

UNIT TWO: Christology after the New Testament

Introductory reading:

Chadwick chapters 9, 11, 12,13,14,17; Kelly chapter VI 1-4

1. Scriptural Grammar

There are very different interpretations of what it meant for the Gospel to pass beyond its original Jewish milieu, and so 'the making of orthodoxy' is also variously understood. Adolf von Harnack considered it as 'Hellenization', characterizing the process as a vast mistranslation of the Gospel into the language of Greek metaphysics. Those who contest this account claim that patristic theology is profoundly informed by exegetical concerns, that it is about the right way to interpret Scripture, and even that patristic writings obey the same basic rules for speaking about God (the 'grammar' as it were) as Scripture. Turning to the development of Christology – or the systematic reflection on the person and work of Christ – after the New Testament, we can begin to test these different interpretations, to explore the theological as well as historical significance of patristic doctrine, and so too the nature of 'orthodoxy.'

In the *Book of Revelation* 5.11-13, we read:

And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round the throne and the beasts and the elders, and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand; and thousands of thousands saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches and wisdom, and strength, and honour and glory and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing and honour and glory and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever.

In this passage, we encounter a tension about the worship of heaven that reveals the distinctiveness of Christian worship. Jesus the Lamb is incorporated into this worship, but Christians remain rigidly monotheistic. They continue the Jewish worship of the one God while simultaneously acknowledging the divinity of Christ, especially through the praises they give him. The sustained polemic against the idolatrous worship of imperial paganism throughout the Revelation indicates a total commitment to monotheism. The author of Revelation is therefore forced, in the words of Richard Bauckham (1993: 61), to reflect "deliberately on the relation of Christology to monotheism." So he uses the resources of visual imagery, and keeps recognizable rules in the way he speaks about the relation of God and Jesus. He emphasizes that Jesus is distinct from God. But Jesus

still receives strictly monotheistic worship which is addressed to him as part of God's identity. The author never makes God and Jesus subjects of a plural verb or uses a plural pronoun to refer to them both. He places Jesus on the divine side of the distinction between God and creation. But he eschews polytheistic language.

This tension in expressing belief about Jesus the Christ in terms of an inherited and instinctive monotheism is felt in the New Testament primarily in relation to worship. In the passage we have just considered, it is resolved in visionary experience. But in the early formulations of the faith of the Church it gives rise to intellectual distinctions and doctrinal formulations. The early Fathers inherited this tension and reflected on the relation of Christ – now especially called the Son or the *Logos* - to the man Jesus as well as to the Father. What exactly does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord?

2. Linguistic Convergence

As the Fathers seek to speak of Christ 'according to the Scriptures' their doctrinal formulation develops from the very language of the New Testament: Greek. As Jaroslav Pelikan (1993: 3) observes,

It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to be written in Greek – not in the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, nor in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, not yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum, but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato, or at any rate a reasonably accurate facsimile thereof, disguised and even disfigured though this was in the Koine by the intervening centuries of Hellenistic usage.

This linguistic convergence allowed theologians speaking of Christ to make connections between very different texts that were written in, or translated into, Greek and used the same vocabulary. The Old Testament had been translated into Greek by Jews in Alexandria in the third century B.C. and this translation, the Septuagint (so called because it is attributed to *seventy* translators), became the authorized version of the early Gentile churches. So Greek-speaking theologians could trace lexicographical continuities from the writings of the New Testament, to those of the Old Testament, and beyond what became the canon to the discourses of Classical and Hellenistic philosophy and science. Greek words like *logos*, so important in the prologue of John's Gospel, or *hypostasis* had already come to the Septuagint and then to Christian vocabulary from these discourses already.

For example, Revelation opens with the salutation, 'Grace to you and peace, from he-who-is, and he-who-was, and he-who-is-to-come.' The identification is thus made between the eternal one-who-is and the eternal 'I am the one-who-is' of the theophany

to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3.14). God is the one who is. But *he-who-was* and *he-who-is-to-come* are 'Christological titles of majesty' (Hahn 2002: 11). Gregory of Nyssa connects this same phrase beyond the canon with the metaphysical 'one-who-is' of classical Greek ontology where the word *is* was taken to refer to the continuity and eternity and transcendence over all the marks of time that are the properties of divinity.

