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In Him All Things Cohere: Seeing Jesus as Theological Act

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Doctor of Philosophy

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An abstract of

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Abstract

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This dissertation considers the implications of seeing Jesus for doing theology. In the first chapter, I claim that divine transcendence determines what kind of knowledge of God is available. I rely on Thomas Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius to identify the possibilities and constraints of speech about God. Chapter 2 traces conciliar developments, from Nicaea to Chalcedon, that clarify Christian speech about Jesus, including affirmation of his two natures and his divine identity. Chapter 3 continues on this historical bent, identifying the Iconoclast controversy as a further discussion concerning Jesus' identity as the divine "Who." In Chapters 4 and 5, I take Julian of Norwich as an example of a theologian working in a "visual" mode. Julian moves from an icon of Jesus to an innovative theological "system" - it is her vision of Jesus that determines what she is willing to say about God.

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## **In Him All Things Cohere: Seeing Jesus as Theological Act**

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## Introduction: Why We Need a Visual Theology

Throughout the Gospel of John, characters are urged to “come and see.” This command stands alongside an emphasis throughout John’s Gospel on Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. The Gospel itself starts with the articulation of a “high” Christology in which the Word’s co-eternity with God is stressed:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people (John 1:1-4).<sup>1</sup>

In the opening remarks of his Gospel, John is offering a theological as well as an epistemological claim. Because the Word became flesh, we are able to see God’s glory (John 1:14). God the Son has made known the character of the unknowable God. John’s readers are invited to “Come and see”—to see the place where Jesus is living (John 1:39), to see whether anything good can come from Nazareth (John 1:46), to see the man who knew the details of the Samaritan woman’s suffering (John 4:29). We are invited to see the signs that Jesus has undertaken (John 2:11), signs that are intended to reveal the glory of the Father. Most of all, we as readers are invited to see Jesus as the one who reveals the Father’s glory.

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted. The terminology of “above” and “below” (and the language of “high” and “low” associated with it) seems to have originated with F. H. R. Frank, who proposed (following his mentor Ritschl’s denunciation of speculative Christologies) that “Our knowledge of Christ, as of God, moves from below to above [*von unten nach oben*].” F. H. R. Frank, *Zur Theologie A. Ritschl’s*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Erlangen: Andreas Deichert’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1891), 27; cited in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 279-280 n12. See Wesley Wildman, “Basic Christological Distinctions,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 285-304.



Protestant theology in particular has emphasized salvation as something that comes *sola fide* - by faith alone. This emphasis has led to an emphasis on the role of the noetic or cognitive in human salvation -- one must believe and assent to the person of Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world in order to receive the benefits of salvation. For the Gospel of John, however, the invitation is less cerebral – “Come and see.”

In this dissertation, I do not intend to cast aside the emphasis of Protestant theology on assent as vital to soteriology. In fact, these questions will be left largely unaddressed. Christian theology has too often argued about the role of the will in bringing us to faith, about how we are able to choose God, and about the fate of those who seem unwilling to choose God. Too little thinking has been done regarding those who due to cognitive impairment are *unable* to give this kind of assent to Christ as their personal Lord. While these are important questions, instead of furthering these discussions I hope to shift the focus somewhat. In this dissertation, I will offer a different perspective on what it means to encounter Jesus Christ.

It is my conviction that *seeing* Jesus is a central theological category. More than philosophical reflection on God *in se*, more than applying the powers of one’s mind to understanding the particularities of Christian doctrine, seeing Jesus provides the contemporary Christian with much that she needs to know about God.

This claim in no way minimizes the role of Scripture, for indeed as contemporary readers our knowledge of Christ is available primarily through Scripture. Any external affirmations of Jesus must be read together with what is affirmed of Jesus in the New Testament and what is affirmed of God in the Hebrew Bible. My claim does, however,

elevate sight alongside cognition as a mode proper to theology. Because God is not a being in this world, knowledge of the divine nature is always elusive. We cannot know what kind of being God is, because God is not a *kind* of being at all. To be sure, we have in the Scriptures much that leads us to knowledge of God. But this knowledge is tempered always by the fundamental affirmation that God is different from what we can know. Our affirmations are always tempered with the claim that God is not simply “other” (i.e., a different thing), but otherwise (*totaliter aliter*).

