

Christianity Without Incarnation

by: Douglas Lockhart

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Father Sylvan
Jacob Needleman: *Lost Christianity*

Affective Identification

The Christian preoccupation with devotional matters, and the secular world's preoccupation with logical categories constitute two sides of a problem - the problem of how to evaluate the "self" in relation to God, or Ultimate Reality. Christianity holds the key to this problem, a mystical key shaped to fit the lock marked "transcendence", but it is an area of experience fraught with difficulties for most Christians. Transcendence languishes in a backwater of the Christian mind, emotional excursions into the personality and identity of Jesus being the preferred route. Well, not altogether. According to Evelyn Underhill, the situation is changing; mysticism is now "more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man."¹ A generation of religious psychologists have helped theologians and philosophers come to terms with mystical experience, the psychic disturbances that sometimes accompany them being dismissed as *accidental*. Serious students of mysticism are said to pay less attention to the ecstatic or visionary elements prevalent in the literature because they neither confirm nor discredit conservative Christian beliefs. In spite of such progress, however, old patterns are still operative in the Catholic and Anglican communions, emotional identification with the Old, Old Story continuing to act as an *experiential* backdrop. Keeping what they consider to be the "ship of faith" afloat, a surprising number of clergy ignore mysticism's challenges and carry on as before, the findings of biblical scholarship being treated with the same disinterest. The "ship of faith" or, more accurately "the ship of belief", must be kept afloat at all cost.

In *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experience*, Marghanita Laski tackles the problem of mystical ecstasy and records, for our amusement, a medically-

based summation of religious ecstasy where St Paul's vision on the road to Damascus is described as a "discharging lesion of the occipital cortex" (epilepsy), St Teresa's visions as "hysteria", St Francis of Assisi assessed as a "hereditary degenerate", George Fox as suffering from a "disordered colon" and Thomas Carlyle from a bout of "gastro-duodenal catarrh".² How else could such claimed experiences be explained, certainly not in mystical terms. And it is no different in the conservative religious camp: mystical experiences that throw doubt on the Old, Old Story are rejected, it being assumed that mystical experience should support that story's storyline. St. Augustine's classifications of mystical experience should not be tampered with, nor the religious status quo as found in Christianity's ancient heritage.

Marghanita Laski rejects the idea that conservative Christian beliefs can modify the nature of mystical experience,³ but she does admit that "Mystical religions and philosophies, together with poetry, have so comprehensively provided the vocabulary in which ecstatic experience is felt to be fittingly described that their words and phrases will perforce be used even by people who do not share the beliefs these words and phrases imply."⁴ That adds an interesting twist to the situation, for it tells us that the mystically inclined may use the Church's terminology for no other reason than an inability to think outside of the Christian paradigm.

The Unknown Darkness

The above problem is addressed by Laski when dealing with the issue of *induced* ecstatic experience. Referring to spiritual directors of Catholic persuasion, she tells us that they "insist that contemplation of Christ shall not become contemplation of God which is liable to lead to such statements as Ruysbroeck's 'so far as distinction of person goes, there is no more God nor creature', and 'we have lost ourselves and been melted away into the unknown darkness.'"⁵ Such an approach is apparently anathema to the Christian mind because, as W R Inge is reported as saying, such are "the disastrous consequences which follow from the method of negation and self-deification". Or, as the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church states in relation to Quietist meditation:

a certain form of mental prayer in which the soul consciously refuses not only all discursive mediation but any distinct act such as desire for virtue, love of Christ, or adoration of the Divine Person, but simply rests in the presence of God in pure faith ...The moral consequences of such teaching are almost indistinguishable from those of pantheism.⁶

To rest in the presence of God in pure faith (trust) is considered inadvisable, emotions such as desire for virtue or adoration of God being rendered obsolete. There has to be an emotional dimension for a meditation to be valid, prayer and adoration being the accepted route. Orthodox conceptions of God, Christ and Church are the conduit through which the transcendent dimension is to be approached, any other path perceived as out of step with the saintly traditions. Mystical states brought about through an emptying of the mind or a controlling of the breath constitute spiritual anarchy and should be avoided. In this vein it is interesting to note Laski's language when describing the Christian attitude towards contemplation of God, for she detects within it the fact that Christianity has all but lost its original premise - *trust* in God. Instituting a human being *as* God, Christians have been relieved of the pressure and responsibility of facing the inherent mystery of God, a mystery that renders God beyond conceptual *thingness*. Stunned by too much light (classical theology or fundamentalist naivety), we have replaced God with Jesus as *graspable* image and fallen into a form of idolatry.

