



THE DOUBLE-SIDED LEGACY OF JOHN OF DAMASCUS

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Abstract:

The reputation of John of Damascus in Western Christianity as the “last of the church fathers” and the champion of Chalcedonian orthodoxy against monophysitism is based in part upon John’s repeated invocation of the Western Papal Tome of Leo in his great summation/synthesis of the Eastern Christian theological tradition, *On the Orthodox Faith*. Yet the text bequeaths to the West conundrums as well, for example, regarding the Eucharistic theology of the presence of Christ or the correlative question whether John’s deified humanity in Christ remains authentically human. On examination one finds a peculiar, semi-Nestorian “doubling” of the divine person and its human nature in John’s theandric Christ which, in Lutheran perspective, effectively eclipses the drama of the gospel narrative by regarding the personal communication of attributes in Christ as a way of talking only, not a way of being. John’s defense of Chalcedon against monophysitism thus betrays faults within that definition, begging not for Chalcedon’s abandonment but for its repair (B. McCormack). In a Trinitarian Christology incorporating John’s concern for the humanity of Christ but unhampered by metaphysical simplicity, there would be no competition between the personal union of the divine Son in taking on body and soul and the Holy Spirit anointing this assumed flesh to create of it the new Adam. And salvation in Christ would be the Christification of dying to sin to arise by faith in newness of life and in this way receiving the gift of eternal life: the reconciliation of persons in beloved community, not the generic deification of finite nature.

Key words:

John of Damascus, Chalcedon, monophysitism, the hypostatic union, communication of idioms, incarnation, Trinitarian Christology, Robert Jenson, Bruce McCormack, Richard Cross

Re-Reading John

When Dr. Pavel-Andrei Prihracki invited me to contribute to *Testimonia Theologica*, the invitation brought me back to the time in the 1990s when I was a visiting professor of systematic theology at EBF UK. In 1999 I left behind a book of lectures in Slovak on the theology of the Nicene Creed which became the basis for my 2010 book *Divine Complexity*.¹ In those lectures on the theology of the Nicene Creed I was trying to fill what I perceived to be a significant gap in the knowledge of the theological students. It seemed to me that, as is

¹ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Fortress, 2010).

depicted on the mural in the little church in Bratislava, Christianity was thought to run from the light of Christ through a brief stop in Augustine and thence on to the Reformation – in between, little but darkness! There was no way in this depiction of Christian history to understand the creedal faith in the Trinity and the person of Christ to which the Lutheran Confession actually subscribes. So I undertook serious study of the church fathers, particularly the Eastern Greek tradition where the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ were consolidated. All this work in patristics from those years in Bratislava flooded back into my mind as I considered the invitation from Dr. Prihracki.

Coincidentally, when his invitation arrived, I had been working on the famous “last of the church fathers,” John of Damascus (674–749), Syrian born, speaking both Greek and Arabic, an administrator in the Muslim court in Damascus until he emigrated to Jerusalem and lived his life out as a scholarly monk. I had read John when I worked at EBF UK. But I was surprised re-reading John that his theological magnum opus, *On the Orthodox Faith*,² didn’t correspond much to my memory of reading of him 25 years ago.

What I remembered from 25 years ago was that in Christology John defended the true humanity of the incarnate Son against an extreme version of Cyril’s Alexandrian Christology in which the humanity is dissolved like a drop into the ocean into the divinity, so-called *monophysitism* or better, *miaphysitism*, *theosis* on steroids, so to speak. The *miaphysites* maintained that the person of Christ is not in two natures but out of two natures. Against them, John defended the decree of the Council of Chalcedon acknowledging two “natures” abiding in Christ “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation... combining in one Person and hypostasis –not divided or separated into two Persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God...”³

But I didn’t remember precisely why affirmation of the abiding humanity of Christ was so important to John – namely, as a way of avoiding predication of ignominy and suffering to the divine Son. “It is impossible that uncreated and created nature [in Christ] should have a single nature, power, or activity. If we were to say that Christ’s activity is simply one, we would be attributing to the divinity of the Word the passions of the intelligent soul, by which I mean fear and sorrow and anguish.” By the same token, the will of the divine Son would no longer

² St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, Introduction, Translation, and Notes by Norman Russell (Yonkers NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2022). All citations from this excellent edition, with Greek text and English translation on facing pages, with page number(s) in parentheses following.

³ *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, 373.

be the same “activity as the Father nor would he be of the same essence” (p.201). That need to separate divinity from humanity in Christ explains John’s repeated invocation of the Western *Tome of Leo* to insist upon the humanity of the one incarnate Son – *as a buffer* between the divine nature and the incarnate experience of shame, grief, pain and the terror of death. *The Tome of Leo* plays this theme of separation of the natures in John’s Christology, however, where one might have expected the personal communication of attributes by the “one and the same Son” to play a different tune of the dialectical unity of the natures in the person of Christ. We would not then say that Christ’s activity is “simply one,” but rather that it is *complexly* one. But John quotes Leo in order to separate: “One shines with miracles, while the other has succumbed to outrages” (p.169). This reliance upon Leo, moreover, is what made John’s summation of the Eastern Orthodox tradition amenable to Western appropriation, as it was translated into Latin early on and was influential especially on Thomas Aquinas.

If the real suffering of Jesus is not truly assumed by the divine Son, how can suffering humanity be found in reality, grasped, saved? The rule of salvation in Christ is surely that “what is not assumed is not healed!” Gregory Nazianzus had formulated this rule against Apollinarius who denied a rational soul to the person of Christ – for the same reason of separating the divine Logos from Jesus’ human anguish. But “surely he has borne our sorrows!” Gregory Nazianzus’s rule would imply that the divine Son makes the human soul in Jesus his very own, thus “attributing to the divinity of the Word the passions of the intelligent soul, fear and sorrow and anguish” – the very thing John wants to deny!