The incarnation speaks directly to this situation. In Christ we do not have only a picture of who God is, or an illustration of the divine being. We have more than an example of holiness or a model of the sanctified life. According to the claims arguably implicit in John’s Gospel and explicit in the conciliar documents of Nicea and Chalcedon, in Christ we see God. In Jesus for the first time we can point our fingers and say “God is there” – indeed, that God is *here*.

The claims of this dissertation are both radical and staunchly traditional. What is radical is the shifting of the emphasis from belief rooted in cognitive assent toward sight as a vehicle of salvation. What is traditional is my persistence throughout to articulate this theological vision in conversation with the historic creeds of the Christian church. My doing so is not motivated by a desire to wield the conciliar documents as a weapon or a means of power. I do so because I believe that the Church has throughout history worked to clarify our thinking about God in order to bring honor and worship toward the Trinitarian life. I do not hold the tradition as infallible. I do, however, view it as a reliable theological guide, a trusted friend whose opinion I seek first in discerning a

future direction, and which in the case of classical Christology provides some surprising and helpful insights for contemporary Christian thinking about encountering God.

In the first part of my dissertation, I will clarify what kind of knowledge of God is proper to the human being. I will use Thomas Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius to make these claims because they both articulate the fundamental unknowability of the Divine Being without removing from humanity the possibility of a real knowledge of God. A fundamental apophaticism regarding the Godhead is met and measured with a strong cataphatic voice – we certainly can say things, and say true things about God. We just cannot know exactly how the things that we say of God refer to the divine nature.

However, in the Incarnation the unknowability of the divine *nature* is countered with the real presence of the divine *person* in Jesus. That in Christ God appears not only in matter but (in a sense to be qualified later) *as* matter is a phenomenal claim. I use phenomenal here in both senses of the word – it is both extraordinary and a matter of God's being made available to our senses, such that we are able to see God in Christ. The power of the Incarnation is that God appears *as* – not simply behind or in – matter. The Incarnation therefore changes the conditions under which we can make theological claims that are proper to God.

Though this is a radical claim, it is not one without base in the tradition. The Council of Nicaea (325) in its articulation of the God whom “for us and our salvation came down” works to clarify the ways in which Jesus is *homoousios* with God. To be one essence with God rendered Christ uniquely able to effect human salvation. In Chalcedon the scope of the *homoousios* was further explained. Christ was two natures in one hypostasis – fully God *and* fully human. Later known as the doctrine of the

hypostatic union, this affirmation that the divine and human natures existed together in perfect harmony in Jesus renders effectual Christ's work on our behalf to unite us with God. More importantly for this project, however, *the hypostatic union renders us able to see God.*

Arguing from the hypostatic union to divine visibility is a significant characteristic of the iconodule theologians of the eighth and ninth centuries. Iconodule theology (which sought justification for the liturgical use of images) offers significant resources for thinking about how we see Jesus. Facing persecution for their reluctance to relinquish religious icons for personal and liturgical use, John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite articulate a strong theological case for the usefulness and (in the case of the Studite) even *necessity* of icons in Christian worship. Their argument proceeds not simply from the edification possible in the use of icons, but from the logic they perceive internal to Christology that warrants their use. That visibility is a function of the Incarnation is a claim that comes naturally to iconodules, and will be the subject of Chapter 3.

