denizens of God's good creation, human and more-than-human alike. Moreover, I argue that this picture, in particular, misses the startling portrayals of God as the beaked and feathered Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity who, alongside Father and Son, is the 'animal God' of historical Christian witness. Appearing in the Christian scriptures as a winged creature at the time of Jesus' baptism, the bird-God of the New Testament signals the deep grounding of archi-original biblical faith in the natural world. But due to the age-old bias in world-denying Christianity that God is divorced from mortal existence, this reality of God in creaturely manifestation—not only in the mode of the human Jesus but also in the form of the birdy Spirit—has been missed by most Christian thinkers and practitioners alike . . . My aim is to correct this oversight in contemporary religious thought and pave the way for a new Earth-loving spirituality grounded in the ancient image of God as an avian life-form.

Wallace's ambition then is to develop a new kind of theo-ecological ethic, one grounded in part on the idea of a literal avian incarnation. And make no mistake, Wallace does think this is a *literal, physical incarnation* by the Holy Spirit in the body of a dove (ibid., 2–3):

My recovery of God's animal body within biblical and Christian sources might be startling, even sacrilegious, for some readers at first. Even though the Bible speaks directly about God as Spirit becoming a winged creature ("When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove"; Luke 3:21–22), religion and biblical scholars alike have oftentimes dismissed the descriptions of God's spirit as a bird in the New Testament as a passing allusion or figure of speech. These critics do not regard this and similar texts as actual descriptions of the avifauna that God became and is becoming: testimonies to the Spirit's enfleshment (or, better, enfeatherment) at the time of Jesus' baptism. Nevertheless, I maintain here that the full realization of Christianity's historical self-definition as a scriptural, incarnational, and Trinitarian belief system is *animotheism*—the belief that all beings, including nonhuman animals, are imbued with divine presence. Woven into the core grammar of Christian faith, then, is the belief in the Spirit as the *animal* face of God, even as Jesus is the *human* face of God. [Emphases in original]

Wallace's coining of a new term, *animotheism*, and his claim that God's presence is

omnipresent throughout the natural order, might lead one to think that he is not an animist of the usual sort—i.e., that he is not positing the reality of many numerically distinct nature spirits (river spirits + thunder spirits + tree spirits etc.), but rather that he is simply using the terminology of animism as a new way of talking about divine immanence. It might seem, in other words, as if he is positing just a single nature spirit—namely, the Holy Spirit of God—animating all of nature by way of its immanent presence. And at times that appears to be Wallace’s view (*ibid.*, 3):

Hidden in the bedrock of Christian theology is a grounding *animist* sensibility that construes all things—including the sentient and relational biomass that makes all life possible—as living enfleshments of divinity in the world. I will call this new but ancient vision of the world *Christian animism* in order to signal the continuity of biblical religion with the beliefs of Indigenous and non-Western communities that God or Spirit enfleshes itself within everything that grows, walks, flies, and swims in and over the great gift of creation. [Emphases in original]

This would be a non-standard form of animism; far more common is the pluralistic animism of the sort alluded to above and practiced around the globe today.¹¹ Still, I will not dispute Wallace’s use of the label ‘animist’; such a terminological disagreement would be unfruitful in the present context. And one can shoehorn Wallace’s conception of animism into Dumsday’s (2024, 96) above-cited big-tent characterization, provided one reads his “there exist living or even personal nature spirits” as allowing for a ‘*one or more* nature spirits are real’ interpretation. A singular Holy Spirit imbuing all natural entities (perhaps in unique, individualized ways?) with His living presence can still provide for a form of animism, if an atypical one.¹² For Wallace (2019, 7), the core of animist commitment seems to be the envisioning of “nonhuman nature as ‘ensouled’ or ‘inspired’ with living, sacred power.” A bit later he (*ibid.*, 17) characterizes Christian animism as “the belief that things, even so-called inanimate objects, are alive with sacred presence . . .”

All that said, Wallace (*ibid.*, 8–10 and 181) also approvingly cites advocates of standard animism such as Graham Harvey, leading one to suspect that he is at least sympathetic with belief in numerically distinct, individually personalized nature

¹¹ Indeed, it is even non-standard *Christian* animism, differing on this front from the animisms discussed by Beck (2015) and Joerstad (2019; 2020).

¹² There is a view known as *panspiritism* that is perhaps closer to Wallace’s actual ontology here; it maintains that a single spirit-force or immanent impersonal intelligence grounds and suffuses all material and mental reality. For a defence of panspiritism see Taylor (2018; 2020). Among the differences between Taylor’s panspiritism and Wallace’s animism: Taylor explicitly denies that the spirit-force is divine.

spirits. Moreover in his fifth chapter he defends a Biblically-infused version of James Lovelock's well-known Gaia hypothesis, according to which the planet Earth properly counts as a living organism (indeed a *sentient* one).¹³ Perhaps he believes in standard animism (or standard animism + Gaia hypothesis), and then overlays it with a more theologically significant Holy Spirit-inspired animism? So far as I can tell these specific matters are ultimately left unclear in his text. Nevertheless, his principal emphasis throughout is on divine presence in nature, on nature as 'animated' by the Holy Spirit.

