Christologies and Philosophies

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Discussed in this essay:


Yet another book of Christology has been added to the “Current Issues in Theology” series from Cambridge University Press. Kathryn Tanner’s Christ the Key, published last year, joins Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered (2007) by Oliver Crisp and Marilyn McCord Adams’s Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology (2006). This abundance of riches is probably coincidental, but it is a happy coincidence. Although there is no explicit conversation among the three authors, let alone collaboration, considering them together provides an opportunity to raise important questions not only about Christ but about Christology and about its aims, procedures, and criteria.

Independent though they are, the three books under review have this much in common: none of them follows what is, or used to be, the standard recipe that confines Christological discourse to statements derived somehow from a historical Jesus reconstructed out of synoptic gospel material. These authors affirm the further development of Christian teaching about Christ for which Crisp’s title phrase, divinity

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and humanity, is a convenient shorthand. But although each of the three is attentive to the past, none of them subjects readers to a historical survey, and while they all rely on “classical” traditions, they are not primarily concerned with reporting what others have said. Primarily, these are positive, direct-discourse statements of what their authors judge to be “the case.” At the same time, however, the point of the statements is not so much to establish or defend the veracity of Christian doctrine as to make sense of it. As Adams observes, the intellectual coherence of Christology (or any other discourse) does not constitute its truth, though it may indicate it, since an incoherent truth can scarcely be true. Thus an argument for the intelligibility of Christological beliefs may, as a kind of bonus, have the indirect effect of commending those beliefs to unbelievers.

Such an argument cannot but take into account other components of the theological whole of which the Incarnation is a part. Most obviously, what you think about Christology, in the narrower sense of discourse about the selfhood or identity of Jesus Christ, is a function of what you think about what he did and why he did it—and vice versa. In that regard, Crisp’s book is the most tightly focused and Tanner’s the most wide-ranging, but all three address the question of just what is meant by (the) Incarnation.

The traditional answer takes the form of a rule of thumb, known as the communicatio idiomatum or “interchange of properties.” Not everyone, however, reads the rule in the same way, and on how it ought to be read the authors considered here are not of one mind. Crisp distinguishes between what he calls a “strong” and a “weak” version. According to the “weak” version, the communicatio idiomatum stipulates that, because Christ is entirely human and entirely divine, he can be named either way—as Son of man or Son of God, as Lord of glory or man of sorrows—but no matter which way he is named, properties that belong either to humanity or to divinity may truly be ascribed to the one so named. Thus it is true that the Lord of glory was crucified, and true that the Son of man came down from heaven. This is the reading of the communicatio that Crisp himself takes to be correct. The “strong” version shifts from statements about Christ to statements about his “natures,” his divinity and his humanity, as such. It would be a “strong” application of the rule to say that Christ’s divinity has taken on human characteristics, which somehow add to it or constrict it; or, conversely, to say that his humanity has acquired divine characteristics, such as being everywhere present. Martin Luther was
in effect reading the *communicatio* in this “strong” sense when he maintained that Christ’s human nature, his body in particular, has the divine property of ubiquity, and so can be simultaneously in heaven and on each and every eucharistic altar.

Luther’s is still a specifically Christological application of the *communicatio idiomatum*. But it is a short step from the “strong” form of this rule to the more expansive assertion that God became man so that man might become God. This patristic commonplace is perhaps most naturally construed as a statement about the results of the Incarnation. It can, however, be understood as referring also to the Incarnation itself, conceived as a convergence of divinity and humanity that is somehow inclusive, somehow the means and manner of all God’s communication of God to what is not God. That appears to be what Tanner has in mind when she speaks of the “saving *communicatio*.” In many ways it is the *leitmotiv* of her book. She is less interested in the internal make-up of Christ than in his Incarnation as the cause or source or archetype of divine activity, and most especially of grace, the unowed and unearned gift that bestows divine properties on human powers.