In short, *that* God can be seen in Christ is the argument of the first part of this dissertation. The *content* of that vision is will be the subject of the second part. In it I will look to Julian of Norwich, whose visions of Christ crucified affirm him as the One who has made God known (John 1:18). I will argue that Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* presents a compelling view of the coherence of protology, soteriology, and eschatology that is rooted in her having *seen* Christ.<sup>2</sup> In Christ God's acts of creation,

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<sup>2</sup>Janet Martin Soskice was the first to connect these three claims for me in her chapter entitled "The Kindness of God: Trinity and the Image of God in Julian of Norwich and

redemption, and our future hope are all held together. This “held-togetherness” occurs throughout Julian’s theology. Julian’s emblem of Creation, the hazelnut, reveals to her that everything that is created exists together, held by the hand of God. The shape of the hazelnut affirms that all that exists as a unity, and that we as creatures are all beholden to each other.

Along with the “heldness” of all of creation comes Julian’s hamartiology. Sin for Julian is “no thing.” It has no ontological status. This does not mean that it is not theologically significant. Indeed Christ’s very existence occurred in part so that sin would be addressed. That sin is “no thing” means that it is not solely what necessitated the Incarnation. Instead of a sort of “exchange,” Julian argues that what we have in Christ is a gardener on a divine mission to offer back to God those things that are already God’s. The harvest for Julian requires that Christ return to the ground, but Christ’s death does not appease divine wrath, or satisfy a blood debt. Christ’s death is necessary because it is part of a larger economic vision that God has set in motion already in Creation.

Julian makes these claims because she has seen Jesus. In her contemplation of Christ crucified and her sight of his wounds Julian is able to expand a systematic vision of the Christian life. Her ability to do so in such a total and beautiful manner is astonishing, but the manner by which she came to make such claims is proper to theology. Seeing Jesus for Julian *is* a theological act.

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Augustine.” Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 146.

Paul's letter to the church at Colossae opens with an astounding Christological claim. God has "rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13-14). This salvation was possible because Jesus is God- "for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19-20). Between these soteriological claims, Paul inserts an epistemological one:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:16-17)

Jesus the *Logos* is the divine image in the world. He is the agent of creation, and is the one in whom all of Creation coheres. The subject of how in Jesus we see God will be the first part of this dissertation. How we see in Christ that "in him all things hold together" will be addressed in the second. In her vision of Christ crucified, Julian was able to see all of these things. It is there – in Christ – that theology starts for her.

Too often theological work has been removed from such a vision, both literally, in its reluctance to engage images and visionary experiences, and more broadly, in its hesitance to associate the whole of the Gospel with Jesus' crucified flesh. I hope to lay the theoretical groundwork for assuring my readers that this vision is indeed the place where the whole of the Gospel is found. It is cohesive and coherent, an embodied systematic presentation of the love of God for all of Creation. It requires no more of the creature than that she open her eyes from the pit and adjust her head in the right direction.

It is fitting to our capacities as creatures – indeed we were created for such a vision. As the Gospel of John reminds us, we just need to come and see.

### **Chapter 1: An Epistemological Problem with a Christological Answer**

A primary affirmation of religion of the Hebrew Bible is that the God of Israel cannot be seen. God is referred to as a pillar of cloud (Exodus 33:9), a burning bush (Deut 4:12-13), and a voice speaking out of silence (1 Kings 19:12). Israel's attempt to imitate religions that possessed physical deities (with the golden calf, Exodus 32) is immediately and emphatically squelched. That Israel's God lacks a physical representation, however, is not simply a characteristic of Israelite religion—it is a fundamental claim regarding what kind of God Israel serves. That Israel's God is unable to be depicted is a corollary of *who* Israel's God is; the only true God, and the one to whom all other powers must submit (1 Kings 18, 1 Samuel 5). As the only true God, the Creator-God and not simply the greatest representative of creation, Israel's God is something *other* than what the gods of other nations represent. Idols and “graven images” are certainly prohibited in the commands God gives to Israel (Exodus 20:4), and Christians accordingly cite these passages when arguing for restraint on divine images. But that God cannot be imaged is not simply a command- it is a theological innovation regarding what kind of being God is.