3. Beginnings

Patristic Christology is at first unstable and incoherent. It is found not in theological treatises but in liturgical prayers, exhortation and instruction, and occasional writings that seem to transpose the experience of salvation. But a history of doctrinal development begins, one that has been described as a record of discarded solutions. Typically, a promising theory is advanced, explored, found wanting and left behind, with a legacy of terminological clarification and complexity that makes the next round of discussions still more difficult. Later definitions in the fourth and fifth centuries are still not very stable compounds of these terminological experiments: a precariously balanced set of writings and prescriptions, within whose boundaries truth may be encountered. The processes of debate give the terms their meaning, not some alien philosophical discourse; they seek to mark out where the risks and incoherences lie in talk of God's revelation.

Frequently they react against a too tightly worked theory that leaves out of account some fundamental concern. In the first and second centuries Christology began with theories that played down the humanity of Jesus and left out the significance of the human locus of his divine activity. But if sacred power is not alive and sustaining itself in the midst of actual human suffering it was felt that something essential was lost. The first Christian generations developed an 'angel Christology' (cf. Stückenbruck 1995). Christ appears as an angel and the Lord of angels in texts from the late first and early second centuries like *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *2 Enoch*, and the *Recognitions* of Pseudo-Clement. This angel Christology fitted neatly into the cosmology of both Greek and Jewish belief. Contemporary Rabbinic Judaism was debating the existence of a 'second power' in heaven. But this Christology left open the question of whether it is God's power we are dealing with. A theology that treated Jesus as a great human saint promoted to semi-divine status for his achievement is, perhaps surprisingly, hardly in evidence at all. Even where the language of 'promotion' or exaltation is used (as in Acts or Hebrews in the New Testament), it is made clear that direct divine power is from the first at work in him and the divine initiative is prior to any kind of reward for human virtue. Perhaps the majority of Christians in the early second century shared the prayer and belief of the simple Bithynian believers who confessed to the Roman governor Pliny that they met together before day to sing a hymn 'to Christ as to God' (*Letters* 10.96). The supposition about Christ that was most widely held has been described as a 'Spirit Christology': in the historical Jesus Christ the pre-existent Son of God, who is divine

Spirit, united himself with human nature. In a phrase from *The Shepherd* of Hermas (*Similitudes* 5.6.6), 'God caused the holy, pre-existent spirit which created the whole of creation to dwell in the flesh that he desired.'

4. Justin Martyr

Theological reflection on the mystery of Christ moves beyond these modest beginnings in the writings of the Greek 'apologists' of the second century. They wrote to give reasons for their Christian faith to a new audience as Christianity converted growing numbers of educated pagans and moved within the horizon of Hellenism. The greatest and most voluminous of these apologists was Justin Martyr.

There is no reference to the prologue of the Gospel of John in Justin's *Apology* (c. 151 A.D.) or his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (c. 160 A.D.), but he takes up the concept of the divine reason or *logos*, and its linguistic convergence with Platonic philosophy. He uses this concept both to explain how the transcendent Father of all deals with the inferior created order of things, and to justify his faith in the revelation made by God through the prophets and in Christ. The pre-existent divine Logos inspired the prophets and was entirely present in Jesus Christ. The Logos is God's Word, his speech, and the principle of revelation and education. He compares the Son of God with the pagan messenger god Hermes, thus interpreting the Logos as messenger. His 'Logos Christology' is only secondarily concerned to present Christ as the principle of creation and through this to explain the origin of the world. But he insists that the Logos is other than the Father, derived from the Father in a process that in no way diminishes or divides the being of the Father, but in the same manner in which one torch may be lit from another. He is Light from Light.

5. Gnosis

Justin insisted that in the incarnation the Logos was completely 'made man', assuming body, soul, and mind, and that Christ truly suffered in his passion. In these assertions he was responding to the rapid spread of systems of thought generally known as 'Gnostic' (from the Greek word *gnosis*, referring basically to esoteric knowledge). The early development of Christology can only be understood in relation to the context of the Gnostic systems the faith of the Church came to define itself against. There is polemic against these systems in New Testament texts such as 1 John, against those who deny that 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.' But the middle of the second century saw an increase in the elaboration of sophisticated Gnostic schemes describing the structures of the cosmos and the mechanisms of enlightenment and salvation, such as those of Marcion and Valentinus. A library of Gnostic texts was discovered in 1945-6 in the Egyptian desert at Nag Hammadi. Gnosticism was the most serious intellectual threat that the Church had yet faced, complex and subtle religious systems, articulating in scriptural language a position that came to be seen as alien to the Gospel. Christianity

was challenged to define its language, to draw boundaries, and, above all to defend its commitment to the contingent and to the material world and the body. These systems are very diverse in character and it is a mistake to lump them all together as something called 'Gnosticism.' There is intense debate about what 'Gnosticism' actually is, and how it relates to Christianity, as is indicated in the titles of two books: Michael A. Williams' *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (1996), and Alastair Logan *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy* (1996). Even so, several recurring themes can be identified across the literature and these themes justify the cautious use of the term 'Gnosticism.'