Yet I also remembered that John introduced a *Trinitarian* notion of *perichoresis*, interpenetration or coinherence, “previously only used in Christological contexts” to speak of the personal communication of attributes of the two natures, now applied to the three divine persons. He did this “by deepening the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the Spirit’s hypostatic character and clarifying its relations with the Father and the Son.”⁴ This idea a *Trinitarian* notion of *perichoresis* arises with the recognition of the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit at Constantinople in 381 which in turn raised the question of the Spirit’s role in the divine life together with the Father and the Son. “John introduces the term “*perichoresis*” (“coinherence”) [in section four of *The Orthodox Faith*] for the first time and develops the

⁴ Norman Russell, “Introduction,” St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox faith*, 35.

concept of the nature of the divine unity.”⁵ Daniel J. Janosik paraphrases the term as “circle dance,” a model which describes the otherwise inconceivable “nature” of God as the circulation by which the Spirit communicates the Father’s love to the Son and so causes the Son to return the glory to the Father.

“This concept of the Spirit abiding on the Son and the Son in the Spirit as the Father is in the Son gives us a richer description of the perichoretic relationship. The mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son is extended so as to include the Holy Spirit in the same coinherence with the other hypostases [...] There is a unity in the community that has no beginning and no end, just like a circle, in the “circle dance” of the one God who is there.”⁶

The divine life is an eternal circulation of love and in this we are to conceive the *dynamic unity* of the triune God.

This notion of “being as communion” told a tale, namely, that the antecedent philosophical idea of generic being as a super quality undergirding persistence in time was theologically transformed by the gospel of Christ into expressing as concrete reality the one God who lives eternally in the fellowship in love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This doctrine of John of Damascus excited the theological world in 1985 with the publication of John Zizioulas’s book *Being as Communion*.⁷ But since then a groundswell of reaction has arisen against his thesis, arguing for the persistence in the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity of a countervailing doctrine of metaphysical simplicity going back to Origen of Alexandria.⁸ And the truth is, as we shall see, that we find both in John of Damascus. His legacy is double-sided.

As mentioned, John brought forth the notion of perichoresis from previous discussion of the relation of the two natures in the one person of Christ. In John’s thinking, as we shall see, Trinitarian perichoresis could be seen to fund the Christological doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* (so important for Luther!)⁹. But I didn’t remember how strictly this circulation of divine attributes in Christ was a one-way street for John, divinizing the humanity but denying a reciprocal communication from the humanity to the divinity. “The

⁵ Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2016), 180.

⁶ Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims*, 186.

⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Paul R. Hinlicky, „Luther and the “Repair of Chalcedon,” *Dialog* no. 63. 1-2 (April 2024).

interpenetration did not originate from the flesh but from the divinity. For it is impossible that the flesh should pass reciprocally into the divinity. Rather, once the divine nature had passed reciprocally into the flesh, it also endowed the flesh with an ineffable interpenetration, which indeed we call the union" (p. 269). So the personal or "*hypostatic*" union according to John is the one-way deification of the human nature through its adoption by the divine Son. We shall see how this deification of the humanity is very important for John's understanding of salvation in Christ, even though it could in turn provoke an accusation of docetism which fault he otherwise charged to the miaphysites: against John's intention, a deified humanity only appears to be human!

I remembered that John defended the veneration of icons against the iconoclasts. Janosik indicates that the Byzantine Imperial prohibition of icons was an act of repentance in response to the rise of Islam, which the Byzantines viewed as the judgment of God upon the idolatrous worship of images.¹⁰ Since the humanity in Christ was real and enduring,¹¹ John countered, it can be depicted and otherwise represented so that through veneration of such earthly representations, the divine is worshiped. Certainly, in the new social reality of the Christian community surrounded by triumphant Islam, defense of the veneration of images, also in defiance of the Byzantine Emperor, was a bold and courageous statement of Christian particularity.

Granting that, one still has to ask: does such a justification of images turn the earthly representation into nothing more than a transitory lens through which to perceive the transcendent, expressly denying that the icon is the thing itself? On what grounds, then, would one discriminate between various representations/icons? Without a criterion, could this rationale not represent a reversion to polytheism in which each one finds a lens/icon to perceive the divine? That at its best would be the worry of the iconoclasts. Trouble thus threatens especially if this rationale is taken Christologically. The man Jesus Christ is the icon of God, as the New Testament affirms. But in John's thinking, would even his deified humanity be only a means through which to apprehend resplendent deity? Is the humanity a ladder on which one climbs to the rooftop of divinity, only to be kicked away? Or are we rather to see the specific divinity of the divine Son as the particular humanity who is Jesus? Maybe, then, a complaint of docetism against John *the Chalcedonian*, even he who *rejected*

¹⁰ Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims*, 191.

¹¹ Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims*, 191.

miaphysite Christology, carries weight. With Philippians 2, the obedience of the heavenly Son of God takes place on this earth as the very human consent of Jesus to his Father's will that he drink the bitter cup. With Luther we see the resplendent deity of the Son as this man, not through him.

Correlatively, I remembered that John was a first-hand witness to the initial encounter of Christianity with Islam. On one level the encounter was framed by his defense of icons, transferred now to defense against Islamic iconoclasm. But on a deeper level, John saw that Islamic *tawid* had to attack as idolatrous *shirk* the Christian "association" of the divine Word and Spirit with the Nicene "being" of the transcendent deity of the Father, i.e., Trinitarian monotheism. For Islam, by contrast, the heavenly word and spirit which attended prophet Jesus are not God but creatures of God. John interpreted Islam, not ineptly but certainly from his orthodox Christian perspective, as an outbreak of the Arian heresy and thus as a *Christian* deviation. He historically and critically attacked the Qu'ran (yet he did not apply the same kind of criticism to Christianity's Scriptures). Just so, however, a subtle but necessary question arises. Can we discern in John's *metaphysical* defense of the triune God as a communion of love an unwitting concession to Islamic notions of absolute deity? In any case, John's pioneering Christian interpretation of Islam bequeaths to us still today a profound dilemma theologically: are we to take Islam as it understands itself to be the final revelation and seal of the prophets or must we regard Islam with John as a Christian heresy?