Around grace in that broad sense nearly everything in *Christ the Key* turns. The book is, as Tanner notes, a further development of the methodological position she had worked out in *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (1988) and applied systematically in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (2001). The presiding thesis in these earlier studies is that when the transcendence proper to divinity is understood as Christians understand it *de facto*, there is no competition or even contrast with the created order, or with human being and activity in particular. Difference there is, certainly, but it is not such as the differences between realities other than God. Accordingly, the “grammar” of Christian God-talk prescribes sentences that are logically odd, compared with sentences about the world, but not so odd as to be unintelligible. Here the point to note is that since Tanner derives this “grammar” not from supposedly neutral discourse about deity but from talk that is always already informed by Christian practice, its directives remain within a Christianly specific language-game. In *Christ the Key* this approach takes a more conspicuously Barthian direction. Not only do “natural” phenomena tell us nothing about divinity. They tell us nothing about humanity either. Only from God, incarnate in Christ, do we learn what is “naturally” human.

What we learn is that human nature, apart from grace, is subnatural darkness and depravity—total depravity (p. 78). To be
non-divine is an impediment to being human. There is not even a natural desire for God, since the act of desiring him is not only specified but constituted by its divine object. So, unless we have already incorporated into ourselves a divinity that nevertheless remains alien to us, we are in no way oriented to it, cognitively or affectively or conatively. Tanner’s formulations of this radical asymmetry can be puzzling, to say the least. For example: “Although the presence of God is an essential ingredient of our constitution, it does not form any sort of composite with us” (p. 136). And a little earlier: “If not ours by nature, the gift of God’s own life is still, however, naturally ours or natural to us” (p. 129). What could be meant by ingredience without composition, or how “ours by nature” differs from “naturally ours,” Tanner does not explain. The relevant Christological question, however, is clear: How does Christ effect or affect the “gift of God’s own life”?

The answer turns on Tanner’s proposal that there are degrees of participation in divinity, weak and strong, each with subdivisions. At one end of the scale is the simple fact of being created; at the other, a very strong attachment on the part of Christ’s humanity, which is “the precondition for humanity’s attachment in will and deed to the divine in Christ; it is not the product of that [weaker] sort of attachment and thereby dependent upon its character” (p. 71). The question then shifts to the sense in which “precondition” is meant.

It is clear that God did not assume human nature for the sake of having what it takes to do something else—so as to be able to pay a ransom, say, or conquer the powers of darkness and death. For Tanner it is the Incarnation itself that saves. “Humanity is taken to the Word in the incarnation in order to receive from the Word what saves it” (p. 254). That being so, what is meant by “humanity” cannot be simply a discrete human nature that is proper to Christ, as one of the metaphysical constituents of an individual being. Were that the meaning of “humanity,” the difference between Christ as individually human and any of the human individuals he saves would call for some further link, some intermediate agency through which the human natures of these others receive what Christ’s human nature has precisely because it is his. That, it is fairly plain, is not what Tanner means. By “humanity” she might instead mean a universal essence in some Platonic sense, with an existence of its own such that its attachment to the Word in Christ attaches not only Christ but other human beings, all of whom already have a share in the “humanity” so attached, and all of whom therefore participate, albeit weakly, in the life of God.
In that case, however, it would follow that ever since the Word became flesh not only Jesus of Nazareth but every other human being has been God incarnate. Presumably this is more than even the most thoroughly neo-Platonic Christian would claim. None of the Greek fathers whom Tanner follows went so far as to claim it, and neither does she. But even if this theologically dubious conclusion can be avoided, there are philosophical objections to what has rudely been called the “chemical theory” of salvation. Tanner is aware of them (p. 259). Her response is that the seemingly ontological vocabulary of patristic Christology and soteriology was never meant in a technical, philosophical sense. Still, if her own language likewise has its meaning in a “homey,” commonsense, metaphorical context, rather than the context of a philosophical system, the same question returns in another form. Exactly what do the examples exemplify, and what do the metaphors mean?