Their Christian antagonists saw Gnostic systems as a flight from the particular. Despite the variety of Gnostic stories about the cosmos and the soul, each with its heavy-handed symbolism, there is a clear central motif, summed up by some modern scholars as the doctrine of an 'alien God'. God and the world are strangers to one another. That there is a world at all is the result of accident or malevolence on the part of some heavenly power. So the historical or temporal order is in no way within the purposes of God. It is an abortion, a calamity. Yet within it, as within all things, are the vestiges of a divine reality - souls capable of understanding. And these imprisoned souls must be released to return to their home in God, if they are ever to attain their destiny. Thus the religious impetus of Gnostic systems is the longing to escape from time and matter. There is a single cosmic drama, in which no significant part can be played by the particular, immanent history of the individual. The pattern of liberation is the same for us all. If this is so, then there can be no sense of human experience in its entirety and individual diversity as the theatre for God's saving work, no sense of bodily life as something to be brought to maturity, as a work of art to be completed. What is authentic in human life is solely what is free from the conditioned and the historical. And the implication to be drawn concerning the life of Christ is no less clear. What is significant is the imparting of transcendent, unconditioned truth, pure intellectual communication, *gnosis*, the food of the soul, and never human acts, least of all the sufferings of a particular man. Hence the Gnostic gospels, which were excluded from the canon of the New Testament, are records of words not acts, located either at some unspecified point in Jesus' ministry or very commonly during the forty days following the Resurrection.

For a Gnostic then, the seriousness about the experiences of conflict and tragedy in the lives of Jesus and his first followers, so many of whom became martyrs, is a sign of spiritual immaturity. Their death represents a failure to advance into the realm of freedom. For Gnostics, the problem of the reconciliation or integration of experience is absent. Although words like 'sin' and 'repentance' may be used, the believer is in fact being directed to reject certain areas of his or her experience as illusory, meaningless, and irredeemable. Human bondage is not the moral impotence and deadlock of which Paul writes in his *Epistle to the Romans*. It is ignorance of the cosmic story and the way to identify with it by fleeing from the constraints of human history. In the words of one Gnostic text, the [Books of Jeu 1:2](#), 'The living Jesus answered and said: "The life of my Father is this: that you receive your soul from the race of understanding mind, and that

it ceases to be earthly and becomes understanding through that which I say to you in the course of my discourse, so that you fulfil it and are saved from the archon of this aeon and his persecutions, to which there is no end.” According to this presentation, Christ gives his followers the information they will require in their ascent to God, which will enable them to name and to overcome the “archon of this aeon”, the cosmic powers that stand in the way. Gnostic systems were concerned with very practical questions. The *gnosis* that it is about is knowledge as power, a technique, a skill in the manipulation of words and ideas in order to find a safe path through the cosmic maze. Rebirth is a repossession of the psyche in the understanding of its true nature as part of the basic spiritual reality - the *nous*. Cosmic history is the story of this reality alone, told to men and women in order to provide them with the tools for breaking the prison bars of the pseudo-history in which they live their bodily lives.

6. Ignatius of Antioch

Gnostic systems came near to dominating Christian tradition in the period before the council of Nicaea, which met in 325 to define the orthodox faith about the divinity of Christ for the first time. Why it did not do so is, as we shall see, a difficult question, which can be answered in quite different ways. Certain Christians continued to bear witness that Christ really had been made man, despite Gnostic denials. This was the teaching of the martyr and bishop Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century. He claimed to be able to speak ‘according to the Scriptures’ because he had learnt the right way to interpret Scripture from another martyr and bishop, Polycarp, who in turn had known the apostle John. Against Gnostic docetism, which claimed that Christ only seemed to come in the flesh and to suffer, in his epistles Ignatius emphasized both the oneness of Christ, and the reality of his two-fold mode of existence as both divine and human. In his *Epistle to the Ephesians* 7.1 he proclaimed:

There is only one physician, composed of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, authentic life in death, from Mary and from God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.

He drove home the fact that the subject of these experiences was indivisibly one by using expressions like, ‘the blood of God’, ‘the suffering of my God’ and ‘God...was conceived by Mary.’ He anticipates the later doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*, that is, the principle that the unity of Christ’s person makes it possible for his human attributes and experiences to be ascribed to his divinity and *vice versa*.