The Language of Appearance

The most pointed of Laski's observations is directed at Catholic theologians, for it is through their sensibilities that the words of the Christian mystics have been filtered. Catholic theologians, it should be realised, "may explain any seemingly pantheistic statement by an accepted Catholic mystic as not really meaning what it seems to mean."⁷ There is a language of appearance, and those who veer from it describe only what they *think* they have experienced, not what has actually taken place. The problem for Laski is that many Catholic mystics knew the orthodox and permissible language yet dared to dispense with it, there being "plenty of evidence that even the most respectable Christian mystics do describe experiences that are not doctrinally acceptable."⁸ And so Meister Eckhart had to recant, St Teresa be tailored into theological conformity and Marguerite Porete forced to face the flames. God was a good Catholic. Authentic mystical experience resonated with Catholic doctrine, the Church's dogmas with contemplative clarity, her teachings with what the Apostles had reported and mystics had endlessly confirmed. But what if this were not true? How would the situation change if mystical experiences were open to an alternative explanation? Theologians may insist that their approach is the only one possible given the history of the faith and the supposed nature of mystical experience, but that overlooked the fact that "faith" and "history" made incongruous bedfellows. An acceptance of the virgin birth and the physical assumption of Mary into heaven as historical events mixed categories to an alarming extent, the story of Jesus having fed

five thousand people by miraculously multiplying the contents of someone's lunch box similarly absurd. When properly understood, however, mystical experiences served a double function: they steered us towards a clearer perception of our own psychologies and allowed the mythic dimension of these wonder-filled stories to surface.

The basic claim made by conservative Catholic theologians is that secular and religious forms of mysticism can be separately described. R C Zaehner, Professor of Eastern Religions, supports this stance by claiming that non-Christian mystical experience can be clearly differentiated from Christian mystical experience through the terminology used. Laski admits that the terminology used does seem to reflect varieties, or levels of experience, but in her opinion that does not confirm an actual difference between Christian and non-Christian mysticism. Experiences claimed by Zaehner as non-Christian are often identical to claims made by traditional Christian mystics. Attempting to explain this anomaly, Zaehner argues that although all mystical experience can be described as "unitive", it is what one unites with that determines the nature of one's experience. It is one thing to encounter Reality, say, in the Quietist or Eastern meditative sense, it is quite another to prayerfully encounter God in the Christian sense. Laski's reply is that Christian mystics do not always "use such terms as must lead us necessarily to assume that their contact was with God".⁹ That is an important point. There may well be a difference between Christian and non-Christian mystical experience, but there are also numerous overlaps, and these overlaps suggest a more complex experiential dimension than Christian theologians are willing to consider.

For Zaehner, the Christian mystic's use of terms such as "The Absolute", "Absolute Being" or "Absolute Reality" automatically refer to the Christian God, whereas the use of identical terminology by an atheist or Eastern/Asiatic meditator is assumed to mean something quite different. That is quite odd given that Christians are only supposed to approach God through the personality and identity of a human being for whom divinity has been claimed. One can pray to God *as if* he were a separate being from Jesus, but not actually *think* of him as such due to the Council of Nicaea's inspired 3rd century insights. Yet Christian mystics did speak of being united with the God Jesus called 'Father', and they were not speaking of Jesus by some other name. Inexplicably, these good Catholics jumped the theological rail and spoke of the Almighty in terms studiously avoided by the Church's theologians. Evelyn Underhill does argue that mystical experience "requires to be embodied in some degree in history, dogma and institutions if it is to reach the sense-conditioned human mind",¹⁰ but as the words *in some degree* denote, blind adherence to doctrine or institution is not being advocated.