Thankfully those interpretive issues can be left aside for our primary purpose, which is not to assess Wallace's overarching Christian animist worldview, but more narrowly to provide a critical examination of his proposal regarding avian incarnation. (Though, as already noted, these two projects are connected for Wallace, such that an assessment of the latter will inevitably bear on an assessment of the former.) And his case for it does not rest wholly on the gospel passages concerning Christ's baptism; rather, he thinks this incarnation was prefigured in much Old Testament language, which frequently uses bird analogies when referring to God (Deuteronomy 32:11 for instance). He also thinks that the notion of avian incarnation becomes less odd when one considers that God previously became literally incarnate as a plant, namely as the burning bush of Exodus 3:5. Wallace (2019, 23–24) writes:

The story erases time-honoured binary oppositions about who or what God is, and where God is located, in this mix of scrubby fire, commanding voice, and dangerous ground. Again we confront the shock of viscous carnality as Moses hides his countenance because he is afraid to see God face-to-face—God the sacred plant, God the consecrated ground, God the burning fire. Speaking to Moses in a commanding voice on the holy mountain, God in Exodus is an on-fire, earth-rooted vegetation deity (*deus botanicus*).

Later, he suggests (*ibid.*, 28–29) that further Biblical passages indicate elemental incarnations (or at least manifestations) of the Holy Spirit, for instance the tongues of fire at Pentecost. He also argues (*ibid.*, 30) that considerations of Greek grammar in the gospels (especially Luke) render it unlikely that the Spirit's descent in the form of a dove could be properly interpreted merely as a metaphor. He then spends considerable time (*ibid.*, 32–40) rebutting the Biblically-based objection that if God is so present in nature, what was wrong with the Israelites building a golden calf?

¹³ For instance he writes (*ibid.*, 151–152) that we need to "resituate ourselves—ontologically and ethically—in the wider personhood of the Earth itself, who, like us, is a living being with emotion and purpose unto itself."

After his first chapter there is no further sustained defence of the avian incarnation thesis, as his attention turns to more general Christian animist and environmentalist concerns.¹⁴ Nowhere in the book does Wallace consider the metaphysics of avian incarnation or take up specifically metaphysical objections against the idea. This is understandable, given the overarching ethical and pragmatic thrust of the work.¹⁵ Still, it does leave us with some issues calling out for further inquiry.

So let's turn now to consider philosophical and theological insights from Scholastics who took up core questions relevant to Wallace's thesis: the question of whether the Holy Spirit could become incarnate at all, and the question of whether any divine Person could become incarnate in a non-rational animal nature.

3. Bonaventure & Aquinas on Avian Incarnation

Among the foundational theological works of the High Middle Ages was Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, on which later Scholastics wrote voluminous commentaries. In book 3, distinction 1, chapter 3, Lombard briefly takes up the question of whether the ability to become incarnate as a human being is restricted to the second Person of the Trinity. His answer is no (2008, 5): "But if it is asked whether the Father or the Holy Spirit could have become incarnate, or could even do so now, it may be answered affirmatively: that the Father or the Holy Spirit could formerly and can now take on flesh and become man. For just as the Son was made man, so the Father or the Holy Spirit could and can be." This was the standard view in the Middle Ages, that in principle there is no metaphysical barrier to the incarnation (in human nature) of the other Persons; still, Lombard and his successors did argue that it was more apt that the Word become flesh than that the other Persons do so. On this matter of fittingness Lombard writes in *Sentences*, bk. 3, d. 1, ch. 1 (2008, 4–5):

¹⁴ For instance he argues that Jesus' healing ministry can be interpreted as paralleling those seen in indigenous shamanic traditions, and thus as supporting an animist worldview. He writes (*ibid.*, 67) that "Jesus is an animist shaman who expectorates in the good soil of creation to make a healing plaster to teach that all life—even what we reject as dirty and unclean—is charged with divine wonder and power."

¹⁵ In the book's final chapter he writes (*ibid.*, 165): "The Christian belief in the incarnation of God in Jesus and the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the baptismal dove should actually mean something in practical, spiritual terms, not simply serve as points of theological doctrine. If God shows Godself to us in the gift of the sacred dove at the time of Jesus' immersion by John, then all doves and, by extension, all creatures are sacred beings. Thus, to inflict needless pain and suffering on any one such being...is to inflict needless pain and suffering onto God."

But it is to be diligently noted why the Son took on flesh, and not the Father or the Holy Spirit: for the Son alone took on human form . . . And so also the Son was sent, and not the Father, because it was more fitting that the one be sent who is from another, than the one who is from no one; and the Son is from the Father, but the Father is not from anyone else . . . And so the Son, who is from the Father alone, was sent first; then also the Holy Spirit, who is from the Father and the Son, but the Son alone was sent in the flesh, not the Holy Spirit, just as not the Father. And this was done so that he who was Son of God in divinity should become son of man in humanity. Neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit was clothed with flesh lest one be the Son in divinity, another in humanity, and lest the same [person] be father and son, if God the Father were born of man.

In commenting on Lombard's text, Bonaventure reaffirms his conclusion: any member of the Trinity could *in principle* have become incarnate (as a human), but it was most fitting that the Word *actually* do so. He takes up this point in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, bk. 3, d. 1, a. 1, q. 4. It would be worth our while to work our way through this question, as it ends up being pertinent to both of the issues before us (i.e., both the possibility of the Holy Spirit becoming incarnate and the possibility of incarnation in a non-rational animal).

Bonaventure opens by presenting four brief arguments in favour of his preferred conclusion, namely that incarnation is possible for the other Persons. First, he observes that from the vantage point of any creature, the ontological divide between it and the Son is just as massive as it is with respect to the Father and Holy Spirit. And yet we know that that distance is no barrier to the Son's incarnation in a creaturely nature (even though this is one of the most obvious concerns one might have about the very possibility of *any* sort of divine incarnation). So likewise it would not be a barrier to the incarnation of the Father or Holy Spirit.

