

# Key Themes in Systematic Theology

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# Week 1: Foundations of Christology

- Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, 59–259
- Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (London: SPCK, 1979)
- Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone-Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (London: I. Nicholson & Watson, 1935)
- Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christology*, trans. Jo Bennett (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015)
- John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987)

## Bibliography II

- Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1990).
- Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe (3rd edn; London: SCM Press, 2002).
- Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
- Maurice Wiles, 'Christianity without Incarnation?' in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), 1–11.

# 1. Introduction

- Christianity is named after a person: Jesus of Nazareth, named Jesus Christ.
- There is universal agreement that this person is at the centre of the Christian faith.
- What does it mean that 'a person' is thus central?
- We have seen last term how Christ was already involved in the way Christian doctrine teaches about God and creation.
- Christology initially an extension of these doctrines.

## Introduction II

- *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.*
- (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed)

# Introduction III

- Christology is here presented as a narrative.
- The subject of this narrative is the pre-existent God, the second person of the Trinity.
- Incarnation is a phase in the 'history' of this being.
- The story is one of descent and ascent.
- Christ *was* in eternity with the Father, descended to earth for a while, then ascended again to the heavens.
- Many questions, e.g. how can 'God' have such a history? How is it compatible with God's immutability?

# Introduction III

- This approach has been called 'mythical' because it tells a story about God.
- Biblical basis exists in the NT:
- John 1, 1-3: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.
- John 1, 14: And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

# Introduction IV

- Yet another narrative exists as well.
- In this narrative, he was born, grew up, preached the Kingdom, was persecuted, died and was resurrected.
- Major difference between the two:
- One story has God or the Word as its subject. The second one has a human subject.
- Christology fundamentally seeks to explain how the two stories can coincide.
- Surely, they both deal with the same person?



# Introduction V

- In practice, this has meant explaining how 'divinity' and 'humanity' of Christ come together.
- Early Church 'translated' this into the metaphysical and logical task of explaining how two realities or 'natures' could be present in and shape one and the same individual.
- In dealing with this inherited form of Christology, it is helpful to recall that it is ultimately an attempt to align these two narratives.

## 2. Biblical basis

- We have previously looked at the scriptural basis of the Christian teaching on God and creation.
- Certainly, none of these doctrines could be ‘found’ in the Bible, but they were clearly based on specific texts.
- Their later debate was therefore largely exegetical.
- Interestingly, the situation with Christology is different.
- Biblical evidence is largely indirect.

## Biblical basis II

- Important source – summaries of salvation history.
- John 1, 1-14 (see previous slide).
- Philippians 2, 6–11: Jesus Christ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

## Biblical Basis III

- The divinity of Jesus is directly asserted in few texts, e.g. John 1,1 (of course, it was found in many others as well).
- Christ's humanity is presupposed throughout the gospels.
- Hebrews 4, 15: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

## Biblical Basis IV

- Personal unity of Christ is once again presupposed in the historical summaries of John 1, Phil. 2 etc.
- The *same* person was originally with God and later born and crucified.
- Much of this evidence then is *indirect*.
- Christology thus different from other doctrines.
- Not less 'biblical': In a way it is the 'most biblical' doctrine in that it aims to explicate the theoretical basis on which the entire teaching of the New Testament is based.

## Biblical Basis V

- But with Christology we're moving a further step away from the mode of presentation to be found in Scripture.
- Christology takes theology to a more technical, more abstract level.
- Christology has therefore been seen as the central doctrine, the doctrine of doctrines so to speak.
- But Christological debates have also been among the most technical and scholastic in the history of Christianity.

### 3. The theoretical task of Christology

- This can be arranged on two axes.
- On the one hand is the human-divine axis.
- Here the task is to ensure that the saviour is 'fully' human as well as divine.
- On the other hand is an axis formed by the tension of unity and duality.
- Here the task is to show how Christ is somehow one individual person without denying the dual elements of his composition.

## A) Christ as divine and human

- 1. The problem of docetism.
- Gnostic authors: Christ was not 'really' human (docetism from Greek *dokein* = to seem).
- Merely clothed himself in a body as part of his soteriological mission.
- Left the body behind to die on the cross ('My God, why have you forsaken me?')
- Anti-Gnostic fathers (Irenaeus, Tertullian) insisted on the importance of Christ's humanity including a material body.



# Christ as divine and human II

- They equally insist on the identity of Christ's humanity with ours.
- Christ is not simply a human individual but his humanity somehow embraces the whole race as Adam embraced all created, sinful humanity.

# Christ as divine and human III

- 2. The problem of adoptionism
- Rom. 1, 3-4: [The Son of God], who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.
- Early attempt to counter Gnostic docetism by giving full weight to the narrative logic of the gospel.
- Condemned in Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch in 268.