The Salvation Myth

Behind what appear to be perfectly reasonable statements by clerics and theologians lies the view that only Christianity offers a doctrine of "salvation", the Church's capacity to deliver it being its centuries-long purpose. There is a grand divide between the sacred and the profane, between Christian mediation and Quietist or Eastern meditation, between the Christian God and what others conceive of as the "Absolute" or "Ultimate Reality", and we should never lose sight of that fact. Only through the medium of Christ's Church can salvation be had, experiences that do not resonate with Christian belief being a snare for the unwary. Salvation operates within the closed circuit of the Church as God's gift to the world. It was God's intention that the Christian Church should come into existence, and the fact that it did means that the Church harbours and safeguards God's truth on earth. God has nurtured his Church throughout the centuries, and as such she bears the stamp of divine approval and authority. Question that authority and you stand charged with disobeying the will of God. Question the Church's conception of mystical reality and you stand charged with spiritual subversion. Question the Church's spiritual package from experiences gained at the meditative level and you not only challenge its right to view itself as the font of authentic spirituality, you reveal yourself to be spiritually bankrupt. For if you are not united with the Church, or with Jesus, or with the Church's God in the appropriate manner, then what exactly are you united with? That, as we saw earlier, is Zaehner's question, and it would be a legitimate question if the mystical sphere functioned as either he and others believe, but as it does not work in such a circumscribed fashion, another explanation is necessary.

Most Christians side-step the necessity of facing the darkness of God; they choose instead the comfort zone of a belief system built around Jesus. Or, if they are mystically-inclined, inadvertently break out of emotional identification with Jesus and encounter something they did not expect to encounter - the *formless void* that Jesus called "Father". On doing so they discover that "faith" has nothing whatever to do with "knowing" or "believing", but with a form of *not knowing*. Faith, they discover, is being able to bear this "not knowing" without flinching; or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested, *throw oneself into the arms of God*. As God has neither shape, form, content or even existence in any sense that can be conveyed, this is a creative act of some magnitude.

In *Honest to Jesus*, a refreshingly frank book, Robert Funk gives us his definition of faith: "By faith, I do not mean belief; I mean 'trust'. The confusion, in popular usage, of faith as trust with faith as belief in a set of propositions has almost made the term in its proper sense unusable."¹¹ Indeed. Like the word "God", the word "faith" has been devalued through overuse and misuse. Overuse by those who claim to know every twitch in the mind of God, misuse by those who call whatever they decide to do or think the will of God. In such a fashion are the imagined intentions of God exploited by causes, groups, and

even countries. God is primarily the God of the Jews, the Arabs, Catholic fundamentalists or Protestant evangelicals, Jehovah Witnesses or the exclusive property of a David Caresh or a Jim Jones. Hemmed in by belief systems, God becomes a commodity to be sold or bartered, an invisible, faceless and totally silent partner in the business of selling religion. Christians have all the answers because God is on the Christian side. Moslems have all the answers because God prefers the Islamic viewpoint. The Jews have all the answers because God has a soft spot for Judaism.

This sets up an impossible situation, for God cannot be made partisan to belief systems; he (he?) must be independent of individuals, groups, parties, societies or nations. He must be beyond bias or preference, beyond history and not embedded in it, beyond gender and unconcerned with carefully worked out doctrinal schemes. If the God of the Christian mystic upholds centuries old doctrinal notions cobbled together by Church Councils, then it can be assumed that *that* God is an intellectual construction. This means that the Church's mystics have either consciously disguised their experiences to avoid censure, or unconsciously tailored what they experienced to fit with the Augustinian mystic template. Either way we are being sold short. In his intriguing novel *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, Morris West captures the essence of this problem:

It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price ... One has to abandon altogether the search for security and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the whole world like a lover, and yet demand no easy return of love. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing.