The God of the Bible who cannot be imaged can also not be named. Jews have affirmed that God's name is unpronounceable, referencing Exodus 3:14- "God said to Moses, "I am Who I am." This semantic act belies a theological affirmation- God is known by God's *acts*, but God's being cannot be identified. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: "Nothing is more alien to the spirit of Judaism than the veneration of images...To Jewish faith there are no physical embodiments of the supreme mysteries. All we have are signs, reminders."<sup>3</sup> It is not the case that God cannot be *known*, but knowing God is always a result of God's acts of self-revelation, because God is entirely transcendent.

Moses' recollection of the burning bush offers a clear statement about the kind of knowledge of God that was available in that event:

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.... Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female. (Deut. 4:12-13, 15)

We are not ignorant of God (there was a voice revealed out of the fire) but we do not see God (there was no form). There are two related, though separable, reasons why God cannot be seen. The first seems obvious, but it contains a second more fundamental theological assertion. God cannot be seen because God does not have a material form, and God does not have a material form in part because God is not a being in the world. The knowledge of God that is available to us is not a total knowledge of who God is.

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Symbolism and Jewish Faith," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 80-99.



Human knowledge is mediated by the material world. Knowledge of God, therefore, is different from knowledge of plants, animals, or other humans. The Christian affirmation that God is *totaliter aliter* – totally otherwise—demands that thinking and speaking of God proceed differently than thinking and speaking about objects or created beings.<sup>4</sup> As Anselm claims in the *Proslogion*, “We believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought.”<sup>5</sup> An understanding of God’s radical transcendence brings with it an appropriate limit to human knowledge of God, and recommends apophaticism as the most proper mode of thought relative to the divine nature. As Denys Turner notes, the apophatic mode means something like “that speech about God which is the failure of speech.”<sup>6</sup> In order for theological speech to reflect its subject, it necessarily functions differently than talk about an apple or a child.

As the medieval Scholastics said “*Deus non est in genere.*” God’s existence is fundamentally *otherwise*, and God does not belong to a genus or a species. For this reason, certain kinds of theological deductions- most notably, claims made from natural theology or human experience- will be tempered. Natural theology, which attempts to deduce things about the divine nature from the material world, is tempered because although we can make conceptual abstractions from material things toward divine reality, because God’s immateriality differs altogether from material things our abstractions remain always partial. Furthermore, our abstractions particularly from experience can be wrong if they are rooted only in our experience of the material world, which is often

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 291.

<sup>5</sup> Anselm, *Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.

colored by the tragedy and suffering of human existence. To deduce from one's existence of suffering that God is indifferent might feel existentially true, but neglects both the affirmations of Scripture and the principle of divine transcendence. Put another way, knowledge that a malevolent God exists, though it might *feel* true based on human experience, contradicts the claims of Scripture and is therefore deemed inaccurate.

Transcendence affirms the mystery of God in a way that considers the integrity of God's goodness to always exceed creaturely perception of it: "The mystery of God's ways is a presupposition of the Christian trust that, appearances to the contrary, the world is ruled by a good, just and loving God."<sup>7</sup> Transcendence, therefore, serves both as an affirmation of God's distinction from human creatures, and as a commitment to trust that human experience of the world does not take precedent over biblical claims regarding God's commitment to all that is created.

Theology as *speech* about God also meets a necessary limit when divine transcendence is affirmed. A transcendent God cannot be said to be simply "different" from the world, but altogether distinct: "A God who genuinely transcends the world must not be characterized, therefore, by a direct contrast with it."<sup>8</sup> Because God's being cannot be known or seen by humans, our attempts to describe the *nature* of God are also remote: "He can be named by us from creatures, yet not so that the name which signifies Him expresses the divine essence in itself."<sup>9</sup> We can have true knowledge of God through Scripture and the Christian tradition, and yet not know entirely how our

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<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis.: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas and Fathers of the English Dominican Provinc, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981), I-1 13.1.

theological affirmations apply to God. God in God's transcendence is beyond our reference. Even our predications must be tempered by the knowledge that we do not know how they apply. We can give names to God, but these names accordingly express God "so far as our intellect knows him" – which is only in part.<sup>10</sup>

I have indicated thus far that affirming divine transcendence- God as *otherwise*- places a necessary limit on what we can know about God. Our theological epistemology is determined, therefore, by what we believe about God. At the end of this chapter, I will discuss how theological language ("God-talk") ought to reflect these views of transcendence. But before I get there, it might be helpful to consider what precisely it means to affirm that *Deus non est in genere*- that God cannot be classified.

