

Incarnation

Eric Yang

Santa Clara University, USA

The doctrine of the incarnation in Christian theology (see CHRISTIANITY) maintains that God the Son became human, having characteristics essential to being human and characteristics essential to being divine. The primary motivation for upholding such a view is fidelity to scriptural revelation concerning the historical individual, JESUS OF NAZARETH, who is presented as being divine and as being human. The early church did not have a consensus concerning CHRISTOLOGY or Christological language, but the Christological controversies (which were occurring throughout the second to fifth centuries) led to the Council of Chalcedon (451), producing the so-called “Definition” of Chalcedon. In this pronouncement, the early church adopted the formulation that there is one person with two natures – where the natures are not confused and the person is not divided. This pronouncement was used to rule out certain views deemed as heresies, such as monophysitism (that Christ had a single nature, perhaps only the divine nature or some new combination such as a *theanthropic* nature), Nestorianism (that there were two persons in the incarnation), Apollinarianism (that God the Son assumed only a human body and not a human rational soul), among others. The Chalcedonian definition by itself does not provide an account of the incarnation; rather it sets the boundaries of what can be posited for a theory to count as orthodox.

The primary philosophical focus on the incarnation is the problem of logical consistency, for it may not be possible that one and the same thing be both human and divine. It seems that we must posit Christ as being omniscient (see OMNISCIENCE) given his divinity, and yet it seems that we must posit Christ as being limited in knowledge (not because humans are essentially limited but because scripture seems to teach that he was in passages such as Luke 2:52 and Matthew 24:36). Therefore, Christ is both omniscient and not omniscient, which is a putative contradiction (though see Pawl 2016 for a case defending the compatibility of these predications). If this is what the doctrine entails, then not only is this central Christian teaching false but it is necessarily false. One main project by philosophers has been to provide a model which shows that the doctrine of the incarnation yields no such contradiction.

One way to avoid the alleged contradiction is to employ “*qua*” modifiers such that Christ *qua* divinity is omniscient and Christ *qua* humanity is not omniscient, and this is supposed to prevent having to say that Christ is both omniscient and not omniscient (Adams 2006, chapter 5). Although this approach was quite popular in the medieval period, it is not clear exactly how to employ the “*qua*” modifiers. One interpretation is to have it modify the entire proposition (e.g. “*qua* N, S is P”).

So the statements would be: “in virtue of his divinity, Christ is omniscient” and “in virtue of his humanity, Christ is not omniscient.” The problem is that this move does not obviously avoid the contradiction. For it seems that the statement “in virtue of being N, S is P” entails “S is P.” If so, then the two statements above entail that Christ is omniscient and not omniscient. Another interpretation is to modify the subject: Christ-*qua*-divinity is omniscient and Christ-*qua*-humanity is not omniscient. But it is unclear what Christ-*qua*-divinity and Christ-*qua*-humanity even are and what their relation to each other is supposed to be. And it seems that there are two distinct subjects here, and hence this move may fall into Nestorianism. One other interpretation is to modify the predicate: Christ is omniscient-*qua*-divinity and Christ is not omniscient-*qua*-humanity. The difficulty here is in understanding what these predications are supposed to mean or be, and there is no explanation as to what the difference is between omniscience-*qua*-divinity and omniscience *simpliciter*. Moreover, such attributes do not seem to be deep or fundamental enough. Hence, it is not clear that employing the “*qua*” modifier avoids contradiction, heresy, or unintelligibility.

Without abandoning the “*qua*” strategy, one way to elaborate the approach so as to avoid some of these worries is to treat the natures as concrete proper parts of Christ, where the different attributes are predicated of the different parts of the one person (Stump 2003, chapter 14). We sometimes attribute a property to a person because they have a part that has that property. For example, we might say that Elijah has a scar in virtue of having a foot that has a scar. Similarly, we might say that Christ has the property of being omniscient in virtue of having a proper part, viz. the divine nature, that is the literal subject of being omniscient, and Christ has the property of being limited in knowledge in virtue of having another proper part, viz. the human nature, that is the literal subject of being limited in knowledge.

There remains a question of what relation God the Son bears to Christ, which we will designate as the whole that is composed of the divine nature and the human nature (viz. the human soul and the body). One option is to claim that God the Son just is Christ. But then it seems that we would have to claim that God the Son has a human soul and a body as proper parts. However, such a view may come into conflict with the data of scriptural revelation. For example, John 1:18 states that “no one has ever seen God,” but if God the Son just is the composite Christ, then God can be seen (Leftow 2015). Moreover, the idea that God the Son gained additional parts has been criticized (Flint 2011). Instead, one might claim that God the Son is not Christ but that Christ is the composite of God the Son plus a human nature, viz. soul and body (Leftow 2002). In this case, God the Son would not be the strict or literal subject of human attributes. And though it may be compatible with the letter of Chalcedon, it may not fit the spirit of Chalcedon since it maintains that God the Son is not identical to Christ. Moreover, it may fall into the error of denying Mary as *theotokos* (God-bearer) and only ascribing her as *Christokos* (Christ-bearer).