For all these reasons, study of John of Damascus is important because the problems within Christian doctrine that he represents are problems carried over to Western theology which still perplex us. At the root of this problematic legacy is the doctrine of divine simplicity. This doctrine is about the nature of monotheism, theologically about divine unity. But it is ambiguous. It can be taken as a *grammatical* rule for the proper speaking about God in Christianity, for example, so speak of God as the *one and only* creator of all that is not God, *the One*. Such a rule is clearly derived from Scripture and in fact encapsulates the first table of the Decalogue. But divine simplicity also can be taken as a metaphysical insight into the being of God derived by the way of negation of all creaturely imperfections to arrive at the notion of a perfect being. Perfect being would then be understood as utterly simple, i.e. timelessly, spacelessly self-identical oneness, not subjected to historical vicissitudes nor composed of parts which could come apart under duress and decompose. The attraction is evident, for metaphysical simplicity seems to secure a worthy notion of divine transcendence

as pure oneness. On the other hand, this metaphysical understanding of transcendence is in some tension with Scripture's narrative representations of *the One* truly God as he who freely initiates a creation and commits himself to its redemption and fulfillment in the missions of his Son and of his Spirit.

I was surprised above all in my recent re-reading of John at how important a role divine simplicity plays in his theology. His understanding of simplicity oscillates back and forth between the two senses, but arguably, under the influence of Dionysius the Areopagite, the metaphysical sense of divine *oneness* predominates. And this has problematic implications for the Damascene's doctrine of the person and work of Christ and accounts for his peculiar double mindedness in it, as I shall presently show.

Divine Simplicity

We find a biblical starting point but accompanied by a philosophical inference at the very beginning of John's work:

"All beings are either created or uncreated. If they are created, they are necessarily subject to change, for since their beginning has its origin in change, they will necessarily be subject to change, altered either by decay or by deliberate choice. But if they are uncreated, it follows logically that they are also necessarily unchangeable, for if their being is the contrary, then their mode of being, or properties, will also be contrary" (p.63).

The inference that the beings of creature and creator are logically and necessarily "contrary" derives from the natural theology of the Greek philosophical tradition, specifically the way of negation. The Divine is what finite beings are not. Creatures are composites with beginning and end. But the divine is not composite but pure oneness without beginning or end. Salvation of moral creatures from the inevitable fate of finitude accordingly would be participation in divinity, deification, *theosis*.

But why should the biblical terms, creator and creature, be defined logically as contraries? Couldn't they also be understood as complementary? After all, you can't have a creator without a creature nor a creature without a creator. One could thus draw quite a different inference from Scripture's rule to speak of God as the One, sole creator of all that is not God, namely, that creator and creature are correlative terms characterized by natural dispositions of desire for each other. The creator creates out of superabundant love and the creature's true good is to acknowledge this love in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. This would mean, then, that fulfillment of creation and its redemption from the destructive forces

of sin and death would require a healing reunion, taken as moral reconciliation, of creator and the estranged creature. This reconciliation too would culminate in the gift of eternal life, yet specifically as the fulfilled union with Christ by the Spirit to the glory of God the Father, world without end. Eternal life would be *Christification*, not generic deification.

More subtly and problematically, however, John employs the category of “nature” (= Greek *physis* or *ousia*) as a common category under which to conceptualize the “contrary” beings of creator and creature. It doesn’t occur to John that, strictly speaking, an idea of humanity, human “nature” in the abstract, is just as immune from decay as is an idea of divine nature. Ideas are timelessly self-same, as Plato taught. They abide unchanging, more real than the entities they classify. Setting aside for present purposes the problem of the historicity of such tacitly normative concepts of “nature” (“essentialism”), timeless ideas may be thought to be the really real, the “substance” (Latin: *substantia*, the literal translation of the Greek *hypostasis*) that underlies as support of (Latin: *supposit*) phenomenal appearances. John knows this is wrong in Christology; he identifies the error of Nestorius as thinking of the one born of the Virgin Mary as a “human borne by God” instead of “God incarnate” (p.191).¹²

It is only concrete individual creatures that are mortal; it is only individuals divine in nature that are creators of creaturely life. The employment of a master category of “nature” thus creates a conceptual illusion that one has acquired with it a point of comparison with which to grasp and define the being of creator and creature over against each other as the *contrary natures* of perfect and imperfect being respectively. Even though John knows that “nature” is a “pure concept” which usually serves to grasp by way of observation what is common to all the individual members of a set (p.185), he is inclined to treat these pure concepts platonically, not as a pragmatically useful mental acts of classification, but as if the “nature,” so discovered, i.e. the Platonic idea or Aristotelian form, is the really real.

Unfortunately, under the evident influence of Dionysius the Areopagite, his own acknowledgment of the purely conceptual status of “natures” does not lead John to the suspicion that climbing to a metaphysical notion of divine simplicity by way of negating imperfections of creaturely being amounts to the reification of a mere idea, vacuous to boot: divine nature as the quintessence of negative qualities of the alpha-privatives like

¹² But such *metaphysical* misunderstanding of the sense of hypostasis, i.e., *person* in Trinitarian theology, was carried over by the medieval Latin term *suppositum* into scholastic theology, bringing with it the Nestorian tendency of the *Tome of Leo*.

immutability, impassibility, intangibility, etc. This leads inevitably, however, to an utterly empty theological conclusion: the purely negative statement that the being of God is “beyond being,” “hyper-natural,” “no thing,” *nothing*. Yet this No-thing is supposedly the really real in God. It stands behind the revealed Trinity as a dark aura and qualifies into insignificance all the scriptural statements about the God of the gospel at work in human history. These become mere symbolizations pointing to an unknowable Oneness, God beyond God. (As we shall see, a parallel difficulty arises with the notion of a perfect human “nature” in Christ).

What’s the problem here? The creator creates. Is this not a *beginning*, not only of the created, but also for the creator? If that is so, something other than sheer perfection as immutable oneness *must logically* be the basis for an act of creation which is *free initiative*, not necessary, and *generous*, not needy or greedy, but rather giving existence to all that is not creator God purely as a gift from out of immanent divine superabundance. That superabundance to fund creation should be understood as the eternal life of circulating love which is the Father of the Son on whom he breathes the Holy Spirit so that in the Spirit the Son returns glory to the Father. It is this eternal Trinity as the perfect life of circulating love who at great cost creates with a view to the redemption and fulfillment of the creation. That could have and should have been the resource for John, since he knows the doctrine of the Trinity very well.