"We Speak of God As We Know Him": Thomas Aquinas and the *Res significata/ Modus Significandi* Distinction

The first part of the *Summa Theologica* clearly explicates how the distinction between divine and human beings determines the possibilities of human knowledge of God. For Thomas, divine reality exceeds human modes of comprehension because God does not belong to a genus or species. Nevertheless we can know that God exists, and we can name God from things, even if we do not know exactly how these names apply.

In fact "how these names apply" would be one way of titling the first part of the *Summa Theologica*. For Thomas the *modus significandi* ("thing signified") has a necessary metaphysical relation. One's metaphysical status determines the mode of signification – creatures signify as creatures, and God as uncreated cannot be "signified" in a created manner. Our manner of signifying reflects our finite existence. Human

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<sup>10</sup> ST I-1 13.2

knowledge is always incomplete-- this is a function of what it is to be human. Therefore what we say about God is said in a finite and incomplete manner. It will always be partial – not untrue, but “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12), reflecting in its partiality our existence as derived from One whose existence is fundamentally otherwise. We speak as finite creatures about a God who is infinite – our words reflect this impasse.

Aquinas relies on the *res significata/modus significandi* distinction throughout the first part of the *Summa Theologica*. At stake here is an ontological claim that grounds an epistemological one: God’s being is different from human being. This difference derives in part from a doctrine of Creation-- in a Christian theological view human being derives its existence from God. Divine being, however, is self-subsistent; it is and always has been what it is. It does not derive from anything else. The giftedness of human existence is fundamental to a Christian view of the divine-human relation. Human existence comes from something other than itself; something precedes it both logically and ontologically.

Further Distinctions: God is Uncreated. For Thomas the first argument for God’s existence comes from causation: “whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be put in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act.”<sup>11</sup> From this it follows that all that is was put into motion by God, the first mover who was “put in motion by no other.”<sup>12</sup> Of course this is not simply a logical argument (God was the first thing) but an ontological one – God is the only existent whose being is its own life. That which

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<sup>11</sup> ST I-1 2.3.

<sup>12</sup> STI-1 2.3.

precedes human existence as its ground and source is one who was not created. To be uncreated is not simply to possess a different narrative about divine origins. To be uncreated is an ontological claim that distinguishes divine existence from all creaturely existence. It therefore determines what can be known and said about divine life.

Among the things that provoke Christian worship is the belief that God is not a being in the world alongside other beings (Pss 8, 104). As Creator, God is radically distinct from creatures. Creation, in fact, can be understood primarily as that reality which defines all that is as God or not-God—creator or creature. Creatures exist as those brought into existence by another. Created lives are gifted, and are held in being by something beyond themselves. Indeed that our lives and the world persists is thanks to the God who holds the world in being. The Christian affirmation of God as Creator of all that is exists simultaneously as an affirmation of divine transcendence. Creation itself can be understood as a kind of separation between God and all that is not-God.

God's transcendent otherness is part of what provokes Christian worship. God is immortal and invisible and *therefore* due our worship – “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever” (1 Tim 1:17). Christian claims of creation *ex nihilo* emphasize this point. What exists was made by God out of nothing. God therefore is the sole author of all that has come to exist.<sup>13</sup> An *ex nihilo* understanding of creation sets up a worldview whereby God differs from

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<sup>13</sup> God as author and not source is an important distinction that separates *ex nihilo* doctrines of Creation from emanationist schemes. Under the latter scheme, divine transcendence can be argued but it functions rather differently.

creation in a fundamental way – as uncreated, in distinction from everything created, which exists as brought into being by another.<sup>14</sup>

God is Simple. How God is Creator is related to Thomas’ argument from motion, which in turn is related to *how* God exists. Because God was not put into being by another, God’s being *is* God’s essence. This claim is often referred to as divine simplicity. God is not composed of matter and form.<sup>15</sup> Whereas humans have the “stuff” of material existence, God simply *is* existence. There is no “stuff” from which to identify God. God simply is Being.