The Three-in-One Formula

In Roman Christianity the Apostle Paul's idea of the "Christ" was literalised; that is, the Church took this Greek word denoting "messiahship" and transformed it, by stages, into the notion that Jesus the itinerant Jewish preacher was part of a co-equal divine trinity and consubstantial with God. In Paul's mystical scheme, Jesus was conceived of as the "Christ" because he had *taken on* the role of Messiah and been found worthy to carry the "Christ" nature. He was the *carrier* of that nature, not that nature incarnated in human form. When Paul says "Do you not recognise that Christ is in you", he is unlikely to be suggesting that Jesus can in some sense live inside someone's skin, or brain, but that like Jesus we have a capacity for realising the "Christ nature" in our own lives. Paul the theologian has cleverly extended the Greek

word for "messiah" and turned it into a psycho-spiritual state of mind, a state of mind obliquely alluded to by Jesus when he tells his disciples that through "faith" they will do even greater things than he has done.

Robert Funk sums up this situation with characteristic force: "It is a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the Christ of Christian orthodoxy, the Christ of the Creeds. The creedal Christ ... is an idol that invites shattering."¹² Worship of the historical Jesus is therefore a misplaced act: Jesus as idol has to be torn down for our own good and liberated from this kind of projectionism. To do so is to reinstate the creative darkness of God beyond conscious, intellectual distortion and place him where he belongs, in *emptiness*. The Jewish Temple's *empty* Holy of Holies was not empty because there was nothing in there, but because God is not a "thing" - he is *no-thing*. This, for those brought up and educated, or indoctrinated, in a Christian society, makes facing God *without* Jesus the spiritual challenge of our age; it is the psychological equivalent of rescuing the Eucharist from being literally the body and blood of Jesus.¹³

In 'Christianity Without Incarnation', Maurice Wiles explores the possibility of a Christianity minus the notion of a divine Jesus. As he was at that time Regis Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, as well as Chairman of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission, that was quite a brave thing for him to suggest. Arguing for the abandonment of the Church's metaphysical claim that Jesus was the Second Person in a Holy Trinity, he considers the complex weave of ideas associated with the incarnation and says: "the precise way in which Jesus is understood ... has been a constantly changing phenomenon in the history of the church".¹⁴ But he cannot predict how this change in attitude towards Jesus will come about, for abandonment of the divinity model will entail more than logical deduction, more than the correction of historical distortion and theological exuberance, it will also mean thinking people engaging the Church in a dynamic discourse around this issue.

Wiles' account of how the doctrine of the Incarnation came about starts with the observation that it is not something directly presented in Scripture. It is in fact, "a construction built on the variegated evidence to be found there."¹⁵ The New Testament writers were interpreters, not reporters. Jesus is variously described as eschatological prophet, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Logos and Messiah. He is seen by some as the pre-existent wisdom of God spoken of in the wisdom literature of the Jews, and by others in the more personal sense of God's pre-existent Son come down to earth. But all four gospels (even John's) stop short of saying that he was actually God. It was one thing to personalise the wisdom literature, to poeticise the meaning of Sophia, it was quite another to transform this strictly Jewish conception of the pre-existent wisdom of God into a human being.

The Jews never intended their notion of Sophia to be interpreted in such a literal fashion, and later Christian insistence that Sophia be made subservient to, or be amalgamated with, the idea of Jesus as Logos (the Word of God) is a travesty of their sublime vision. As a concept, Sophia was feminine, Logos was masculine. It could be claimed that Sophia had descended on Jesus at his baptism, but it could not be claimed that Jesus was Sophia dropping in physically from the transcendent realm. Such a claim was nonsensical. Yet such a claim was eventually made for Jesus, and diverse opinions arose because of it that worried the evolving Church from the end of the 1st century until the end of the 4th. Jesus was this and Jesus was that. Jesus had two wills, not one. Jesus had only one, untainted divine will. Jesus as the "Christ" was distinct from Jesus the "man". Jesus the man was limited to normal human development, but as the Christ he was the recipient of knowledge directly communicated to him from God. Jesus was *all* God. Jesus was *all* man at the same time as he was *all* God. All in all a mess of pottage that led the Council of Nicaea to demand creedal standardisation. For by then no one either knew, or could remember, or perhaps even cared, what it was Paul or the original Nazarene Apostles had believed about Jesus. And anyway, had not these Nazarenes lost track of who and what they were and turned back to Judaism after the death of Jesus' brother James?