The alternative historically was Neoplatonism. Here the nature of deity is defined by the timeless *metaphysical* binary of absolute/infinite vs. relative/finite, so that the divine is logically and necessarily bound to being the immutable *esse seipsum* that grounds the mutable within one conceptual system, the oneness that grounds plurality, the first cause of all causes, the highest good that lends value to all lesser goods. If that is so, however, it is this cosmic divine-world relationship which is eternal. It is difficult to avoid the inference that the “creator” creates *necessarily*, by nature in a series of derivative emanations constituting a great chain of being giving form to chaotic but equally eternal matter. It is this God-world relation that is eternal rather than the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These two are incompatible interpretations of divine transcendence.

We witness, consequently, the peculiar double mindedness in John under the influence of Dionysius’ Neoplatonism: on the one hand wanting to uphold the Trinity and the incarnation with the relational ontology expressed by the notion of *perichoresis* but, on the

other hand, maintaining as equally important a doctrine of metaphysical simplicity.¹³ This transpires with little apparent awareness of the profound tension between these two accounts of divine unity, what it is that makes the one God one. Is “God” (= Hebrew *elohim*; Greek *ho theos*) a noun or an adjective? Is God the *one* or the *oneness*? A title for the numerical one who is truly God as creator of all that is not God? Or is God “the divine,” a qualitative oneness *esse seipsum*, the first cause of causes, the highest good ordering the multitude of lesser goods, etc.? Is God *numerically* one as the eternal and inseparably circulating love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Or is God qualitatively *oneness* because all three members of the divine species share the same metaphysical nature as determined by the natural theology of ascent to the idea of the perfect being by the way of negation?

Perhaps the context of Islam all around John presses him constantly to reiterate the principle of divine simplicity as a defense against the attack on Trinitarianism as tritheism. But John actually sources his constant invocation of divine simplicity in the Fathers before him going back to Origen of Alexandria who first employed divine simplicity to explain how the eternal generation of the Son from the Father is ineffable because it is timelessly immutable, natural oneness, not like the temporal generation of composite corporeal creatures. The attraction of this doctrine is endemic within Christian tradition and the rise of Islam only brings its allure to a head. But recognition of the problems involved forces us today to reject metaphysical simplicity in favor of a grammatical rule version of the doctrine.¹⁴ This becomes most evident in analysis of John’s Christology.

Christology

How does the strong version of divine simplicity influence John’s Christology? The Trinitarian concept of perichoresis provides the distinctively Christian account of the divine unity of being. The high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 is the biblical seat of the doctrine, reflecting the Johannine relational ontology of God as spirit (i.e., freedom) and love. Trinitarian perichoresis developed historically from recognition of the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit as the mediator of divine love. But John had inherited the notion of perichoresis from

¹³ We find in John typically two accounts of divine unity laid out side-by-side but unintegrated: “For although each [person]subsists in itself, that is to say, is a complete hypostasis, and possesses its own distinctive character or different mode of existence, they are nevertheless [**both 1**)] *united in essence and natural properties* **and** [**2**)] by the fact of *not being separated or departing from the Father’s hypostasis*, and are one God both in reality and name” (p.173).

¹⁴ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

previous discussion of relationship between the two natures of Christ and as he turned his attention to the person and work of Christ for salvation he redeployed perichoresis to save the doctrine of salvation. He worried about the dissolution of human nature he detected in the Monophysite doctrine of deification: a drop dissolved in the ocean of infinity. At the same time, he tried to thread the needle with a version of the doctrine of deification that preserves human nature in its integrity. Here again, however, we find John to be torn between two lovers.

We can approach the problems here by noticing how the seeds were sown by John's double mindedness for the eventual standoff between Lutheran and Calvinist Christology. The Lutheran *genus majesticum* is perfectly expressed.

"For the flesh came to participate in what pertains to the divinity, not the divinity in the passions of the flesh. For the divinity operates through the flesh as fire does through the wood; it is not that flesh operates through the Word. The Word therefore did not suffer as incarnate, but brought about the incarnation by imparting to the flesh or sharing in its hypostasis and deification. By deification I do not mean a change [of the flesh] into the nature of divinity; I mean [its] participation in the glorious attributes of the divinity. For it endows with life not by virtue of its own nature, but by its union with the divinity." (p. 179)¹⁵

Yet practically on the same page one also finds the *extra-Calvinisticum* perfectly expressed. "Although we say that the Lord's natures interpenetrate each other, we know that the interpenetration comes from the divine nature. For this nature permeates all things, just as it wills, but it is itself permeated by nothing. And it communicates its own splendors to the flesh, remaining itself dispassionate and without a share in the passions of the flesh" (p. 180), i.e., not localized, let alone confined to the finite body of the man Jesus. "For God the Word was not united to flesh that already existed in itself, but came to dwell in the womb of the Holy Virgin *without being circumscribed* in his own hypostasis ... (p.164–165, emphasis added). Perfect oneness of divine nature cannot be fully expressed in the composite being of a finite human creature, not even the perfect human who is God incarnate.

But how then *in either case* can the hypostatic union be called a *coinherence* as the notion of *perichoresis* suggests? It was this rather obvious question that led the second generation Lutheran theologian Johannes Brenz to his radical innovation of a two-way communication of idioms – even though at the price too high of replacing the *personal*

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communication of attributes with an impersonal metaphysical operation on the way, historically, to Hegel's immanentized dialectical idealism.

More broadly, we witness the long shadow of Platonic metaphysics at work in John's hermeneutics. John's frequent invocation of Dionysius the Areopagite, as mentioned, is the impetus for this hermeneutical framing: "Because we find that in the divine Scripture most things about God are stated symbolically in a rather corporeal manner, one needs to know that since we are human beings and are wrapped in this solid morsel of flesh, it is impossible for us to conceptualize or to speak of the divine, exalted, and immaterial energies of the Godhead unless we use images, types, and symbols that are familiar to us. Thus whatever is said of God in a rather corporeal manner is said symbolically and has a higher meaning. For the divine is simple and without form" (p.85).

