SJT 68(3): 351–355 (2015)
doi:10.1017/S0036930615000150
© Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd 2015

Article Review

Christopher Beeley, *The Unity of Christ*[1]

Keywords: Athanasius of Alexandria, *communicatio idiomatum*, divine suffering, divination/deification, Jesus Christ/Christology, unity of Christ.

It is always exciting to read the retelling of a familiar narrative, whether it is of the early life of Shakespeare, the political careers of Washington and Jefferson, or the story of the development of the classic Christian understanding of the person of Jesus Christ during the first seven or eight centuries of Christianity. In this last case, the reader feels liberated from the weight of inherited pieties, invited to look again at the existing documentation with fresh eyes, urged to reconceive what he imagines to be the implied agenda of the main actors, and their significance for the later history of Christian faith. Christopher Beeley's new book from Yale certainly has this effect on those trained by earlier tellings of the story of early Christology, from Newman to Harnack and Loofs, to Sellers and Grillmeier and Kelly. The heroes and villains, characteristic phrases and defining moments of heresy and orthodoxy, all take on a slightly new form in Christopher's reconstruction – a form centred on the question of how the personal and ontological *unity* of the Saviour is conceived and emphasised by key Christian authors and principal church synods from the third to the eighth centuries.

One of the great benefits of Christopher's book, I think, is the fact that it offers us a few new heroes to admire. As one reads through the narrative, for instance, it becomes clear that the real paradigm of an author who offers later tradition a vision of Christ that does justice to the Christian message is St Gregory of Nazianzus (with whom Christopher's first book was concerned) – Gregory 'the Theologian' in the parlance of the Eastern Churches; while many recent historians of Christology have found Gregory's position on the person of Christ puzzling, even anomalous, Christopher finds in the bishop's lively, impassioned rhetoric a way of emphasising the paradoxical, lived unity of Christ which goes beyond the antinomies of Greek philosophy and sees him as God in our human flesh, God suffering our human weaknesses and dying our human death. Christopher seems to take Gregory's occasional image of a 'new mixture' (*mixis*; *krāsis*) of God and the human in the incarnate Son as a kind of implicit norm for both his intentions and for the adequacy

[1] Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 408. $55.00.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930615000150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of later formulations, from Cyril of Alexandria to Leontius, Maximus and the later councils.

More interesting still, Christopher devotes a whole chapter to the christological vision of Eusebius of Caesaraea, who up to now has received little recognition as a serious theologian (much as he is respected for his historical and exegetical writings). Drawing from his apologetic works, from passages in the *History* and some of the festal orations, and especially from Eusebius' writings against Marcellus of Ancyra, Christopher offers a convincing portrait of Eusebius not simply as promoting a view of Christ as produced by the eternal Father, not himself strictly eternal, and divine in a true but participated sense, but also as a mediator and agent in the history of creation and redemption who is radically and personally one. Avoiding the pitfalls of Origen's view of Christ – as a created mind and the divine Word who are personally unified only by the extrinsic means of loving contemplation – Origen's admirer Eusebius succeeded, Christopher argues, in presenting Christ, the Son of the heavenly Father, as both a constituent member of the divine Trinity and an agent on the stage of our history. In this way, Eusebius appears as a key transmitter of Origen's early, prescient understanding of God as Trinity to the later, vibrantly unified portraits of Christ and God sketched by Gregory of Nazianzus and Cyril of Alexandria. In doing this, Christopher allows a somewhat neglected figure to appear now on the scene, deservedly in my view, as a major player.

On the other hand, Christopher's revisionist narrative has a new set of villains, as well. Chief among them, undoubtedly, is Athanasius of Alexandria, whom Christopher (like R. P. C. Hanson) sharply criticises for his lack of theological and philosophical education, his bullying tactics as bishop of the chief church of Egypt, and his overheated rhetoric. More important – and to me quite inexplicable – is the fact that Christopher repeatedly insists that Athanasius' view of Christ ends by being radically 'dualistic', in that he powerfully emphasises the otherness of God and creation, and (in Christopher's view) utterly fails to present Christ as a single agent. His Christology is 'remarkably close to the later Antiochene position of Diodore and Theodore' (p. 267), 'a Christology of graver contrasts in which the Word is all power, and human flesh can only await transformation into the Word itself. It is also a scheme in which God lacks the desire and the ability to include human brokenness into the divine being without being threatened with decomposition himself, and humanity possesses no real and lasting nature of its own' (p. 169). One could, if there were time, raise many questions about the details of Christopher's interpretation of Athanasius' work; to me, however, its overriding fault is that Christopher continues to measure Athanasius' arguments against the standard – never

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930615000150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

articulated – of what seems to serve in the book as the norm of all Christology's adequacy: a personal, naturally functioning unity of Son and human Jesus in which God actually performs human actions, and dies a human death – the 'theopaschite' conception of Christ promoted in the sixth century by people who had difficulty with the formulation of Chalcedon.

Christopher's book also has its other, deeply puzzling revisionist moves. Arius – much discussed by Western scholars since the late 1970s – appears as a fairly harmless, if imprecise, Origenist, the victim of Athanasius' caricatures. The creed of Nicaea – which emerges more or less as an ephemeral by-product of the synod, as Eusebius himself suggests – is a 'strictly polemical document', not intended to be a baptismal confession, which distorts Arius' real thinking (p. 121). Marcellus of Ancyra and Apollinarius appear as writers who misconceive the Jesus of the Gospels in a mistakenly unitive direction; but equally to be rejected is the essentially divisive Gregory of Nyssa, the Antiochene theologians, and Pope Leo, who fail to emphasise Christ's active unity directly. The Council of Chalcedon's formulation of the Mystery of Christ is also seriously inadequate, 'a clear statement of Antiochene and Leonine (but not Augustinian) two-nature Christology enforced under government pressure, which left the basic identity of Christ and the nature of the union disastrously ambiguous from the point of view of the more unitive traditions' (p. 284). Among the post-Chalcedonian theologians Christopher briefly treats here, Leontius of Byzantium and John of Damascus are written off as continuing the 'dualist' tradition by insisting on the enduring distinction of two natures in Jesus; only Maximus, with his stress on the divinisation of Christ's human nature, appears to pass the test of offering a unified model of Christ, in which God is the continuing real agent of salvation.