Because there is no “stuff” conceptually distinct from God from which to identify God, God cannot be categorized along with creatures. God does not belong to a genus or a species. Thomas uses scientific models of classification to articulate why this is the case:

all in one genus agree in the quiddity or essence of the genus which is predicated of them as an essential, but they differ in their existence. For the existence of man and of horse is not the same; as also of this man and that man: thus in every member of a genus, existence and quiddity- i.e., essence- must differ. But in God they do not differ.<sup>16</sup>

God’s essence *is* God’s existence: to be God is simply *to be*. God is God’s own essence and existence,<sup>17</sup> God’s own Godhead, God’s own Life, “and whatever else is predicated

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<sup>14</sup> Creation is not the only site where transcendence is a theologically significant category. For many, redemption also requires that God be transcendent. A God who is identical with the world might share in its corruption, therefore be unable to offer the world the gift of redemption.

<sup>15</sup> ST I-1 1.3. For Thomas the names we attribute to God come from God’s effects.

<sup>16</sup> ST I-1 3.5.

<sup>17</sup> ST I-1 3.4.

of [God]”.<sup>18</sup> Divine simplicity posits that to be God is not to be other than what God is. There is nothing separable from divine existence.

God is Infinite. For Thomas epistemology follows ontology – the way we exist determines how and what we know. Created beings whose nature is material (in contrast to angels, who are immaterial) cannot know God without the mediation of matter.<sup>19</sup> *In se*, God is supremely knowable. However, the transcendent nature of divine existence makes this knowledge not fully available to the creature. Because divine being is different in kind from human being, human knowledge of divine being is limited: “If therefore the mode of anything’s being exceeds the mode of the knower, it must result that the knowledge of that object is above the nature of the knower.”<sup>20</sup> God is infinite, therefore humans (who are finite) will *necessarily* have only a limited knowledge of God because human finitude determines that knowledge of the divine is above human capacities. To know God fully is not proper to the human. This is a claim about theological language rooted in a doctrine of Creation and in an affirmation of divine transcendence. It is proper in this life for humans to know God “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12)- only in part.

Thomas’ argument here shares much in common with Pseudo-Dionysius’ discussion of divine transcendence as the backdrop for God’s unknowability, which I will discuss later in this chapter. For both Thomas and Pseudo-Dionysius, the limitation on human knowledge of God does not indicate a problem with the human; such a limitation is fitting to created existence. The limitation on what humans can know about God is a

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<sup>18</sup> ST I-1 3.3.

<sup>19</sup> ST I-1 12.4. Thomas defines angels as subsistent natures

<sup>20</sup> ST I-1 12.4.

necessary limit that pertains as much to the nature of God (transcendent, uncreated, simple, immaterial, infinite) as it does to what kind of beings humans are. Our inability to know God fully reflects our finitude and is rooted in an affirmation of divine infinity: “what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light.”<sup>21</sup> Because infinity does not have a material form, human knowledge of the divine being will always be partial, and will always be mediated by matter.

God’s Im/Materiality. For Thomas the material mediation of knowledge derives from ontology. Because our souls are embodied we are able to know only enmattered forms. “The nature of our intellect is to abstract the quiddity of material things from matter”<sup>22</sup>, and because immaterial substances differ altogether from material things, one cannot move intellectually from material things to perfect knowledge of immaterial substances:

From material things we can rise to some kind of knowledge of immaterial things, but not to the perfect knowledge thereof, for there is no proper and adequate proportion between material and immaterial things, and the likenesses drawn from material things for the understanding of immaterial things are very dissimilar thereform, as Dionysius says.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas’ use of proportion here refers back to his affirmation of divine transcendence.