His second argument pertains specifically to the Father's possible incarnation: "Likewise, the capacity to become incarnate manifests dignity, otherwise it would not be appropriate to the Son; but whatever the Son is capable of that manifests dignity can apply to the Father as well, since the Son receives all His power from the Father: therefore if the Person of the Son is able to become incarnate and take flesh upon himself, it seems that the Father can do the same."¹⁶

Third, he argues that the preconditions for any divine incarnation are: (a) both

¹⁶ Bonaventure, *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 1, a. 1, q. 4. (Quaracchi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1887), 16–17. My own translation, here and throughout (except where otherwise noted). The Latin reads as follows: "*Item, posse incarnari spectat ad dignitatem, alioquin non conveniret Filio; sed quidquid potest Filius ad dignitatem spectans, potest et Pater, cum totum posse habeat Filius a Patre: ergo si persona Filii potest incarnari et carnem sibi assumere, videtur, quod hoc possit et Pater consimili ratione.*"

parties to the unification (human nature and divine nature) must be capable of it; (b) the Person who is to be incarnated must be a singular, unified Person, and (c) immense power. Now, in the case of the incarnation of the Word, obviously all of these criteria are in place. But the same can be said of the Father and the Holy Spirit, who share a nature and power with the Son and who are of themselves likewise singular Persons.

Fourth, Bonaventure says that the Son's ability to become incarnate results either from his status as a divine Person, or from His status specifically as Son. But clearly it is a result of his status as a divine Person, since the Son is only Son in relation to the Father and not to any created thing, and it's the relation to the created thing that really counts for incarnation. Since the Father and Holy Spirit are also divine Persons, they too can become incarnate.

Bonaventure then takes up four arguments against his preferred conclusion. The first of these suggests that if the Father or Holy Spirit became incarnate, this would suggest that there are actually two Sons in the Trinity (because two Persons would have human mothers and thus count as sons), which cannot be. And so they cannot become incarnate. The second notes that since to become incarnate is to be sent into flesh, and it is impossible that the Father be sent (since He does not have anyone from whom He is generated), it is likewise impossible that He should become incarnate. Third, "that which is a proprium [distinctive trait] of one Person cannot be present in another; and 'becomes incarnate' is a proprium of the Son. Therefore it is impossible that it belong to any other Person."¹⁷ Fourth, the objector suggests that it would be more appropriate for human nature to be taken up by the Word along with the other two Persons (such that all three would become incarnate simultaneously in the same human nature) than it would be for other natures to be assumed which are not in fact assumed. But Bonaventure has already shown that such simultaneous multi-incarnation is not possible.¹⁸ This implies then that no other natures are apt for assumption, such that any sort of incarnation is ruled out (as unbefitting if not actually impossible) for the Father and the Holy Spirit. Now, here the Quaracchi editors have a footnote pointing to a variant reading found in some manuscripts, which variant reading adds the following passage: "But another

¹⁷ Ibid., 17. The Latin reads as follows: "*Item, quod est proprium unius personae impossibile est alteri convenire ; sed incarnari est proprium Filii et sibi soli convenit : ergo impossibile est, quod alteri personae conveniat.*"

¹⁸ This was the topic of the immediately preceding question: *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 1, a. 1, q. 3: "Whether one Person can be united at the same time with another, by assuming one and the same nature." The Latin reads: "*Utrum persona una possit simul uniri cum alia, assumendo unam et eandem numero naturam.*"

Person assumed another nature, since the Holy Spirit evidently assumed the nature of a dove. Therefore the Holy Spirit could assume the human nature that the Son assumed. And the rejection of the consequent entails the rejection of the antecedent.”¹⁹

Having presented four arguments in favour of his own view and four arguments against, in his *‘respondeo’* Bonaventure presents his own definitive view of the matter, which is that any member of the Trinity could become incarnate, but that it was more fitting that the Son actually do so. To have multiple Persons become incarnate would not imply any confusion of roles within the Trinity:

Moreover, that the Father or the Holy Spirit could without any incompatibility become incarnate is clear. For He could form a body by which to unite Himself to human nature by means other than generation, just as He formed the body of Eve, who is not said to be the daughter of Adam. Moreover, other Persons could have assumed flesh from the Virgin, just as the Word assumed it, and this does not imply a confusion or diminution of equality in what is real, because from this there is no transmutation concerning the divine Persons. For there is no confusion when we believe that one and the same thing is temporal and eternal, immortal and mortal, immense and circumscribed. There is nothing absurd, when we say that the Son is equal to the Father and less than the Father, according to the duality of natures. And therefore it is to be granted, just as the Master said in his book, that any one of the three Persons is able and was able to become incarnate.²⁰

So the upshot is that in principle any member of the Trinity could become incarnate (as a human), but at the same time Bonaventure reaffirms the point that it was most fitting that the Son alone do so.

Then he goes back and replies to each of the four objections. To the first, he points out that there are more ways for a divine Person to take on human nature than being

¹⁹ Ibid. The Latin reads as follows: “*Sed altera persona alteram naturam assumit, scilicet persona Spiritus sancti naturam columbae: ergo et Spiritus sanctus potuit humanam, quam Filius assumit, assumere. A destructione consequentis ad destructionem antecedentis.*”

²⁰ Ibid., 17–18. The Latin reads: “*Quod autem Pater aut Spiritus sanctus incarnari possit absque aliqua repugnantia, planum est. Posset enim formare corpus, quod sibi uniret de genere humano, non per viam generationis, sicut formavit corpus Evae, quae non dicitur esse filia Adae. Praeterea, esto quod alia persona assumisset carnem de Virgine, sicut assumit Verbum, ad huc non esset ibi confusio nec aequalitatis diminutio secundum rem, quia ex hoc nulla fieret transmutatio circa personas divinas. Nulla enim est confusio, quando nos credimus, quod unus et idem est temporalis et aeternus, immortalis et mortuus, immensus et circumscriptus. Nullum etiam est inconveniens, cum dicimus, Filium esse aequalem Patri et minorem Patre secundum naturarum dualitatem. Et ideo concedendum est, sicut Magister dicit in littera, quod quaelibet trium personarum potest et potuit incarnari.*”

born of a woman, so even if we should be concerned about having to call multiple incarnate persons ‘sons’ in some sense (namely as having a human mother), that would not wholly rule out divine incarnation by the other two Persons. But even if that were the sole available method of incarnation, Bonaventure still sees no problem. The fact that multiple incarnate persons could all be called ‘sons’ takes nothing away from either their shared divinity or their individual Personhood.