In 'A Cloud of Witnesses', Francis Young makes the point that titles such as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord and Logos were all in existence before Christianity appeared. They were standard titles used among the many Jewish groups, and they were not always properly understood by later Christian thinkers. Some titles carried a different emphasis, some projected different Christological structures, some were influenced by differing linguistic and cultural environments.¹⁶ Gaining additional importance in a Greek environment, some became a standard way of referring to Jesus, but it was a standard of usage amputated from its Jewish-sectarian roots. Jesus' message had been about the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God, the Church's message, based loosely on Paul's epistles and on the fact that God's kingdom had not arrived, was that Jesus himself was the central issue. Paul's evocation of the mystic "Christ" as a state of mind had hardened into human form, and it would sweep aside all previous conceptions of Jesus as a normal human being. But what had actually made Jesus special was not that he was God, but that he had wholly surrendered himself to God. He had not surrendered to Judaism or sectarian-Nazarenism, but purely and simply to God alone. For such an act he was deemed heretical by just about everyone, rejected, tortured and crucified, and if alive today would incur the wrath of many for exactly the same reason.

Francis Young completes her observations by pointing out that the fullness of God experienced by Jesus was the result of choice, will, purpose and election, rather than essential derivative nature.¹⁷ He was a man like any

other man, and as such extraordinary for that reason. Our hope, therefore, is not in his divinity, but in his humanity, in the fact that he could laugh and weep, thirst and be hungry. That is the connecting point. It was out of his all-too-human nature that he stepped into the fullness of God as obedient son. And so Young is forced to say that the reduction of all of God to the level of human incarnation is beyond anyone's conceptual capacity.¹⁸ It may be comforting to have a faith complete with a doctrine of atonement and the idea that God has dealt with evil, but that is the language of poetry. Ultimately, all language about God is analogical, it is "the expression of the unknown and inexpressible in terms of the known."¹⁹

If the probings of historians and New Testament scholars have any meaning, then our conception of what Jesus considered important is out of alignment with what was actually going on in his mind. It is unlikely that he was selling himself as God plus a new code of behaviour designed to outshine the Jewish Torah; he was more probably attempting to discipline the minds of his disciples through an exaggerated moral process designed to mirror back to them their low levels of awareness. It was a teaching meant for a small group of students, not the whole of humanity. Pulling Jesus' teachings out of context, the later Christian Church took this sectarian Jew's deepest insights and changed them into a set of moral injunctions that only the fanatical or the naturally passive could ever hope to follow.²⁰ Displacing and distorting his teachings, they set in motion a cult of the personality that pushed Jesus' intentions into reverse. As King Midas was cursed with the capacity to turn everything into gold, the later Church turned Jesus and his teachings into a series of sad literalisms. With everything Jesus said and did constellated around the bizarre notion that he was consubstantial with Israel's God, an alternative faith was set up that progressively hardened into a cult in which divinity was firmly lodged on the side of the human. Capable of wrath, love, disappointment and even hate, this God took sides, had a filthy tempter and revelled in violence.

It is necessary to overpower this God. We have to strip our memories and imaginations of his playful obscenities and attempt to dismantle the mental images we have of him. This is of course to lose the God of our childhood, the God of our growing up and perhaps even the God of our adulthood as the historian Karen Armstrong has suggested, but with a little probing we may find, as she found, that this God is unworthy of our attention, never mind our worship.

The Codex Cantabrigiencis

The New Testament's rendering of Jesus' interaction with the man caught working on the Sabbath is enlarged upon in the 6th century *Codex*

Cantabrigiensis.²¹ Developing Jesus' statement that the Sabbath is made for man, and not man for the Sabbath, this Codex has Jesus say:

Oh man, if thou knowest what thou doest, thou art blessed,
but if thou knowest not, thou art accursed and a transgressor
of the law.