It should be said in fairness that questions of this sort, applied to “nature” in general and “humanity” in particular, did not in fact arise within Christian theology until long after Clement, Athanasius, and the Cappadocians—especially, for Tanner, Gregory of Nyssa—finished their work. “Systematic” theology, constructed from a set of interrelated and exactly defined terms, could not begin until Western theologians began to adopt and adapt Aristotle’s philosophical conceptuality. Their shift toward a more specialized, differentiated, “scientific” approach may have been a mistake. Many have thought so. Adams, however, certainly does not. It is from the context of medieval scholasticism that she draws most, though by no means all, of the resources that contribute to her extended argument for the coherence of Christology.

Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, Adams holds the refreshing opinion that the theologians of the Middle Ages have not been put out of business permanently by the newcomers, Kant and Company. She pointedly notes the irony of pronouncing Greek metaphysics incredible, as one recent Christologist has done, while blithely adopting the intricacies of process philosophy. This is not to say that Christ and Horrors is a modernized scholastic treatise. While Adams does share with the likes of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus the goal of showing that Christian belief makes rigorous intellectual sense, she also acknowledges that the problems which need to be addressed on the way to that goal are no longer the same. Nor does Aristotle provide the only conceptual toolbox she utilizes in addressing them. Among
other things, her argument incorporates insights from the remarkable group of British Christologists who followed Charles Gore in raising and answering questions about the psychological constitution of Christ and its soteriological implications.

The coherence that Adams seeks to demonstrate is complex, but two lines of inquiry determine its overall shape. One is the question of how it can be true that one and the same person is, as the council of Chalcedon declared, truly the subject of both the divine nature and a human nature. The other, more technical question is how best to conceive the human nature that did enter into the constitution of the incarnate Word. To this second question, any answer will depend partly on what Christ is supposed to have accomplished precisely as incarnate, on what was required in order to accomplish it, and on how the accomplishment fulfilled a purpose on God's part. Formally, this is much the same route that Anselm takes (with many detours) in *Cur Deus Homo*. For Anselm, God's ultimate aim is eternal justice; what thwarted this aim is sin; the remedy required is a work of supererogation valuable enough to constitute a just satisfaction for the sins of the world; to meet that requirement by giving his life, Christ had to be sinless yet mortal—and such was the humanity he assumed. For Adams, similarly, the reason why the eternal Word assumed any humanity at all explains why he assumed just such a humanity as he did. But in *Christ and Horrors*, as contrasted with *Cur Deus Homo*, God's purpose is to unite material creation to himself, while the human problem is not death or sin but meaninglessness, and more specifically the oblitera-
tion of meaningful life brought by the devastating afflictions that Adams calls horrors. It is impossible *prima facie* that God will have been good to anyone so afflicted, and absent a remedy his cosmic purpose will thus be thwarted. Horrors, consequently, must be defeated if that purpose is to be fulfilled; and the first though not the only requirement for defeating them is a divine savior who is nevertheless so vulnerable to horrendous evils that, in Adams's repeated phrase, they blow his mind. Whereas for Tanner human beings need to participate in divinity, for Adams God needs to participate in horrors.

What good it does for God to be subjected to horrendous evil had best be postponed for a moment. First, notice that to ask how it is possible for God to be subject to horrendous evil at all is a particular form of asking how it is possible for God to be human—otherwise stated, the question of the Incarnation's intelligibility. To that question, accordingly, much of *Christ and Horrors* is devoted. Nothing could be clearer
than Adams's statement of the basic conceptual problem. It appears that the Incarnation, defined as Chalcedon defined it, is not coherent. For if Jesus Christ is at once God and a human being, he is at once infinite and limited, immutable and changing, immortal and crucified, and so on. So stated, the definition violates the principle of non-contradiction: genuine contradictories cannot be true of the same thing in the same respect. One strategy for avoiding this incoherence is to deny that it is, in fact, one and the same to whom the contradictory predicates, divine and human, apply. That way Nestorianism lies. Another strategy is to argue that the predicates are not, in fact, really contradictory (p. 113). That is what the “strong” form of the *communicatio* implies, and it is what “kenotic” Christologies insinuate by proposing that divine characteristics such as omniscience can be ratcheted down temporarily. Neither of these strategies is Adams’s. She is committed to what she takes to be the full-bore Chalcedonian teaching that Christ is one and the same and that his natures, being two, are not the same. Since it is always with respect to either one or the other of these natures that the one Christ is described, the fact that the descriptions are contradictory does not violate the principle of non-contradiction, because it is not in the same respect that they describe one and the same. As God—with respect to his divinity—Christ is immutable. As man—with respect to his human nature—he suffers and dies. This interpretation of Chalcedon is perfectly coherent from a logical standpoint. If logic rests on metaphysics, however, as Adams holds that it does, her interpretation presupposes a more-than-logical distinction between divinity and humanity, as well as a more-than-logical distinction between either of these two natures and the one subject whose natures they are but who is nevertheless one.