To the second, he replies that although the Father cannot be ‘sent’ in the metaphysical sense of generation, this does nothing to rule out His ability to take on human nature.

In the face of the third objection he draws a relevant distinction:

In response to the third objection, that to become incarnate is a proprium of the Son, it is to be said that just as if Peter were the one and only son of Paul, then to be the son of Paul would be a proprium of Peter, not because that feature *could* not apply to others, but because as a matter of fact it *does not now apply to others*. So in like manner the proposition is to be understood, that to be incarnate is a proprium of the Person of the Son, not because other Persons are incapable of incarnation, but because only the Son has actually become incarnate.²¹

The core of Bonaventure’s reply to the fourth and final objection is his rejection of the notion that the Father or Holy Spirit taking on a human nature (different from that taken on by the Son) is less fitting than the (proven impossibility) of all three taking on the numerically identical human nature. (The point involving avian incarnation, raised in a textual variant pertaining to the fourth objection, is not brought up in Bonaventure’s reply.)

Aquinas’ commentary on this same portion of Lombard’s *Sentences* follows Bonaventure’s closely in some ways, with some of his opening arguments and some of the objections considered being quite similar (though there is no reference to the Holy Spirit’s incarnation as a dove). He reaches the same conclusion as does Lombard and Bonaventure, maintaining that both the Father and the Holy Spirit could theoretically become incarnate in human nature. In his extended ‘*respondeo*’ he does place greater emphasis than Bonaventure on this possibility being founded on God’s infinite, absolute potency. He writes that “for the Father to become

²¹ Ibid., 18. The Latin reads: “*Ad illud quod obiicitur, quod incarnari est proprium Filii; dicendum, quod sicut, si Petrus sit unicus filius Pauli, esse filium Pauli est proprium Petri, non quia non possit convenire alii, sed quia nunc non convenit alii; sic etiam in propositio intelligendum est, quod incarnari dicitur esse proprium personae Filii, non quia alia persona non possit carni uniri, sed quia nulla alia persona actualiter unitur carni a persona Filii.*”

incarnate is not among those things which fail to fall under the absolute power of God, since it does not imply a contradiction nor does it posit some defect in the Person thus incarnated. For the dignity of the Father and the Son is the same . . . And so it is unqualifiedly to be conceded that the Father can assume flesh, and similarly the Holy Spirit, when speaking of what belongs to God's absolute power."²²

Let's turn now to some texts that engage more directly with the question of whether a divine Person could become incarnate in a non-rational animal. For Bonaventure, one of these is a little further along in his *Sentences* commentary, in a question about whether it would have been more fitting for God to become incarnate as the whole physical cosmos rather than in human nature. He defends the greater suitability of incarnation as a human, but of course considers too a number of arguments on behalf of the other side, the fifth of which runs as follows:

Likewise, that is more greatly apt for unification, the assumption of which would more greatly manifest the divine power, wisdom, and goodness. But the universe is such. Proof of the minor premise: divine power, wisdom and goodness is more greatly manifested in the condition of the whole universe than in the condition of any of its parts, because, although any of its parts be good, the universe as a whole is not merely good but greatly good. So if that [i.e., that set of divine attributes] is more clearly manifested in the condition of the universe as a whole, it seems that it will likewise be more clearly manifested in the assumption of the universe as a whole than in the assumption of some part of it.²³

As part of his reply to this objection (and others), in the '*respondeo*' Bonaventure says that the aforementioned divine attributes would not actually be better displayed via

²² Aquinas, *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 1, q. 2, a. 3, co. (Parma, 1858, accessed online via www.corpusthomisticum.org) The Latin reads as follows: "*Dicendum est ergo, quod patrem incarnari, non est de illis quae potentiae Dei absolutae non subduntur; cum neque contradictionem implicet, neque defectum aliquem incarnatio in persona incarnata ponat: est enim eadem dignitas patris et filii....Et ideo simpliciter concedendum est quod pater potuit carnem assumere, et similiter spiritus sanctus, loquendo de potentia absoluta.*" It is worth noting, incidentally, that this issue does remain a topic of discussion within contemporary philosophical theology. For a recent example of a defence of the Thomistic stance on the possibility of incarnation by the Father and Holy Spirit, see Pawl (2019, 41–44 and 86–92).