Such is the reasoning, straight from John, that Zwingli and Oecolampadius employed in their Eucharistic quarrel with Luther. *Hoc significat corpus meum*. But yet again, John's double mindedness appears, now funding Luther's Eucharistic doctrine! "The bread and the wine are not a symbol of the body and blood of Christ – God forbid! – But the actual deified body of the Lord, since the Lord himself said: "This is my body," not a symbol of my body..... Let us approach it with burning desire and with our hands folded in the form of a cross let us receive the body of the crucified... So that the fire of the desire within us might perceive the heat of the coal and burn up our sins and illuminate our hearts and so that by partaking of the divine fire we might be set on fire and deified" (p.251). "It is the body and blood of Christ that enters into us for the nourishment of our soul and body. It is not consumed or corrupted, it does not pass out into the sewer – God forbid! – but into our substance for preservation, a defense against all kinds of harm, purification from moral filth... Cleansed by it we are united to the body of the Lord and to his Spirit and become Christ's body" (p.252). *Hoc est corpus meum*.

So what are we to make of this apparent double mindedness which has such weighty implications for the future of Christian theology? It is deeply rooted: the suffering of the divine Son as also the majesty of the man are *not* ways of being, but *ways of speaking*. Zwingli's *alleosis* can in fact (as Richard Cross has shown¹⁶) trace itself back to John's

¹⁶ Richard Cross, *Communicatio Idiomatum: Reformation Christological Debates*. (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

interpretation of Chalcedon's doctrine of the communication of attributes as a matter of verbal transference. The "theandric" activity of the Incarnate One, John says, means that "his human activity was divine, that is to say, was deified and was not without a share in his divine activity, and his divine activity was not without a share in his human activity, but each is *contemplated* along with the other. This *figure of speech* is called "paraphrasis," when one encapsulates two things in a single word... In the same way, when we speak of a single theandric activity of Christ, we understand by this the two activities of his two natures, the divine activity of his divinity and the human activity of his humanity" (p.217, emphasis added).

The suffering of the divine Son is not a way of being, then, but a way of speaking in that the divine Son suffers strictly *according to his humanity*. The Chalcedonian *one* person of Christ means only that *we* regard together the two natures at work in the *action* of Christ and so *we* speak. A nagging question, however, arises just here: how do we speak about the *passion* of Christ? What do we say when there is no action/agency evident but only the single but monstrous appearance of profound suffering which leaves us speechless?

On account of this "paraphrasis" trope, in any case, John's double mindedness is deeply rooted in the Leonine understanding of Chalcedon, reinforced with Platonism's doctrine of divine simplicity, so influential in the West via Augustine. It is important to be precise here with the critique, for there is much of abiding value in John's Christology. John expresses his basic doctrine this way: "The enhypostatic wisdom and power of the most high God overshadowed [Mary], the Son of God who was consubstantial with the Father, like a divine sowing, and from her chaste and most pure blood formed for himself flesh ensouled with a rational and intelligent soul, the first fruit of our human substance, not from semen but by a creative act through the Holy Spirit, the form not being completed by small increments but perfected in a single operation. The Word of God himself is reckoned the hypostasis with regard to the flesh, for God the Word was not united to flesh that already existed in itself, but came to dwell in the womb of the Holy Virgin without being circumscribed in his own hypostasis, and gave substance to flesh from the chaste blood of the Virgin, flesh that was ensouled with a rational and intelligent soul, and, assuming what is representative of the human substance, the Word himself became the hypostasis with regard to the flesh... God inhominated" (p.164–165).

The incarnation is here described as the eternal Son's assumption, by the work of the Spirit, of the whole human "substance," body and soul. This means that the human nature in

Christ has no hypostasis of its own but exists as God inhuman. An unformed human nature is hypostatized, made a concrete individual, by incorporation into the divine hypostasis, whose unique human individuality is thus to be the eternal Son of God. There is abiding value in this understanding of the Incarnate One because it accurately reflects the New Testament utter lack of interest in the psychological processes of Jesus, his “personality,” depicting him solely as a mysterious public character, the Spirit-endowed man on a mission, about his Father’s business, faithful to death on a cross. As he is “God inhuman,” the faithful in turn commit no idolatry when they call upon the Lord Jesus Christ in prayer, praise and thanksgiving – as they would be guilty, if he were only a God-assisted human being. Far from idolatry, they glorify as true deity that which, unashamed of Mary’s womb, out of love humbly comes so deeply into the human flesh as to his own precious creature.

Granting that, however, problems appear with John’s assumptions about the perfect human nature of Christ (which, to complicate the matter, also belongs *metaphysically* and by nature in the class of *imperfect* beings, who even being deified, remain finite). As we have seen, for John Christ’s human nature has been deified from inception by its enhypostatization in the Logos. Nevertheless, the duality of natures, understood according to metaphysical simplicity has here two implications. First, the will of the divine person of the Son is by nature one and the same will with the other two divine hypostases on account of oneness of being. Strictly speaking, such oneness eclipses any personal difference in will between the Son and the Father, which difference would minimally consist in the Son’s voluntary assumption of human nature as a free act of loving will, making this particular member of the class of humans who is

Jesus *his very own* in distinction from the *heavenly* Father’s abiding transcendence.¹⁷ Second, because for John the Son’s naturally divine will is metaphysically identical to the Father’s and the Spirit’s, it must be separated from the assumed humanity’s natural will. These two wills manifest in the two distinct activities of Christ in Leonine, if not Nestorian

¹⁷ John is forced by divine simplicity to deny free choice to God: “We attribute actual willing [i.e., natural purposiveness] to him but not, properly speaking free choice. God does not deliberate, for deliberation belongs to ignorance. Nobody deliberates about what is known. If counsel belongs to ignorance, so necessarily does free choice. Since God knows all things absolutely, he does not deliberate. Nor do we speak of counsel or free choice in the case of the Lord’s soul” (p. 146). God wills what God wills *by nature*. Lost from view here is a modal analysis according to which of all possible worlds the one true God creates this particular world on which the cross of Jesus stands as the best since through it the world is brought *willingly* to redemption and fulfillment from its *willing* defection from its divine destiny.

sharpness. Generally, "it was characteristic of his human nature to take hold of the child's hand and draw her up, but of his divine nature to restore her to life. For the two are different even though they are inseparable from each other in the theandric activity" (p.203). Note well: the natures are inseparable in the perceived *work* rather than as the mysterious *person* of Christ; the two wills in Christ are separated in *our* perception of his activities rather than understood as unified in his relations with the Father and the Spirit. Thus specifically for John, Christ "possesses the faculty of willing naturally both as God and as a human being, and it [i.e., the human will] followed his [divine] will and was subordinate to it, not being moved by a personal opinion but always willing that which is divine will willed" (p. 213).