Christopher's book, despite these sometimes puzzling judgements and seemingly arbitrary generalisations, raises some important new issues in the christological narrative. For one thing, it suggests with new force the inherent connection between what modern theology has traditionally regarded as the separate questions of God as Trinity and the person of Christ. Surely the reason Christians have come to think of the Mystery of God as irreducibly the eternal, dynamic communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is because of its ancient conviction that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, is, in his person, 'God with us'. I have written on the phenomenon one can observe almost everywhere in patristic literature: that those authors who set out to emphasise the transcendence and unity of the divine Mystery, like Marcellus and, in a different way, the Antiochene theologians, tend to have difficulty in conceiving of Jesus as one agent – he is usually thought of as God's instrument or temple, rather than as God personally present. Conversely, those authors who set out by stressing the uniqueness and subjective unity

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930615000150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the Saviour – like Origen and Eusebius, the two Gregories and Cyril – tend to emphasise also the threeness of God, in which the Son's distinctive role leads to a fundamentally more articulated conception of God. How we think of Christ determines how we think of God, and vice versa. In Christopher's narrative, this becomes more obvious.

Second, the problem Christopher singles out as a continuing focus of his history – the unity of Christ as Saviour – seems to me to be just one face of a deeper problem: how God is related to creation, how God is present in and for the world from its very beginning without short-circuiting the genuine independence of creatures. The 'otherness' of God, which patristic authors from the Apologists and Origen on (and certainly including Athanasius, but also Cyril and Maximus) so emphasise, is not simply a borrowing from Middle Platonism, but a conviction based on Israel's experience of the nameless, formless God on Sinai. To understand this triune God as remaining who and what he eternally is, yet also to see God the Son as acting in a fully human way, having complete human experiences, in Jesus, because he *is* human – to think of the divinity of Jesus as engaged not in a constant turf-battle for the real centre of his humanity, but as enabling his humanity to be itself most fully and perfectly – was always the challenge (and still is!). Philosophical considerations, certainly, weighed strongly with some of the fathers – leading Theodore and Theodoret, for instance, to be very cautious about seeing in Jesus a genuine unity of subject; for others, such as Cyril and those who later had reservations about the Chalcedonian formulation, the scriptural witness to Jesus simply demanded that Christians override their anxieties about that philosophical and biblical affirmation of God's otherness, and find new categories – like the terminology of 'substance' and 'nature', 'hypostasis' and 'persona' – to make the personal presence of the ever-distant God somehow thinkable. In spite of the terminology which developed, however, the person of Jesus – his active and ontological unity, his inner dialectic – always remained a paradox; none of the formulae quite succeed at their task. To divide the theologians of the age into 'dualists' and (presumably) 'unifiers' seems to me not to do justice to their legitimate concerns, and to oversimplify a complex story.

Even Gregory of Nazianzus, who emerges early on as the hero of Christopher's tale, offers us – in his rhetorically stunning, but often deliberately ambiguous formulations of the Mystery of Christ – a portrait which emphasises the lasting otherness of Christ's 'parts', as well as their identity of his person. True, both he and his namesake and friend from Nyssa speak on a number of occasions of the 'new mixture', the 'unexpected blending', of the Word of the utterly unknowable God with the son of the Virgin (Greg. Naz., Or. 38). Theologians of the mid-fifth century – even those

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930615000150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who emphasised Christ's personal unity strongly, like Cyril – would come to avoid mixture-language, presumably because it suggested 'confusion', a hybridisation of the divine and the human into some new species suspiciously like the mythic demigods of Greece. *God* was clearly other; a human being is 'from here', part of the world. What the two Gregories, like Athanasius and so many other Christian thinkers, struggled to do was to find words which might do justice to the whole of the paradox.

In a famous passage near the end of *Oration* 29, for instance – a paragraph or so before he will himself use again the image of 'blending' to express how the man Jesus is one with God, to becoming 'God down here' – Gregory of Nazianzus offers us a kind of hermeneutical rule for thinking out the paradox presented by the New Testament:

> In a word, attribute the higher things to the divinity, to the one who is by nature superior to suffering and a body; but attribute the humbler things to the composite one, to the one who emptied himself and became flesh for your sake – not to put too fine a point on it! – and became human, and then was exalted, so that you might let go of the fleshliness and lowness of your theories and learn to live on a higher level, and might ascend to the divinity . . . and might come to know what the rational structure of nature is, and what is the structure of the divine economy. (Or. 29.18)

Knowing the structure – the *logos* – of being God and being human, keeping them distinct in our minds and speech because they are so distinct in reality, is certainly central to the right-thinking theologian's task, Gregory seems to be saying; the astonishing part of the Christian narrative, of the 'economy', is that these two, which remain utterly distinct in themselves, have at a point of time become one unique agent, one subject who lives and acts in a unity that leaves the difference intact. Christopher's new book helps us to see anew the challenge and the contours of this central, endlessly paradoxical Christian affirmation, and for that we have to be grateful.

Brian E. Daley
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA
brian.e.daley.3@nd.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930615000150 Published online by Cambridge University Press