This latter distinction is the crux. If it is a real distinction, it can only be metaphysical, and drawing it depends upon a metaphysical conception of the notoriously slippery term “nature.” Here is where Adams’s expert knowledge of the medieval discussions pays off. Her account of nature, in the relevant sense, is basically Aristotelian. As the medieval theologians found out, however, Aristotle’s own categories have to be retooled before they will do the Christological work that needs to be done. To follow Adams’s argument in detail is more than can be attempted here. Suffice to say that the Chalcedonian definition is metaphysically as well as logically intelligible if nature is precisely conceived as individual, substantial, and real, yet ontologically dependent. But this condition of the possibility of the Incarnation,
though necessary, is not sufficient. There is a further, more specific condition: it must be possible for a nature that is itself concrete and individual to be ontologically dependent on something other, something that is not of the same kind, something different by definition. For in the Incarnation an individual human nature depends not on a human subject, as is the case with other men and women, but on the divine subject who is the Word (p. 134).

All this aligns Adams’s position with Crisp’s argument for what he calls the combination of a concrete-nature view with a “three-part Christology” (p. 70). Christ, he writes, “is a human being because he has the relevant body–soul composite to be human. But he is not a human person because this body–soul composite is assumed by the Word at the Incarnation, before, as it were, it may become a person independent of the Word” (p. 58). In general, then, it is true that every person is the ontological subject of at least one nature, but ever since the Incarnation began it has been true that one person, the eternal Word, is the subject of another nature besides the divine nature that belongs only to him, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit.

To return, then, to the second of the two questions mentioned earlier—how this “additional” human nature, which the Word has made his own, should be conceived—it is interesting to find that despite their agreement on the first question, Adams and Crisp part company on the second. The point of difference is the Chalcedonian assertion that, by reason of his humanity, Christ is like us in all things, apart from sin. This might mean only that he did not sin. It might mean also that he could not. Which of these meanings is correct is a question that in modern theology has sometimes taken the form of asking whether Christ’s human nature is “fallen.” Since it is not a question on which there has ever been a formal dogmatic or confessional pronouncement, it has to be answered by what Adams metaphorically calls triangulation, that is, by weighing the merits of possible answers against theological assertions that are not in dispute.

For Crisp the relevant assertions have to do with “original” sin and how it is to be conceived in relation to guilt, corruption, culpability, and the inevitability (or not) of actual sinning. He remains convinced, despite the arguments of Karl Barth and Thomas Weinandy, that even the weakest version of original sin—corruption without either guilt or liability to punishment—is at odds with Chalcedonian Christology and, as such, unacceptable. The reason is that even if Christ never
committed an actual sin, the Word’s assumption of a corrupt nature makes that nature his. He would be not only corrupt but responsible for his own corruption. The Incarnation would thus be a morally culpable act on the part of a divine person, who, by the very fact of becoming incarnate, would cease to be impeccable; and since impeccability is an essential divine property, the incarnate Word would no longer be God (p. 113).