This unity of personal obedience in the incarnate Son's willing the Father's will in the power of the Spirit *could* be Trinitarian Christology, which only fails to ask precisely why it is the eternal Son who alone willingly undertakes the saving mission as true human and whether and how his *will* is personally distinct from the Father's will. But John does not ask that question as it would disrupt metaphysical simplicity. The force of such simple oneness is to strip the divine Son of the personally distinct will (according to Phil. 2¹⁸) which fits him particularly for the saving work of the incarnation.

John in fact senses this difficulty, double-minded as he is. John rightly maintains that the source of all Christological errors is the failure to maintain the strong distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia/physis*. "Now what causes the heretics to fall into error is their saying that nature and hypostasis are the same thing." Consequently, he knows that "in the case of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is not possible to establish a common species," i.e. a class of Christs. The person of Jesus Christ is unique and wonderful, worshipful. "For there has not been, nor

¹⁸ In short, the pressure divine simplicity places on the Trinitarian doctrine tends to make the hypostatic differences indiscernible, transcendent, belonging to the realm of the ineffable and as such no longer serviceable on the earth to articulate the gospel drama of Jesus and his relationships to the God of Israel and their Spirit. When you verify the idea of what is common to the individuals of a species, you get immaterial form or substance or essence which then by definition is incapable of relation just because it is not a personal agent but a quality converted into an abstract noun. What you get is "the divine" in which individuals may participate in varying degrees. This thinking forces John to deny that the second person of the Trinity is by nature servant rather than to apprehend that as personally Son he is fittingly "servant." But by nature for John he is essentially the same Lord as the Father. Servanthood, he says, is a relative term befitting human nature's relationship to Lordship, not befitting divine nature. "Since Christ is one, he cannot be his own servant, being, as he is, Lord. For these terms do not belong to things that are predicated simply but refer to relationship with something else. Whose servant would the Son be then? The Father's? But then not everything that the Father has would also belong to the Son if he were indeed the Father's servant but not in any way his own" (p. 219–20). But this reasoning erases the testimony of Philippians 2, not to mention Mark 10 as if divine sonship were not the ontological basis of the Son's incarnation and saving service. What is required is a relational ontology in place of metaphysical simplicity.

will there ever be, another Christ out of divinity and humanity, the same being perfect God and perfect man in divinity and humanity" (p.167). True enough, indeed, crucial for salvation in Christ. The incarnate Son thusly "participates in our poor and weak nature that he might cleanse us and make us incorrupt and render us once again partakers of his own divinity" (p. 248). The question, however, arises whether this soteriologically essential affirmation of a saving exchange of properties is only a way of speaking for John, not Christ's truly historical way of being.

In other words, how can a perfect human nature, now deified, "participate in our poor and weak nature?" What goes unexamined in John are certain assumptions about "perfect human nature" (corresponding to his notion about "perfect divine nature" as simplicity) which presuppose the rationalism of Greek philosophical anthropology. What constitutes perfect humanity for John is *reason* which, he says, is the image of God. Consequently, it is *mind* which is the mediating reality between the creator and creature in the incarnation. "The Word of God, then, is united to flesh by means of mind, which mediates between the purity of God and the materiality of flesh. For the principal element governing both soul and flesh is mind, the purest part of the soul, but God is also the principal element governing mind" (p.175). "The mind became the seat of the divinity united hypostatically with it, just as the flesh obviously did too..." (p.175).

What could be problem with this, when obviously human consciousness is the field of battle in the divine struggle for the hearts and minds of lost humanity? The anthropological rationalism tends to eclipse the social nature of humanity made in the image of God and to internalize faith as a private mental act of assent to revealed propositions rather than a public confession which articulates the identity of the community of a new humanity.¹⁹ The human predicament, then, consists in an inadequate governance of the material body by the rational mind which may in turn be governed by God through assent to the divinely revealed propositions of "orthodoxy." This rationalistic optimism is not adequate to biblical hamartiology, according to which the rational mind is in a perpetual state of denial concerning its own sinful pride – even in the guise of "orthodoxy." In other words, what needs to be mastered is not the gross materiality of the flesh and its passions nor wayward thoughts but the sinful mentality of perverted forms of sociality usurping the reign of God on this good

¹⁹ Paul R. Hinlicky, "Faith," (2022) *St Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*. Available online [December 11, 2024]: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Faith>

earth. Christological salvation consists in having in us "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2) who made society with sinners. What price do we pay theologically for John's Platonizing defense of the perfect integrity of human nature in the incarnation, an ever finite body ruled by ever finite rational soul, ruled by putatively orthodox doctrine?

Focusing now on John's theological anthropology, this persistent duality of perfect natures requires John to interpret passages concerning Christ's ignorance, weariness, or terror as pretense, the theandric Christ pretending to suffer in the mask of his humanity. Commenting on Scripture's depictions Christ's ignorance and practice of prayer, John writes: "He had no need of these and similar things either as God *or as a human being*. He was only making a show of behaving in a human way, in accordance with what was demanded by necessity or profit, such as when he prayed in order to show that he was not a rival God but to honor the Father as his cause. He asked not because he was ignorant but in order to show that he was truly a human being as well as God" (pp. 270-1). The deified humanity *too*, then, the perfect human nature hypostasized in the divine Son, only *pretended* to participate in "our poor and weak nature." Nowhere does this baneful implication of John's Christology more dramatically appear than in his treatment of the Cry of Dereliction.