It is perfectly obvious that the words "if thou knowest what thou doest" do not refer to this man recognising that he is breaking the law, but to the possibility of his choosing to exist on another level of awareness. Jesus' words suggest that real decisions are only possible when we ourselves are real, and that means being profoundly aware of our own living, breathing, touching, interactive existence moment by moment. This, it could be said, is the Christ mind or nature at work, and the German mystic Meister Eckhart pulls this kind of existing into focus for us:

The Holy Scriptures shout that man should be free from self,
for being free from self, you are self-controlled, and as you are
self-controlled you are self-possessed, and as you are self-
possessed you possess God and all creation.²²

This is not Eckhart stuffily confirming that moral behaviour leads to self-control and thence to possession of God, but to the fact that real morality is dependent on loss of self. It is loss of self (the constantly distracted ego) that leads to authentic self-control and a moral life, not a moral life that leads to self-control. In this quirky observation Eckhart confounds religious opinion and points to the "possessing of self" as contingent upon the self-control that blossoms out of transcending the conscious self. A new self forms and occupies the old self's location, and this new self heralds the acquisition of real will. And so Eckhart can say what seems to be utterly contradictory, namely, that losing self equals self-control. For to the extent that we lose self we are self-possessed (truly present to ourselves moment by moment), and this annuls the ingrained habit of our being consciously usurped through identification with world, thought and deed. Not just in the sense of being aware of ourselves and ourselves alone, but aware of ourselves *as* we think, talk and act. In as far as this difficult combination is accomplished, we are potentially in possession of God and all creation.

In *Lost Christianity*, the philosopher Jacob Needleman quotes from the mystical journal of Father Sylvan, a priest who clearly understood the necessity of "self-presence" in relation to transcendence of the ego. Sylvan tells us that we have to "separate our sense of self from all thoughts and logical reasoning in order to reach the relative void from which the certainty-that-has-no-name may speak."²³ *That* is Christianity's lost dimension, the secret it carries in its

heart of hearts. Whether Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu or Buddhist, this is what needs to be operative if we are to experience even a moment of spiritual freedom. To wake up to this simple fact is to wake up to the beginnings of a transformation. On the intellectual level, having an examined faith is a prerequisite if we are to transcend the limited and limiting aspects of belief, but in the end it is the quality of our awareness that is all important. If we are constantly lost to ourselves as a presence during thinking, talking, doing and relating, then we are in trouble. And again it is Father Sylvan who sum up the situation.

Ego is the systematic affirmation of emotional reaction. This system is fuelled by the energy of attention. Therefore as long as a man has no control over his attention his possibilities remain imprisoned in the ego no matter what ideas he espouses and no matter what effort he expends.²⁴

The challenge is not whether we can mortify the flesh or believe the unbelievable, it is whether we can find sufficient energy within ourselves to wake up to what "waking up" means. Socrates' injunction to "know the self" takes on new meaning in relation to this discovery. In terms of waking up, to *know the self* has little to do with information gathering, it has to do with *gathering ourselves in until we fully occupy the space in which we exist*. In this scheme of things, religion is not the final arbiter of truth, it is but an evolutionary tool in the service of transcendence.

References and Notes:

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- 2) Laski, Marghanita, *Ecstasy*, p. 254.
- 3) *Ibid*, p. 133,
- 4) *Ibid*, p. 349.
- 5) *Ibid*, p. 252.
- 6) Oxford Dictionary of Christian Church as quoted by Marghanita Laski in *Ecstasy*, p. 252.
- 7) Laski, Marghanita, *Ecstasy*, p. 123.
- 8) *Ibid*.
- 9) *Ibid*, p. 131.
- 10) Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism*, preface p. ix.
- 11) Funk, Robert, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 9.
- 12) *Ibid*, 20.
- 13) Wiles, Maurice, *Christianity without Incarnation?* an essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick, p. 2.

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- 15) Ibid, p. 3.
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- 18) Ibid, p. 35.
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- 20) Klausner, Joseph, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p 69.
- 21) Eckhart, Meister, *A Modern Translation*, p. 237.
- 22) Ibid.
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- 24) Ibid, p 191