The theologians against whom Crisp argues on this score contend in various ways that unless Christ’s was a fallen humanity he cannot be tempted in every way as we are, and cannot be identified with us in our fallenness. Broadly speaking, Adams would agree. Sin, however, is not one of the theological categories from which she takes her bearings in triangulating an answer to the question of how to characterize Christ’s humanity. The human condition with which God needs to be in saving solidarity is “bad,” non-optimal, and the problem is in some sense “original” to the human race; but it is a metaphysical problem rather than a moral one. What Adams calls the “size gap” between God and the material universe he has created is so wide that creatures which aspire to straddle it, as do the “personal animals” or “enn matters” that are women and men, find themselves radically vulnerable to ghastly torment and adversity. The paradigmatic biblical character is not Adam but Job; and what the book of Job implies, though it does not assert, Adams does not shrink from affirming forthrightly: It is God himself who, by creating such a world as we inhabit, has set us up for a plunge into one hideous disaster or another, either as victims or as complicit and commonly as both (p. 35). Hence the soteriological requirement noted above: Such a God cannot be good to those whose lives are ruined and rendered meaningless by horrors, unless he also defeats them.

Salvation, then, is principally ontological and only derivatively ethical. As Adams conceives it, God saves in three stages, the first of which bears most directly on Christology in the narrower sense. An immaterial God cannot, by definition, share in horrors, although he is responsible for the fact that they occur. God incarnate, however, can and does take part in horrendous evil, and that for two reasons: first, because owing to his human nature he has a finite range of consciousness, with limited powers to cope (p. 142); second, because the world he was born into makes it inevitable that he will in fact participate in mind-blowing horrors, both as sufferer and as perpetrator (pp. 68–70).
In itself, however, the solidarity with other humans that the Incarnation brings about is soteriologically insufficient. God defeats horrors within the lives of individuals, and so is good to each of them, by weaving horror-participation into the fabric of their personal relationship to the transcendent good that is himself. By making it possible for God to be “like us in all things,” horror-involvement included, the Incarnation does plant in history the materials for giving positive meaning to what would otherwise eviscerate the meaningfulness of human lives qua human (pp. 47–48). But this is only Stage I of an overall program. The materials still have to be recognized and appropriated (Stage II), and beyond that the mismatch between embodied persons and the material environment has to be recreated (Stage III) so as to eliminate forever the vulnerability that explains why there is a problem to be solved in the first place. These two further components of God’s solution are Christological in a wide sense, but they depend on Christ as God—Stage II on Christ the Augustinian inner teacher, Stage III on Christ the Irenaean center and goal of the cosmos—rather than on Christ as man.

Adams has not quite finished with Christ as man, however. She returns to the Incarnation in the two final, and most remarkable, chapters of Christ and Horrors. They are closely related. One deals with sacrifice, the other with Christ’s eucharistic presence. On sacrifice it is pretty much a case of Adams contra mundum. The venerable tradition of spiritualizing the New Testament’s sacrificial imagery is nowhere to be found, much less the sweeping rejection of sacrifice tout court that followers of René Girard advocate. If nowadays the bloody, destructive features of ancient sacrificial rites evoke disgust and horror, that, for Adams, is just the point. Sacrifice is a paradigmatic instance of what she calls horror-participation. God sacrifices humans, by setting them up for horrors (p. 274), and God also sacrifices himself, in the flesh of the incarnate Word—not to himself, however, but to us. As in some theories of atonement, Christ becomes the target of anger, but it is human anger, not divine, and on him is laid the iniquity of—God the Creator (p. 277). These ideas are carried

further in the concluding chapter, which proposes that in the sacra-
ment of the altar Christ is truly sacrificed, again and again—sacrificed
by God, who thereby takes responsibility for the horror-prone uni-
verse he has made. This is no mere sacrifice of praise, for real destruc-
tion occurs, in virtue of a new incarnation, or rather impanation, of
God. In this rite the Word, already incarnate, assumes in addition to
his human nature the nature(s) of bread (and wine). As a result, the
“breaded” Christ can be chewed, chomped, torn, cannibalized, im-
molated by those who keep the eucharistic feast by inflicting personal
ruin on him and thus venting their rage and frustration at the horrors
to which they are subjected (pp. 294, 304, 311).