²³ Bonaventure, *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 2, a. 2, q. 1. (Quaracchi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1887), 37. The Latin reads: "*Item, illud est magis unibile, in cuius assumptione magis manifestatur divina potentia, sapientia et bonitas; sed universum est huiusmodi. Probatio minoris: magis enim manifestatur divina potentia, sapientia et bonitas in conditione totius universitatis quam alicuius eius partis, quia, cum quaelibet pars eius sit bona, eius universum est non solum bonum, sed etiam valde bonum: ergo si magis manifestatur in universitatis conditione, multo magis videtur, quod manifestetur in universitatis assumptione.*"

incarnation as the whole cosmos, since the whole cosmos contains parts which, while inherently good (as created by God), are nonetheless of such a nature that they seem disqualified from assuming a divine Person. He singles out for mention those parts of the created order that lack life, sense, and reason. These beings lack personal properties and thus are unsuited to union with a person. Expanding on this point in his specific reply to objection five, Bonaventure says that for God to become incarnate in such things would besmirch His glory rather than manifest it. And Bonaventure's concrete example of this is non-rational animals: "To that which is objected, that the divine power, wisdom, and goodness are more greatly manifested if the universe is assumed: it is to be said that this is false; because making it be the case that by union an ass or some other brute animal become God would detract more from divine power and wisdom than it would commend it. Yet that a man be God in no way prejudices power or wisdom, since man is naturally apt to be God-like."²⁴

This passage is notable, both because it speaks against Wallace's overarching animist ontology (which can sound a bit like the idea of cosmic incarnation), and because Bonaventure speaks explicitly against the suitability of God's incarnation as a non-rational animal. (As non-rational, such a nature is inherently ill-suited to the assumption of any person, let alone a divine Person.) Note that he does not quite label such incarnation strictly impossible in this passage, merely unbecoming—though in his eyes this would surely be an adequate proof that God has never *actually* done such a thing, again contra Wallace.

A much later passage in the same volume indicates that, in the end, Bonaventure appears to take a more robust stance against non-rational (and by extension, avian) forms of incarnation. The question at issue is "whether in death the divinity of Christ be separated from the flesh."²⁵ Bonaventure's negative answer to that question agrees with the assessment of Lombard (who is in turn drawing on Augustine).²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 38. The Latin reads: "*Ad illud quod obiicitur, quod magis manifestatur divina potentia, sapientia et bonitas, si assumeret universum; dicendum, quod falsum est; quia facere per unionem, quod asinus fieret Deus, vel aliquod aliud brutum, potius dedeceret divinam potentiam et sapientiam, quam commendaret. Facere autem, quod homo sit Deus, in nullo praeiudicat nec potentiae nec sapientiae, cum homo natus sit effici deiformis.*"

²⁵ Bonaventure, *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 21, a. 1, q. 2. (Quaracchi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1887), 438. The Latin reads: "*Utrum in morte Christi Divinitas sit separata a carne.*"

²⁶ Lombard (2008, 90–91) has the following in bk. 3, d. 21, ch. 1: "[I]t was by the power of the Godhead that the soul was severed from the flesh, but neither [was severed] from the Word of God. Hence Augustine: 'From the time that the Word took on humanity, that is, flesh and soul, he never laid down his soul in such a way that the soul was severed from the Word; the flesh did lay down

One of the objections (the third) taken up runs like this: divinity isn't able to unite with insensible and irrational natures ("*Divinitas non est unibilis naturae insensibili et irrationali*"). That being the case, the objector infers that since Christ's body during the three-day burial was of course lacking in sensation, it did not seem appropriate ("*idonea*") that it be united with the divine nature. So during the burial the union between Christ's body and the divine nature was dissolved. In answer to this objection, Bonaventure says that although Christ's entombed body lacked reason and sense, it still had a natural orientation towards or ordering to the human soul ("*habebat tamen ordinem ad animam*"), which by nature has those traits. A possible counter-reply is that the mere (presently unactualized) *capacity* for union with a rational soul does not suffice to render something capable of union with divinity. Bonaventure says that this must be admitted *if* we're talking about a substance that had never previously been so united. However in the case of Christ's body we're dealing with something that had previously been united with the divine nature, and as such it retains its aptitude for that union. So there is no metaphysical barrier for believing that Christ's entombed body was still united with the divine nature.

Now, notably for our purposes, nowhere does Bonaventure give what would have been a quicker and simpler reply: *God can incarnate in a non-rational nature*. Instead, he works from the objector's assumption that this is typically impossible, and instead tries to show why the case of Christ's entombed body was an exception.

Of course, it might be that Bonaventure is here simply trying to provide the strongest possible argument for his conclusion, and is doing so by granting as many of the hypothetical objector's background assumptions as he can, even without sharing them himself. I.e., maybe Bonaventure believes that incarnation in non-rational entities—like birds—is metaphysically possible, but is briefly granting for the sake of argument the opposite view. And it remains the case that in these texts he does not explicitly say that such incarnation is impossible (and at one point switches again to the language of fitness / aptness rather than possibility). So this passage is no knockdown argument for the claim that Bonaventure is committed to rejecting incarnation in non-rational (and-never-previously-united-with-divinity) natures. But I am inclined to think it is evidence that he leans in that direction.

Aquinas' stance on the issue is less ambiguous. He avers that by virtue of God's infinite absolute power ("*potentia absoluta*"), there is no metaphysical barrier to a divine Person assuming a non-rational animal nature. However, such assumption is inappropriate and unbefitting the divine glory (leaving aside the special case of

the soul when it expired, but at the soul's return the flesh rose again. And so death separated flesh and soul for a time, but neither was severed from the Word of God.'" The Augustine quote is in turn from his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, tractate 47.

Christ's entombed body), and thus not something God would ever actually do—it is not within His ordained / wisely willed power (*'potentia ordinata'*). One might say then that for Aquinas it is theoretically possible that the Holy Spirit become incarnate as a dove, but it is not morally possible.