"And when the flesh suffered, the divinity was united with it, but remained dispassionate and rendered the sufferings salvific, and when the divinity of the Word was operating the holy mind was united with that, apprehending spiritually and knowing what was being affected" (p.205). So the cry of dereliction was, as Thomas Aquinas would later put it, *in persona nostra*: "Nor was he forsaken by his own divinity. On the contrary, it was we who were forsaken and abandoned. And so it was through appropriating our human character that he prayed in this way" (p.224). The divine Christ suffered *figuratively*, not according to his divine nature, but according to his assumed (but deified!) humanity which in this dire moment *also* suffered figuratively, tranquilly associating with *our forsakenness*. The undeniably real suffering of Christ is attributed to the humanity since attribution of suffering to the deity would violate divine impassibility. But the human suffering is in turn properly attributed by the deified humanity *to us*, since the rational soul of Jesus, united to the divine Son, remained unperturbed in this pseudo-solidarity. So divine suffering is a double figure of speech: Christ suffered according to *our* humanity, neither his own humanity nor divinity, but ours. Only by the fiction of a double verbal transfer can the passion be predicated of the person.

Consider how remarkably pronounced the doubling becomes here concerning the Cry of Dereliction: "For when [in Gethsemane] he begged to be spared death, he did so naturally, his divine will having willed and conceded it, and he suffered anguish and fear. And when his divine will willed that his human will should choose death, the suffering was voluntarily accepted by it. For it was not only as God that he voluntarily surrendered himself to death, but also as a human being.... As a human being, of course, he wish to avoid the cup – these were the words of natural fear. "Yet let not my will be done" – which is to say, *in so far as I am of a different substance* – "but yours" – which is to say *mine* and *yours in so far as I am of the same substance as you*" (p.214). And so the human soul "received the courage to face death" – Jesus thus represented as a veritable Stoic!

Soteriology

The model of Jesus' human impassivity in the face of torture derives from the theology of the early Christian martyrs, as may be seen already in the Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus before Pilate. By the time of John of Damascus, however, long after the Constantinian establishment and the cessation of imperial persecution, this martyriological model of human impassivity – steely courage in the face of death threats – had evolved into the doctrine of the *theosis* of human nature as we have just reviewed. The same doubling which we witness in John's Christology, consequently, will play out also in his account of salvation in Christ. But it would be an over-simplification to blame the problems we have been identifying on the influence of Platonism alone. A source of this doubling is also to be found in New Testament Scripture itself. While Mark and Matthew graphically depict the Cry of Dereliction, Luke and John quite deliberately omit the episode and instead depict Jesus in his death as fully in command of the situation, humanly impassible before torture and death. Theologically, a more significant statement of doubling may be found in two soteriological affirmations of the apostle Paul: "He who was rich for our sakes became poor" for the incarnation and "He who knew no sin was made to be sin" for the atonement. The problems we have been identifying are thus endemic to Christian theology.

What unifies the person of Christ in his saving work? John treats the saving Christological exchanges in the order of person and work. The first and natural appropriation of the personal union is that "by which the Lord out of his love for humanity assumed our nature" i.e. abstractly perfect humanity in which mind is in control of body. As we have seen,

however, this appropriation is not an appropriation of our sinful humanity, nor even of our “poor and weak nature” as finite beings whose passions overrule natural rationality. Rather, an abstract human nature capable of perfection, being appropriated by the hypostasis of the divine Son, is fortified by its deification to undergo an unnecessary death to defeat death, not as our “poor and weak nature,” then, but for *our* “poor and weak nature.” The *theosis* pioneered by Jesus is now extended redemptively to believers who sanctify themselves in its power. How is it extended?

The second *personal* appropriation concerning the saving work, John says, follows from the first. It “occurs when someone takes on the character of someone else through a relationship. I mean a relationship of pity or love, and in this place says things on his behalf which do not in any way belong to him personally. It is in this sense that Christ appropriated our curse and abandonment and such things *that are not part of our nature, not because he himself was these things or became them*, but because he took our character upon himself and set himself alongside it” (p.224, emphasis added). As we have seen, Christ is not made to be sin and accursed but made *to look like* sin and curse *by association* with the weak and sinful, this proximity coming about by virtue of the human nature he had personally appropriated and perfected.

The question about this, from Luther’s perspective (as in his treatise against Latomus²⁰) will be: does Christ bear mortality, sin and curse truly or figuratively? Can mortality, sin and curse really be offloaded onto the perfect human nature and even there again further offloaded to dying sinners by virtue of mere association, thus only figuratively attributed to the divine Son by way of a double verbal transference? Does that suffice soteriologically?

From Luther’s perspective, it does not. Of course, we do find in Luther the same patristic Christus Victor motif which appears in John.²¹ John writes that according to Christ’s first and natural appropriation of finite human nature, “death therefore approached and by swallowing the bait of the body was caught by the hook of the divinity, and having tasted the sinless and life-giving body, he was destroyed through whom he had previously swallowed...

²⁰ Anna Vind, “The Use of Augustine by Latomus – and Luther,” *Luther between Present and Past: Studies in Luther and Lutheranism* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 2004).132-150; “Interpreting Luther’s Christology Questions for Richard Cross’s Book *Communicatio Idiomatum*,” *Pro Ecclesia* (Fall 2023)32/1-2: 73-84.

²¹ David Luy, *Dominus Mortis: Martin Luther on the Incorruptibility of God in Christ*. (Fortress, 2014).

destruction for the destroyer" (p. 226). *Christus Victor* – a bomb exploding in the devil's mouth! But in the second personal appropriation of divine pity associating with sinners, we may see John anticipating *Anselm of Canterbury*: Christ

"therefore died because he accepted death for our sake and offered himself as a sacrifice to the Father on our behalf. For we had offended the Father, and so it was he who had to receive the ransom for us and release us from condemnation. God forbid that the Master's blood should have been offered to the tyrant" (p. 226).