Whether these final chapters are bizarre or brilliant, or perhaps
both, is a judgment best left to those who can read them in their en-
tirety. Here, since there is a chapter on sacrifice in Tanner’s book also,
a brief comparison may be appropriate. There are some broad and
basic points of agreement. Tanner would perhaps agree with Adams
that the sacrificial “vector” does not run from humankind to God but
from God to humankind (pp. 268, 272). They would perhaps agree
that what is sacrificed is the humanity of Christ, a humanity that is not
(pace Crisp) immaculate but imbued with “all the qualities of death-
infused, sin-corrupted life” (p. 260). More generally, they would per-
haps agree that the Incarnation, conceived as event, embraces the
whole of Christ’s earthly existence, not just the moment when it be-
gan; that, so conceived, the Incarnation is itself the saving event of
atonement, using the word in its original sense; and that the notion of
sacrifice affords a way of understanding its dynamics.

But if there is a measure of congruence on these points, it serves to
bring out disparities that are perhaps more significant. “At-one-ment”
for Tanner is a matter of attachment to Christ, a matter of taking hu-
manity (in one sense or another) into the Word so as to receive from
the Word the divinity that saves it (p. 254). Whereas in antiquity sacri-
fices presupposed distance from God, the sacrifice of Christ, thought
of as the gift of divine presence, undercuts that presupposition. More-
ever, even those ancient sacrifices which were meant to be expiatory,
and which therefore culminated in the death of a victim, are best un-
derstood in a wider setting characterized by establishing and maintain-
ing community. The same understanding applies to Christ’s sacrificial
action. By adopting this line of (re)interpretation, Tanner hopes to sal-
vage the received language of sacrifice while turning the edge of ob-
jections commonly brought by feminist and womanist authors against
conventional soteriology’s reliance on that language. But this move on her part also seems to take her out of the ambit of Christ and Horrors altogether. Between her understanding of the Eucharist as “the gifts of God in Christ . . . coming down to us for our sustenance, as energizing food for new lives” (p. 199), and Adams’s thesis that in the Eucharist God is making expiation, placating us, and we are “returning horrors for horrors to God” (p. 309), a great gulf is fixed.

It might be that there is no need to bridge the gulf or harmonize what seems to be radical discord. Adams and Tanner are Episcopalians, and Episcopalians have a long tradition of living more or less congenially with theological diversity. Nevertheless it would be instructive to specify the sources of the divergence. That would require a much longer investigation, which would take into account everything in Christ the Key and Christ and Horrors that has been left out here. But Crisp puts a finger on what would have to be investigated. Commenting on the multiplicity of theological positions with respect to Christ’s human nature, and the methodological question of how to judge between them, he observes: “Much here depends on metaphysical intuitions that are difficult to fathom” (p. 69). One might take issue with “intuition,” a word that commonly amounts to a confession of ignorance. Still, if by metaphysics is meant an articulate account of the most basic structuring of all that is, then any Christology that aspires to be more than conceptual poetry will need to take responsibility for the metaphysical position it inevitably implies.

In that regard, Adams has opted for one species of Aristotelianism, a late-medieval development that probably owes more to Duns Scotus than anyone else. Tanner’s commitments are less easily discerned and characterized, since her book is self-avowedly unsystematic and the sources she draws on are admittedly eclectic. If, however, any one intellectual forebear presides over Christ the Key, it is probably Gregory of Nyssa, himself an elusive and eclectic thinker; and correspondingly the predominant philosophical ambience is neo-Platonic. Perhaps Bertrand Russell (if that is who said it) was right: Everyone born into the world is born a Platonist or an Aristotelian. That is no more an explanation of metaphysical disagreement than “intuition” is. It does raise the question whether one of these congenital dispositions, if either, is more congruous than the other with being reborn in Christ.