A contemporary account that bears some similarity to the above approach is the two-minds view, which finds its most robust defense in Morris (1986). The two natures are understood as two distinct ranges of consciousness, one divine and

one human. The divine mind is omniscient and so knows all true propositions, whereas the human mind is limited in knowledge. According to Morris, there is an asymmetric accessing relation between the divine mind and human mind, such that everything the human mind knows can be accessed by the divine mind but not vice versa. That is, we might loosely state that the human mind is contained in the divine mind, but the divine mind is not contained in the human mind. Now the asymmetric accessing relation alone will not be adequate to maintain the right kind of unity since such a relation also holds between the divine mind and all other human minds, and hence Christ's human mind will have to be in some sense uniquely subsumed by the divine mind without making the human mind a mere puppet.

One concern with the two-minds approach is in understanding how there can be distinct minds in a single individual. In response, Morris offers several analogies such as split-brain patients, multiple personality (i.e. dis-associative identity disorder), multi-level consciousness in dreams, and the like to assuage the worry over the possibility of a single person having distinct ranges of consciousness. However, many of the examples provided seem to be psychological disorders, and so it is debatable whether such examples are apt as analogies.

Another issue with this approach is in precisely stating the conceptual relation between persons, mental subjects, and ranges/centers of consciousness. Richard Cross takes the most plausible version of a two-minds approach as involving one person with two overlapping mental subjects (2002, 317–324). It is arguable, however, whether such a distinction adequately precludes Nestorianism. Richard Swinburne (1994) seems to identify persons and mental subject and so proposes a single mental subject with two distinct ranges of consciousness (or distinct systems of belief), such that God the Son became a human soul by taking on a human way of thinking and acting (as opposed to assuming a distinct human soul), while retaining his divine way of thinking and acting. This approach, however, may be looming too close to Apollinarianism. Of course, both Cross and Swinburne (and other adherents who take similar approaches) can argue that their views avoid these heresies.

The views examined so far seem to enjoy some traditional pedigree, though suitably modified or amended to resolve several problems with the more traditional views. However, other philosophers have proposed accounts that do not have the same pedigree, though such views should not be precluded since defenders of these views argue that what makes for an adequate Christology or doctrine of the incarnation is its compatibility or fit with scripture and creedal formulations (along with other criteria such as logical consistency and intelligibility).

One approach is to adopt a notion of relative identity. It is common to think that absolute identity is a primitive or unanalyzable concept, one that is employed regularly in both rigorous philosophical discussion and everyday reasoning. If we say that Eli is the same person as Ali, then we often mean that Eli is a person, Ali is a person, and that Eli is identical to Ali. However, some have argued that some (or all) identity statements must be relativized to a kind or sortal. For example, it seems that you are made up of a mass of matter right now, and that mass of matter is not the

same mass of matter that made you up yesterday. The relative identity theorist might say that you-now are not the *same mass of matter* as you-yesterday but you-now are the *same person* as you-yesterday. A contradiction would arise if we analyzed these identity statements in the way above with Eli and Ali. But if identity is relativized to masses of matter and to persons, then no such contradiction arises.

With the notion of relative identity at hand, van Inwagen (1994) proposes a way in which it can handle the putative contradiction in the doctrine of the incarnation. God the Son is omniscient but Jesus of Nazareth is limited in knowledge and hence not omniscient. By absolute identity, we would have to say that God the Son is identical to Jesus of Nazareth, thereby resulting in a contradiction. However, relative identity can be employed such that God the Son is not the *same being* as Jesus of Nazareth, but God the Son is the *same person* as Jesus of Nazareth. If such relativized identity statements cannot be further analyzed, then the alleged contradiction can be avoided.

Now this approach has an obvious concern: it is committed to relative identity. Some might not balk at this, though others worry that the use of relative identity may be ad hoc (though this can be mitigated when seeing how such a notion might be used to avoid other philosophical puzzles such as the problem of material constitution). However, others will think it is too high a price to pay.

The last view to be presented is also a relative newcomer. Kenotic Christology is the view that God the Son emptied himself of certain features that allowed him to become a full human being. This approach often cites Philippians 2:5–11 as its inspiration (and this is also where its name comes from, for *kenosis* in Greek means “emptying”). Earliest versions of this view can be traced to the nineteenth century, where many of its original proponents suggested that God the Son divests his divinity or some of the essential attributes of divinity. Most of the recent proponents of kenotic Christology, however, do not want to go that far because they want to maintain that Christ remains divine in the incarnation and so could not lose his divinity or essential DIVINE ATTRIBUTES. What contemporary proponents instead claim is that although God the Son voluntarily lays aside certain divine attributes, these properties turn out not to be essential for being divine. Rather, God the Son retains essential attributes of divinity, such as the disjunctive property of *being omniscient-unless-freely-(and-temporarily)-choosing-to-be-otherwise* (Davis 2006). Since the incarnate Christ still possesses that attribute, though not the attribute of omniscience, he is still divine. And since Christ acquired the essential attributes of humanity, he is also human. Now such disjunctive or gerrymandered properties do not obviously appear to be divine attributes. However, many proponents of kenotic Christology argue that their primary reason for maintaining this is scriptural, averring that their approach adequately captures the limitations of Jesus as presented in scripture and claiming that a natural interpretation of the text requires abandoning some commonly held conceptions concerning divinity.