Here is part of how he argues the point in his *Sentences* commentary, where he is considering the question of whether human nature is more apt for divine assumption than all others (beginning again with an objection against his preferred view):

The first point proceeds as follows. It seems that human nature is not more greatly assumable than a non-rational creature. For as Augustine says in his letter to Volusianus, "In miraculous works the whole point of the working is the power of the agent." But the most marvellous of all miracles is the assumption of a creature in unity with an uncreated Person. Therefore the whole reason of the assumability is derived from the power of Him who brings about the assumption. But since that power be infinite, from its point of view no more power is needed to assume a non-rational creature than to assume human nature. Therefore it shouldn't be said that human nature is more apt for assumption than a non-rational nature.²⁷

Here is Aquinas' direct reply a bit further on in the text:

To the first question therefore it ought to be said that God, by virtue of His absolute power, was able to assume a non-rational creature. Nor is it a problem that the non-rational creature does not have personhood: because personality is not owed to the assumed human nature in virtue of its own character—due to what we showed elsewhere in dist. 6, q. 1, art. 1 and art. 2—but in virtue of the character of the one who assumes it; hence in this case there is only an uncreated personality. And furthermore although in the non-rational nature there is not found a person, there is found in it a hypostasis and a suppositum. Union is not only made by way of a Person, but also by way of a hypostasis and a suppositum. But such an assumption would not be fitting, above all because the nature assumed is maximally blessed, as it says in Psalm 65:5: "Blessed is the one whom you have chosen and assumed";

²⁷ Aquinas, *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 2, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 1, arg. 1 (Parma, 1858, accessed online via www.corpusthomisticum.org) My own translation. The Latin reads as follows: "*Ad primum sic proceditur. Videtur quod humana natura non sit magis assumptibilis quam creatura irrationalis. Sicut enim dicit Augustinus ad Volusianum, in rebus mirabilibus tota ratio facti est potentia facientis. Sed omnium mirabilium mirabilius est creaturam assumi in unitatem personae increatae. Ergo tota assumptibilitatis ratio est ex potentia ejus qui assumptionem facit. Sed cum illa potentia sit infinita, ex parte ipsius aequaliter est humanam naturam, vel etiam irrationalem naturam assumere. Ergo non magis dicenda est humana natura assumptibilis quam natura irrationalis.*"

indeed blessedness, which consists in an act of mind, cannot be participated in by a non-rational creature. Whence is clear the response to the first objection, which proceeds on the basis of considerations concerning God's absolute power, and not from ordained power.²⁸

As he clarifies elsewhere in this same text (the *respondeo* to *quaestiuncula* 1), no creature, whether rational or non-rational, has any passive or active natural potency to receive a divine Person. They are finite and He is infinite. Necessarily, however, they do have obediential potency, which entails a responsiveness to God's infinite absolute power. And when narrowly considering just the responsiveness of that creaturely obediential potency to that absolute divine power, God can do anything to a creature which does not involve a logical contradiction; thus God can assume any creaturely nature he likes, whether rational or non-rational. ("*Loquendo autem de potentia Dei absoluta, Deus potest assumere quamcumque creaturam vult.*") But when it comes to God's ordained power, the propriety of the assumption takes on a much more important role, with some creaturely natures being fit for incarnation and others not, and with human nature being most properly apt of all. Thus divine wisdom is compatible with the assumption of human nature, but not with the assumption of angelic nature, nor of any non-rational nature (yet again with the exception of Christ's entombed body implicitly in mind).

There are passages in Aquinas' later works that might seem to be in tension with what he says in his early-career *Sentences* commentary, but in fact these are best read in light of that prior work. For instance in his *Summa Theologica* III q. 4, a. 1, resp., he says the following:

I answer that a thing is said to be assumable as being capable of being assumed by a Divine Person, and this capability cannot be taken with reference to the natural passive power, which does not extend to what transcends the natural order, as the personal union of a creature with God transcends it. Hence it follows that a thing is

²⁸ Aquinas, *In III Sententiarum* bk. 3, d. 2, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 1, ad 1. The Latin reads as follows: "*Ad primam ergo quaestionem dicendum, quod Deus de potentia absoluta creaturam irrationalem assumere potuit. Nec impedit quod creatura irrationalis personalitatem non habet: quia personalitas non debetur etiam humanae naturae assumptae ratione sui, ut infra patebit, dist. 6, quaest. 1, art. 1 et 2, sed ratione assumentis; unde non est ibi nisi personalitas increata. Et praeterea quamvis in natura irrationali non inveniatur persona, invenitur tamen in ea hypostasis et suppositum. Unio autem non tantum facta est in persona, sed etiam in hypostasi et supposito. Sed congruum non erat ut assumeretur, et praecipue quia natura assumpta maxime beatificatur, ut in Psalm. 64, 5, dicitur: beatus quem elegisti et assumpsisti; beatitudinis vero, quae in actu mentis consistit, creatura irrationalis particeps esse non potest. Unde patet responsio ad primam objectionem, quae procedit de potentia absoluta, et non de potentia ordinata.*"

said to be assumable according to some fitness for such a union. Now this fitness in human nature may be taken from two things, viz. according to its dignity, and according to its need. According to its dignity, because human nature, as being rational and intellectual, was made for attaining to the Word to some extent by its operation, viz. by knowing and loving Him. According to its need, because it stood in need of restoration, having fallen under original sin. Now these two things belong to human nature alone. For in the irrational creature the fitness of dignity is wanting, and in the angelic nature the aforesaid fitness of need is wanting.²⁹ Hence it follows that only human nature was assumable.³⁰

This needs to be read in light of the distinction between the different orders of divine power. When Aquinas says here that only human nature is assumable, he means ‘assumable in light of God’s ordained power,’ rather than God’s absolute power. This is more evident when one considers some of the language used elsewhere in this same article, such as at the end of his reply to the second objection: “And hence the irrational creature...has no fitness to be united with Him in personal being.” The exclusion here is on the basis of aptness rather than metaphysical possibility.