# Christ as divine and human IV

- Jesus was an exemplary human person who operated through God's grace.
- He is 'Son of God' so to speak 'by adoption', hence the name of the heresy.
- Direct bearing on doctrine of God - adoptianists are monarchians.
- Jesus partakes of God's wisdom and power but *is* no second hypostasis.

## B) Christ as One and Two

- Apollinaris of Laodicea (4th century) emphasised the need to explain how divinity and humanity make a single person.
- Radical form of so-called 'Alexandrian' Christology.
- Highly accomplished; forerunner of many later Christologies.
- Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444) unwittingly relied on his writings when arguing for the unity of Christ against Nestorius.

# Christ as One and Two II

- Apollinarius thought the Logos united itself to a human body (cf. 'the Word took flesh').
- Was condemned for 'denying human soul' (or mind) in Christ.
- Gregory of Nazianzus: 'What is not assumed is not healed'.
- 'Antiochene' christologies emphasise the duality of divine and human natures.
- In order to do justice to both aspects of Christ's person, they can seem to compromise on his personal unity.

# Christ as One and Two III

- Conflict between Nestorius and Cyril
- This was largely about the conflict of unitive and divisive Christologies.
- Nestorius queried whether Mary could be called 'Bearer of God'.
- God is not born but has existed from eternity.
- Problem: communication of idioms.
- If Christ is God and man, can divine attributes be predicated of his human actions?

# Christ as One and Two IV

- Cyril's Twelfth Anathema against Nestorius:
- 'Whosoever shall not recognize that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, that he was crucified in the flesh, and that likewise in that same flesh he tasted death and that he is become the first-begotten of the dead, for, as he is God, he is the life and it is he that giveth life: let him be anathema.'
- Strong emphasis on divine-human unity leads to paradoxical statements.

## 4. Chalcedonian Christianity

- Formula of the Council of Chalcedon (451):
- **THEREFORE**, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the Godbearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation ...



# Chalcedonian Christianity II

- It is obvious that the statement is arranged to address both 'axes' discussed in the previous section.
- Christ is 'truly God and truly man'.
- He is 'recognised in two natures' 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'.
- It seems like the perfectly Solomonic formula.
- Yet the symmetry of the statements is treacherous.

# Chalcedonian Christianity III

- 'Divine' and 'human' are not equivalent terms.
- Infinite - finite
- eternal - temporal
- omnipotent - weak
- immortal - mortal
- It seems inevitable that any attempt to bring those two together will tend to privilege the divine.
- In fact, this seems the case already with the historical summaries of John 1, Phil. 2.

# Chalcedonian Christology IV

- Chalcedon more a statement of the problem than a solution.
- Demands full humanity and full divinity – doesn't say how this can work.
- Demands full unity of person as well as full distinctiveness as natures – doesn't say how this is possible.
- Has often been seen as compromise of 'Alexandrian' and 'Antiochene' but in reality tilted balance towards Cyril.

## 5. The hypostatic union

- How can the unity of divine and human be thought?
- In the controversies after 451, the predominant Chalcedonian solution was this:
- The one hypostasis (person) of Christ is his *divine* person.
- While he is fully human, he is no human person because his humanity only exists 'within' his divine hypostasis.
- Humanity is, as a medieval author calls it, a kind of accident added to Christ's divinity.

# The hypostatic union II

- Eventual solution to Christology thus strongly centred on his divinity.
- Christ's true self is his divine being.
- His humanity is merely a phase in the eternal 'story' of God.
- This has more recently often been criticized – for entirely understandable reasons.
- Yet it is important to see that it merely extends fundamental decisions made much earlier.

# The hypostatic union III

- The Chalcedonian language of divine and human nature is *in reality* tilted towards his divinity.
- Generally, Chalcedon doesn't represent a 'compromise' between Cyril and Nestorius.
- Nestorius remains condemned. Other 'Antiochene' theologians are additionally condemned in the sixth century.
- Nicene Creed integrates human Jesus into 'divine' story.
- Ultimately, the 'historical summaries' in the NT (John 1, Phil. 2) show the same integration.

## 6. Summary/Open Questions

- Christology maintained Jesus' full humanity as well as divinity.
- Yet in order to explain how he is still *one* person, the divinity took centre stage.
- Blueprint for later Christologies are to be found in 'historical' summaries in NT: Christ, existing in eternity, descended into the world and lived among us etc.
- Can his humanity be fully explained in this scheme?
- Is it faithful to the full biblical witness?

# Summary/Open questions

- These problems will determine more recent approaches.
- Yet the same theologians who sometimes are very critical of the tradition also depend on it and continue its exploration.
- The language of Chalcedon and its further development have remained uniquely influential despite deep-seated problems that have increasingly become apparent.
- No modern theologian can be understood without taking this background into account.