7. Irenaeus of Lyon

Ignatius died in the arena in Rome in A.D. 110, but Irenaeus bishop of Lyon, who flourished c. 130-200 and who had also known Ignatius' beloved Polycarp, took up Ignatius' work of Christian resistance to Gnostic systems. Like Ignatius, Irenaeus secured his interpretation of Scripture by appealing to apostolic tradition. The authentic teaching of the Church, the authentic *gnosis*, is secured by its ability to trace its succession of authoritative teachers to founding apostles. In his *Adversus Haereses*, he argues that if apostles had really taught the strange stories of the Gnostic Valentinus they would have told the authoritative teachers to whom they entrusted the churches they founded: bishops like Irenaeus himself!

It is from these debates that canons of Scripture, that is, lists of books whose authority is recognized and accepted, first began to appear. Marcion, for instance, regarded the Old Testament as a grotesque embarrassment, the record of a nation bound to crude and superstitious beliefs about the involvement of God with creation. And Valentinus claimed to be able to supplement the writings of the apostles with secret unwritten traditions and several additional gospels besides. Irenaeus appeals to a canon of Scripture, and especially to the writings of John and Paul, and above all he attempts to demonstrate the unity of the teaching of the Old and the New Testaments.

Contrary to Gnostic dualism, Irenaeus based his account of salvation on *unity*. Gnostics taught that revelation divides history in two, so that what happens before the Redeemer's coming is darkness and deceit. The visible world whose story we are told from creation onwards in the Hebrew Scriptures is the realm of untruth, and manipulation by ignorant and evil powers in the prison of the body from which only the *gnosis* of Christ can deliver us. Irenaeus' theology can be seen as an attempt to re-establish a vision of the universe and its history that makes a single story without this rupture and division. In response to Gnostic systems Irenaeus taught the unity of God, the creator and invisible Father, the unity of Christ, true God and true man, as well as the unity of material nature with the spiritual person.

This third issue is crucial to his vision of unity, and has been called the doctrine of *salus carnis*. "Salus carnis" refers to the salvation and immortality of the flesh and, by extension, of the whole person. Irenaeus teaches that the one God leads the one human race from creation through to perfection, and this unity is the salvation of the whole human person, material and spiritual. Along the same lines, the one Christ has become true man in order to save all people. He has truly suffered and has truly risen for our salvation, for the *salus carnis*.

Irenaeus makes his case against Gnostics exegetically by arguing for a manifest unity of the Old and New Testaments apparent in the fulfilment of ancient prophecy, and his Christology traces the parallels between what Scripture says of Adam and of Christ as 'the new Adam.' His doctrine of *recapitulation* is really an extended meditation on Paul's image of Christ as the new Adam, developed with special reference to Adam's temptations. The divine plan for the New Covenant was a "recapitulation" of the original creation, a way of going over the chief points again. The event of Jesus remakes humanity by performing the pattern of original human situations again and directing

them Godward. So while Adam is tempted and yielded, Jesus was tempted and endured in obedience. Both are tempted by physical need and instinct, and by the lure of spiritual power, both are equally vulnerable. But one falls and the other wins through. So Jesus creates a new pattern. He transforms the failure of Adam into the pattern willed by the creator. In terms of the exegesis of Gen.1.26, the 'image' of God and the possibility of sharing in the divine life is realized as 'likeness' in Christ's endurance and obedience. The human destiny of communion with God is decisively manifested in a human life in which every significant moral and spiritual choice is a choice for communion and obedience. And the extremity of Jesus' experience of the passion and descent to Hades underlines this theme of the sanctification of the whole of human existence. Jesus passes through each stage of human existence, even the ultimate stages, and renewed them. As Irenaeus puts it in [Adversus Haereses III.18.1](#):

... when [Christ] became incarnate, and was made man, He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam – namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God – that we might recover in Christ Jesus.

On this basis, even experiences of limitation, contingency, temptation, and conflict can be the place where God acts to save men and women. Far from being insignificant and to be escaped they are fundamental to the life of faith and growth towards God. As Irenaeus continues at [Adv. Haer. III.19](#):

For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?

Irenaeus thus sums up his account of how the Incarnation works to save men and women, and body and spirit, with a question that marks the beginning of the Christology of the 'wonderful exchange'. God shares our humanity so that we can share in his divinity. So, for Irenaeus ([Adv. Haer. IV.20.7](#)), 'For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God.'

8. Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?

The first theologians to write in Latin, the combative African Tertullian and Hippolytus of Rome, drew upon contemporary rhetoric and philosophy to develop a technical vocabulary with which to defend the theology of Justin and Irenaeus in later debates. Tertullian's Christology describes the "two natures" or "substances" in Christ, and anticipates later definitions in defining a conjunction without confusion, with each preserving its particular qualities.

Comparison of these early and later accounts raises the question of whether it makes sense to speak of a Christological orthodoxy before it was defined at Nicaea. The traditional account accepted the way Irenaeus tells the story of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy preceded heresy as the implicit belief of the main body of Christians. But this belief only becomes explicit when it is articulated in response to what is rejected as heresy.

But this account has been increasingly challenged. New Testament scholarship has undermined the assumption of a unity of teaching within the Scriptures. In his *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Walter Bauer argued for a different process. According to him, heresy is not a deviation from an already implicitly known truth which orthodoxy preserves by rendering it more explicit in the face of the challenge of heresy. Orthodoxy and heresy are instead the alternative possible developments for an initially inchoate and variegated movement. 'Orthodoxy' tends to be a late growth. The prevailing forms of early Christianity are generally at odds with what later defined itself as normative. Only the exertion of powerful pressure from the one church with a solid majority opposed to the Gnostic system of Marcion and other 'deviations' allowed the churches of the empire to gradually form a united 'orthodox' body. For Bauer, practically and historically, it is the church of Rome that defines orthodoxy and imposes its own order on the chaos of interpretations prevailing elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, given its ecumenical implications, Bauer's account of the making of orthodoxy has met with a mixed response. In his *History and Thought of the Early Church*, Henry Chadwick implicitly suggests a rival concept of authority in the early church. For Chadwick, Rome never comes to be taken for granted as the sole standard of the church's self-definition. He portrays the tension between two models of authoritative self-identification, the "circle" and the "ellipse" – the unified institution with a definable centre providing the norm for right belief from the administrative heart of the Roman world, and the network of communities linked by their common origins in Jerusalem and the events that took place there at the navel of the earth. Rome is not able to replace Jerusalem in antiquity, or assert the unilateral sovereignty over the churches that stem from the events in Jerusalem that Bauer's account suggests.

In an essay in honour of Henry Chadwick, Rowan Williams (1989) joins Bauer in acknowledging the difficulty of identifying a single, clearly identifiable, original 'mainstream.' But he contends that Christianity nevertheless seems to gravitate towards orthodoxy, much as the early recognition of authoritative 'Fathers of the Church' would suggest. For Williams, there are features within the most basic activity of

communicating about Jesus that make for the precarious evolution of a normative Christianity in the context of Gnostic systems, even without the intervention of the Roman church. He notes that the canon ended up containing gospels as well as epistles, four gospels, a variegated set of narratives about Jesus. The Jesus-tradition never finally systematized itself into a single narrative framework. This suggests a mode of proclamation that was less about communicating principles and injunctions that could be more easily systematized, or reduced to a moment of *gnosis*, and more about bringing the hearers into a 'dramatic' relation with the subject of the story. Preachers offered their hearers a new self-perception determined by their response to Jesus. They offered them a place within the drama itself; as someone judged or forgiven, as someone colluding in the betrayal of Jesus or sharing in the power of the Resurrection. If conversion happens through hearing particular stories and then coming to understand oneself in relation to them, then those converted will be concerned to ensure that it is the same stories that continue to be told, and not weaker versions without their power to challenge and convert. They will be concerned to maintain the 'otherness' of the story, lest it become simply a story I choose to tell myself. They will be concerned to maintain its distance and difference. And so they will be concerned with questions of legitimation and continuity. Perhaps the basic Christian narrative carries the notions of canon and orthodoxy within it. For Williams the story of the making of orthodoxy begins in a shared attention to the questioning story of the crucified and resurrected Lord.

The Texts

The texts are taken from the chapters of J. Stevenson's *A New Eusebius* (London, SPCK, 1987) covering the apologists of the second century, *gnosis* and Gnosticism, and the emergence of orthodoxy in the writings of Irenaeus.

Further Reading

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___, 'Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?,' in his *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 1-23.

Questions for consideration

1. How do Justin and the Greek apologists try to persuade educated pagans to become Christians?
2. What is 'Logos Christology'?

3. What is 'Gnosticism'?
4. How does Irenaeus define 'orthodoxy'?
5. What does his doctrine of 'recapitulation' teach?