In making this interpretive claim I find myself in (hesitant) disagreement with Pawl (2019, 39–41), who reads ST III q. 4, a. 1 as indicative of metaphysical impossibility. But unless one maintains that Aquinas changed his mind on the issue in the interim between composition of his *Sentences* commentary and his *Summa* (and it is relatively unusual to encounter unambiguous shifts in stance across his writings), I believe my reading accords better with Aquinas’ corpus considered as a whole.

Elsewhere, in the *Summa Theologica* III q. 39, a. 6, ad. 2, Aquinas is discussing whether it is appropriate to say that the Holy Spirit descended on Christ in the form of a dove. As part of his answer he says this:

As Augustine says (De Trin. li), the Holy Ghost is said to have descended on Christ in a bodily shape, as a dove, not because the very substance of the Holy Ghost was seen, for He is invisible: nor as though that visible creature were assumed into the unity of the Divine Person; since it is not said that the Holy Ghost was the dove, as it is said that the Son of God is man by reason of the union. Nor, again, was the Holy Ghost seen under the form of a dove, after the manner in which John saw the slain

²⁹ This is not because the angels stand in no need of redemption (obviously the fallen ones do), but rather because those who need it are nonetheless inherently irremediable. Demons have no hope of salvation.

³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1920), translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, accessed online via www.newadvent.org.

Lamb in the Apocalypse (5:6): “For the latter vision took place in the spirit through spiritual images of bodies; whereas no one ever doubted that this dove was seen by the eyes of the body.” Nor, again, did the Holy Ghost appear under the form of a dove in the sense in which it is said (1 Corinthians 10:4): “‘Now, the rock was Christ’: for the latter had already a created existence, and through the manner of its action was called by the name of Christ, whom it signified: whereas this dove came suddenly into existence, to fulfil the purpose of its signification, and afterwards ceased to exist, like the flame which appeared in the bush to Moses.”³¹

This makes it quite clear (if it wasn’t already) that Aquinas would have no truck with Wallace’s claims regarding literal avian incarnation (or, for that matter, literal incarnation as the burning bush). He also suggests that the baptismal dove was specially created for the event rather than being a normal local bird appropriated for use at the baptism.³²

Having conducted an admittedly incomplete and selective review of some pertinent Scholastic texts, hopefully we now have a sense of where some prominent mediaeval theologians would have stood when it comes to Wallace’s striking thesis regarding literal avian incarnation (its possibility and its actuality).³³ With this historical material now available to draw upon, let’s conclude with a brief overall assessment of the merits of that thesis.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1920), translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, accessed online via www.newadvent.org.

³² And in the Augustine text cited by Aquinas, one gets the impression that the former thinks there was no real, biological dove there at all, but merely the form of a dove (‘form’ here being taken in the sense of ‘outward appearance’) supernaturally made visible to those at the baptism, in order to function as a sign. See Augustine’s *On the Trinity* bk. 2, ch. 6, sc. 11. For more on this see also Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum* bk. 1, d. 16, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3 (Parma, 1858, accessed online via www.corpusthomisticum.org).

³³ It is worth noting that, just as with the debate over whether the Father or Holy Spirit could become incarnate, there is also some (but not much) contemporary theological literature speaking to the question of the possibility of animal incarnation. This literature likewise tends to be informed by the history of Scholastic debates (as for instance Adams (2006, 135–138 and 198)). It has also been suggested to me that mediaeval debates in sacramental theology regarding impanation (the notion that God might assume the consecrated bread *even while it remains bread*) might constitute another locus in which the general idea of incarnation in (or with?) a non-rational nature played itself out. (Prior to the Fourth Lateran Council, which enshrined transubstantiation as the preferred metaphysics of the real presence within the Roman Catholic Church, several different accounts had been actively debated.) Consequently, recent literature on eucharistic ontology likewise might be relevant to the present discussion, if indirectly. For a helpful recent overview of impanation, see Arcadi (2018).

4. Assessing Wallace's Avian Incarnation Thesis

Assuming for a moment that one is reluctant to entertain Wallace's idea of a literal, physical avian incarnation on the part of the Holy Spirit, one is liable to see the Scholastic dialogue surrounding the possibility of such incarnation as trapped on a kind of theological balance beam: on the one hand, denying the possibility risks besmirching the breadth of divine omnipotence, limiting God's power in a way not unambiguously demanded by logical strictures. Thus, one can understand Aquinas' desire to affirm it as a possibility on a purely theoretical level, as a matter of God's '*potentia absoluta*.' And yet, reading this mediaeval discussion in light of Wallace's work, one is likewise liable to see Aquinas' stance as potentially tipping one over to the opposite side of the balance beam. By way of forestalling Wallace's novel, strange idea, might it not be better to go with (one plausible reading of) Bonaventure and deny avian incarnation even as an abstract possibility?

Aquinas would of course resist this, in part because he would claim (and here Bonaventure would likely agree) that the arguments regarding fitness and God's '*potentia ordinata*' are adequate to block Wallace's thesis. Moreover, Aquinas would see his concern to safeguard divine omnipotence as just as weighty, if not more so. In his own day, the chief source of philosophical opposition to Christ's incarnation was mediaeval Islam, which viewed the very idea of divine incarnation as either impossible or impious or both. One could thus also understand it if Aquinas was inclined to err on the side of emphasizing the breadth of God's power—given the philosophical threat from Islam, it was perhaps better to defend the possibility of incarnation generally, even at the risk of admitting the abstract possibility (and *only* the abstract possibility) of odd incarnations.