One worry is that it is unclear whether the strategy of providing disjunctive divine attributes will work for all divine attributes. For example, it is harder to think of how the same strategy can be employed for attributes such as being necessary, being *a se*,

being immutable, and so forth. Furthermore, some kenotic theorists maintain that the kenosis continues even in Christ's glorification (Evans 2002, 266–267), whereas other kenotic theorists maintain that the kenosis is temporary (its duration lasting only as long as Christ's earthly, pre-glorified life) while the incarnation will be everlasting (at least from the moment of Christ's conception), and hence the latter approach will have to incorporate a nonkenotic account for a satisfactory theory of the incarnation (Davis 2006, chapter 10).

Aside from providing models or views for explaining the possibility of the incarnation, some philosophers have argued that we have good reason to believe that the incarnation actually happened (and whatever is actual is possible). Such arguments don't explain how it could be possible, but rather they focus on historical and philosophical reasons for maintaining that the man Jesus of Nazareth was also divine. One argument stems from Christ's resurrection. For example, Swinburne (2003) argues that the historical case for the resurrection of Jesus makes it more likely that the incarnation occurred.

Another argument arises from the words and deeds of Christ prior to his death. The most well-known version of such an argument is the Mad-Bad-God argument, sometimes referred to as the "Lord-Liar-or-Lunatic" argument. This argument can be traced back to Pascal, though its most famous presentation is found in the writings of C.S. Lewis, and some recent philosophers have defended the soundness of the argument. In summary, the argument maintains that Jesus claimed (at least implicitly) to be divine in his teaching and activities. For example, passages such as John 10:30–30 and Mark 2:5–10 serve as evidence of Jesus's (implicit) claim to divinity. Now either his claim is true or not. If it is not true, then Jesus either knew that it was not true, thereby making him morally bad (a liar), or he did not know that it was not true, thereby making him mad (a lunatic). However, many individuals, and not only Christians, maintain that Jesus was a good moral prophet, appearing rational and lucid of mind. Hence, Jesus is neither morally bad nor insane. Hence his claim is true, and so there is reason to believe that Jesus, along with being human, was also divine (fuller defense of this argument can be found in Davis 2006, chapter 9).

The Mad-Bad-God argument has been contested, even by Christians. For example, one objection maintains that the argument leaves out a genuine possibility: that Jesus was sincerely mistaken. One crucial aspect to this debate is the historical context, and so it is unclear that the "sincerely mistaken" option is a serious one given the background of Jewish monotheism in the first century. However, the argument may still be problematic. To make the case, assume Jesus was divine. Now whatever reason or evidence that Jesus had for believing he was divine might be duplicated in all epistemically relevant respects for someone else who wasn't divine, and such a subject could then claim to be divine without being morally wicked or insane (Howard-Snyder 2004). Thus, if it is possible to mistakenly believe one is divine while being reasonable, then that possibility has not yet been ruled out by the Mad-Bad-God argument.

See also: CHRISTIANITY; CHRISTOLOGY; DIVINE ATTRIBUTES; JESUS OF NAZARETH; OMNISCIENCE

REFERENCES

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 2006. *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cross, Richard. 2002. *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, Stephen T. 2006. *Christian Philosophical Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, C. Stephen. 2002. "The Self-emptying of Love: Some Thoughts on Kenotic Christology." In *The Incarnation*, edited by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, 246–272. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flint, Thomas. 2011. "Should Concretists Part with Mereological Models of the Incarnation?" In *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, edited by Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill, 67–87. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 2004. "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God? or Merely Mistaken?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 21: 456–479. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200421440>.
- Leftow, Brian. 2002. "A Timeless God Incarnate." In *The Incarnation*, edited by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, 273–299. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leftow, Brian. 2015. "Against Materialist Christology." In *Christian Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Colin Ruloff, 65–94. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Morris, Thomas. 1986. *The Logic of God Incarnate*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pawl, Timothy. 2016. *In Defense of Conciliar Christology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2003. *Aquinas*. New York: Routledge.
- Swinburne, Richard. 1994. *The Christian God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2003. *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. 1994. "Not by Confusion of Substance but by Unity of Person." In *Reason and the Christian Religion*, edited by Alan Padgett, 201–226. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

FURTHER READING

- Crisp, Oliver. 2009. *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology*. New York: T&T Clark International.
- Flint, Thomas. 2001. "The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions." *Religious Studies*, 37, 307–320. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412501005546>.
- Le Poidevin, Robin. 2009. "Incarnation: Metaphysical Issues." *Philosophy Compass*, 4: 703–714.
- Marmodoro, Anna, and Jonathan Hill. 2011. *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merricks, Trenton. 2007. "The Word Made Flesh: Dualism, Physicalism, and the Incarnation." In *Persons: Human and Divine*, edited by Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, 281–301. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moreland, J.P., and William Lane Craig. 2003. "Christian Doctrines (II): The Incarnation." In *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 597–614. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.