A divinized humanity innocently offers himself as a sacrifice to the offended God which merits the forgiveness of offenders and in the process baits an overreaching devil to work the death of death and hell's destruction.

Gustav Aulen's famous attempt to align Luther with the patristic Christ the Victor soteriology over against the medieval satisfaction theory articulated by Anselm fails the test here of John of Damascus, where the two motifs appear bound together. But that makes them no less unsatisfactory. In either case, the humanity of Christ is *either* the passive instrument of the monophysite Logos *or* the Nestorian agent of salvation. John's double-minded bundling came apart in the West. But what view of the saving work of Christ would emerge if we unify the person of Christ as he passes from an antecedent state of glory through a state of humiliation, and thus enriched *with us* whom he has there secured, to a surpassing state of glory?

The Damascene Legacy and the "Repair of Chalcedon"²²

20th-century Lutheran theologians have been so exasperated by the "doubling" deeply embedded in Western traditions of Christological orthodoxy, as informed by John of Damascus, that they have cut the Gordian knot. They dispense with preconceived ideas of divinity as timeless, spaceless, self-identity. Instead, they identify the human Jesus of first century Palestine *as such* as the second "identity" of the triune God, i.e., the God of the gospel. The motives for doing this drastic surgery include greater appreciation of Luther's insistence on the indivisible personhood of Christ, picking up on the neo-Chalcedonian reiteration of the "*one* Lord Jesus Christ" as that "*one* of Trinity who suffered" as this particular human. To be sure, there are other motives involved in this dramatic move, which

²² Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

basically bans from further consideration any preexistent Logos *asarkos*, and even the notion of an antecedent, so-called, “immanent” or eternal Trinity. For these theologians, the Trinity of revelation, the “economic” Trinity, *is* as such the immanent and eternal Trinity and vice versa.

Robert Jenson is representative here. He achieves this rather profound revision of the orthodox tradition by way of an eschatological ordering of eternity to time. “God” is not already all that God can be in a state of immovable perfection, the “God of the past,” functioning as the ground of being which is merely disclosed in Jesus, the divine simplicity which Jenson names the unbaptized “metaphysics of persistence.” Rather, the perfection of the God of the gospel is to become all that God purposes to be, a “metaphysics of anticipation.” The event of Jesus Christ *is* the *divine* anticipation of the eschaton, not only for us, then, but also in the life of the triune God. So the economic Trinity of revelation will prove to be the immanent and eternal Trinity when the kingdom arrives fullness and power.

But perhaps the deepest motive in such revisions of the tradition inherited from John of Damascus is the discovery of 20th century biblical scholarship that the beginning of the gospel is not the incarnation, as represented in the Virginal Conception, but the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. The deep theological significance of this is that the godforsaken death of Jesus on the cross generates a crisis and turning point in the life of the living God in relation to his wayward creation. As Jenson put it, in raising, vindicating and exalting the crucified Jesus, God decides what kind of God God will be. We can immediately see the contrast with the account of John of Damascus in which God, already being all that God can be, simply – simply! – asserts this perfect divinity in the womb of the Virgin Mary to generate perfect humanity. And we have witnessed, consequently, the convoluted exegesis of the gospel narrative about Jesus in his passion that this approach requires of John. John’s apologetics takes all the drama out of the Gospel narrative.

What for Luther is especially dramatic is the spiritual suffering of Jesus the beloved Son in obedience to his Father’s strange will that he drink the bitter cup of abandonment by God on account of his loving solidarity with sinful and perishing humanity. How will this crisis be resolved? With the Father’s recognition by the mediation of the Spirit that the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus, shrouded in the sin of the world which out of love he has borne personally, albeit in true, holy obedience to the Father -- this strangely righteous Jesus is

indeed his beloved Son. And this love for sinners is also the Father's own. "Therefore God has highly exalted him..."

Perhaps we need not go so far as Jenson does in dispensing with the immanent and eternal Trinity as the condition for the possibility of the historical event of the incarnation and with it the role of the Holy Spirit in giving human birth to the eternally begotten Son of God. After all, as we have seen, the blessed life of love of the eternal Trinity is the superabundant divine life that funds creation, inclusive of its redemption and fulfillment, as a free and generous act, indeed, one that proves costly to God. One should not give up lightly this divine freedom to love, secured by the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. The problem of doubling can in fact be resolved with a more rigorous Trinitarianism which takes the divine *Sonship* far more seriously. What is needed, then, is not the renunciation of the Chalcedonian tradition of John of Damascus but its repair, as Bruce McCormack is arguing.

He takes the divine person of the Philippians 2 hymn as the biblical "seat of the doctrine" of Christ because it articulates the *humility of the eternal Son*. Here McCormack is picking up on the tentative explorations of Karl Barth in this direction in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1.²³ McCormack's development of the single subject Philippians 2 narrative to account for the humility of the eternal Son in incarnation and obedience represents real progress. Surely in a Trinitarian Christology incorporating John's concern for the humanity of Christ *but unhampered by metaphysical simplicity*, there would be no competition between the personal union of the divine Son in taking on body and soul and the Holy Spirit anointing this assumed flesh to create of it the new Adam. And salvation in Christ would be the Christification of dying to sin to arise by faith in newness of life and in this precisely Trinitarian way receiving the gift of eternal life: the reconciliation of persons in beloved community, not the generic deification of finite nature. As McCormack sees, however, taking the figure of the Christ hymn in Philippians 2 as *a single subject* passing historically from a state of glory through humiliation to an enriched exaltation requires a principled renunciation of the Platonic axioms of impassibility and immutability – the metaphysical simplicity which has forced virtually Nestorian doctrines of *two subjects* in Christ, as we have seen in John of Damascus's double mindedness.

²³ Paul R. Hinlicky, "The Incarnation of the Eternal Son: Fitting, not Necessary," *Pro Ecclesia* (2022) 31/4: 542-558.

Orthodoxy is not a finished product. Orthodoxy is the work of the Spirit in progress.
We receive the witness of John of Damascus in order to go forward from it.

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