Personally, I am inclined to agree with Aquinas on the question of the abstract possibility, in part because I don't see any easy route to demonstrating that incarnation in a non-rational animal would entail a contradiction (while granting that later dissenters on this point, such as Henry of Ghent, certainly have some interesting arguments deserving of attention). I also agree that avian incarnation would have been unbecoming, indeed inappropriate for a divine Person, and that it didn't happen.

Wallace could counter that although his proposal may initially come across as unbecoming or even impious, in fact it is nothing of the kind. Far from it, avian incarnation manifests God's intimate presence in creation and showcases His love for the animal kingdom. All the earth is the Lord's, and what better way to show this than by taking upon more of the natures He has populated it with? Moreover, in our current environmental moment, surely we would benefit from accepting that such

incarnation has taken place, and allowing it to prompt us into a greater concern for the health of the ecological systems upon which we all depend?

In reply, I would suggest that there are other, equally effective ways to affirm a genuinely robust divine immanence in the natural order without having to disrupt two millennia of Church teaching by affirming that another member of the Trinity has actually become incarnate (let alone incarnate as a bird). I sympathize with Wallace's ethical and pragmatic motivations, but there are ways to get there that do not require the same level of subversion of tradition.

Indeed one might argue that Scholasticism itself supplies ways of understanding the divine immanence versus transcendence dialectic, ways that would allow Wallace to view nature as suffused with divine presence (and thus as itself enjoying a kind of reflected sacrality) without having to adopt any form of animism. E.g., one might point out that for both Bonaventure and Aquinas, every instantiated creaturely form is the exemplification of an eternal divine idea, such that all created things are effectively the material crystallization of some component of the infinite divine mind. (How is that for ontological intimacy?) Or one might draw on the patristic idea of humans as hinge point between the spiritual and physical realms and thus microcosm of all creation. Caldecott (2013, 82) summarizes this idea: "In this view, the human being occupies a central place in the universe, but he does so as a microcosm containing all the elements of nature, and faculties or powers corresponding to both animals and angels. Adam's role in the cosmos is a priestly and mediatory one, radically compromised by the Fall, but restored in Christ, who by assuming human nature assumed *the whole of nature* by taking on a body." [Emphases in original]

With that in mind, one could argue that by becoming incarnate as a human being, Christ in some sense joined Himself (via His humanity) to the animal and plant realms as well. Pope Saint John Paul II writes as follows in *Dominum et Vivificantem* (n. 50): "The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into the unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is 'flesh': the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world." [Cited by Caldecott (2013, 221)]

Or one might draw attention to passages such as this, from the first chapter of Bonaventure's famous short work *The Mind's Road to God* (1953, 12):

From these visible things, therefore, one mounts to considering the power and wisdom and goodness of God as being, living, and understanding; purely spiritual and incorruptible and immutable. This consideration, however, is extended according to the sevenfold condition of creatures, which is a sevenfold testimony to

the divine power, wisdom, and goodness, as one considers the origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, plenitude, operation, and order of all things. For the *origin* of things, according to their creation, distinction, and beauty, in the work of the six days indicates the divine power producing all things from nothing, wisdom distinguishing all things clearly, and goodness adorning all things generously. *Magnitude* of things, either according to the measure of their length, width, and depth, or according to the excellence of power spreading itself in length, breadth, and depth, as appears in the diffusion of light, or again according to the efficacy of its inner, continuous, and diffused operation, as appears in the operation of fire—magnitude, I say, indicates manifestly the immensity of the power, wisdom, and goodness of the triune God, Who exists unlimited in all things through His power, presence, and essence. *Multitude* of things, according to the diversity of genus, species, and individuality, in substance, form, or figure, and efficacy beyond all human estimation, clearly indicates and shows the immensity of the aforesaid traits in God. *Beauty* of things, according to the variety of light, figure, and colour in bodies simple and mixed and even composite, as in the celestial bodies, minerals, stones and metals, plants and animals, obviously proclaims the three mentioned traits . . . [Emphases in original]

There is an awe and respect for God’s created cosmos that comes through clearly in passages like this. Recall too that Bonaventure, as head of the Franciscans quite early in their history, surely had the example of St. Francis of Assisi still clear in mind, with his love of ‘Brother Sun and Sister Moon.’ Could not this side of the Roman Catholic theological tradition be put to use in service of the environmental concerns Wallace holds so dear, without the resort to animism?

Of course there is a substantial literature on environmental ethics produced by recent Catholic philosophers and theologians, and the issue is a major concern for the current pope (Francis).³⁴ One needn’t mine Bonaventure specifically for this purpose. But the fact that one can do so (and pretty readily) underscores the fact that non-animist strategies are available to the Christian environmentalist.

I am tempted to add here a treatment of the Palamite theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church and how its distinctive account of divine immanence—via the essence versus energies distinction—can provide yet another option for consideration by Wallace. (It’s possible of course that he is already familiar with Palamism, but he cites no Orthodox theological works in his book.) Unfortunately, for purposes of this short concluding section such a treatment would take us too far afield; still, it is a perspective which, in my view, would be even more conducive to Wallace’s animist sympathies without actually going the animist route. And

³⁴ See for instance Briola (2023) for a recent treatment.

multiple recent Orthodox thinkers have made a point of applying Palamite insights specifically to ecological concerns—see for instance Chryssavgis (2019), Theokritoff (2005) and Foltz (2014), in addition to the previously cited work of Mousalimas (1990).

Regardless of which specific direction one goes here, the upshot is that one can engage productively with Wallace's central ethical and pragmatic interests without having to step as far outside of theological tradition as he is wont to do. While I don't think commitment to actual avian incarnation is strictly heretical, it is sufficiently strange and 'outside the bounds,' in an intuitive sense, to warrant both a close examination of its merits and a consideration of alternatives (ideally in light of historical theology).

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