Human knowledge of God is limited because of the characteristics of God’s nature.

Because human knowledge is mediated through matter, the material places constraints on

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<sup>21</sup> ST I-1 12.1.

<sup>22</sup> ST I-1 88.2.

<sup>23</sup> ST I-1 88.2.



what can be known.<sup>24</sup> For Thomas, therefore, we can know *that* God exists, but not *what* God is.<sup>25</sup>

Perfection Terms. Thomas Aquinas is not an agnostic regarding the human ability to know God—he simply claims that we cannot know entirely how the names we ascribe to God apply to God. Thomas introduces perfection terms as a way to articulate what kind of naming of God is possible. These terms

do say that God is; they are predicated of him in the category of substance, but fail to represent adequately what he is. *The reason for this is that we speak of God as we know him*, and since we know him from creatures we can only speak of him as they represent him. [Yet] any creature, in so far as it possesses a perfection, represents God and is like him, for he, being simply and universally perfect, has pre-existing in himself the perfections of all his creatures... But a creature is not like to God as it is like to another member of its species or genus, [so] words like ‘good’ and ‘wise’ when used of God do signify something that God really is but they signify it imperfectly because creatures represent God imperfectly.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore for Thomas perfection terms can indeed make true claims about God-

*“Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way.”*<sup>27</sup> God is not created, but because the Creator’s own richness is genuinely

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<sup>24</sup> “For since the nature of our intellect is to abstract the quiddity of material things from matter, anything material residing in that abstracted quiddity can again be made subject to abstraction; and as the process of abstraction cannot go on forever, it must arrive at length at some immaterial quiddity, absolutely without matter; and this would be the understanding of immaterial substance.” ST I-1 88.2.

<sup>25</sup> “Reason cannot reach up to simple form, so as to know *what it is*; but it can know *whether it is*...God is known by natural knowledge through the images of his effects.” ST I-1 12.12.

<sup>26</sup> ST I-1 13.2.

<sup>27</sup> ST I-1 13.2.

reflected in creation (as cause in effect), the creature is also not left with nothing to say about God.

### Transcendence and God-Talk: Pseudo-Dionysius

Because divine existence is different from human existence, what can be said of God is determined by this relation. Therefore, our knowledge of God must exist in a similar mode. Because God is transcendent, it is fitting that we know God *transcendently*.

Pseudo-Dionysius, a theologian of the late fifth and early sixth centuries, emphasizes the “self-subverting” character of theology- that in saying anything about God, we must recognize that God is not like us, and therefore be willing to *un-say* anything we have previously said.<sup>28</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius offers a three stage ascent toward knowledge of God – affirmation, denial, and unknowing. He gives an image of this process as a sculptor creating something out of a block of stone- the process of speaking about God is actually a chipping away, so that the artist can get at what is already there.<sup>29</sup> For Pseudo-Dionysius, gaining knowledge of God is similar to this – our process of perfecting our names for God involves attrition more properly than it does accretion. We must make claims about God, and then remove these claims, in order to approach that disposition most proper to theology, unknowing.

Pseudo-Dionysius’ first stage of naming God includes a pluriformity of names. Because Scripture also includes a diversity of names for God, theological language must be accordingly diverse. Somewhat counterintuitively, Pseudo-Dionysius holds that this

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<sup>28</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 20–1.

<sup>29</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

diversity of naming should also serve to keep us from idolatry –if God is both bird and stone, God must actually be identified with neither. This is the first stage of naming God.

The second, apophatic stage functions similarly. By denying the names that have previously been attributed to God, the individual comes to recognize that God cannot be identified with any thing. This apophatic stage must properly be understood not as making a kind of positive claim – as we unintentionally do when we say that God is impassible, and connote thereby that that God is emotionless. “Negation” suggests that we must “negate the negation between the affirmed and denied”, negating the contradiction between these things.<sup>30</sup> God is not a tree because God is more properly a flower, rather God is not a tree *because God is not a thing*. Denial involves further training the mind toward recognizing that God is not in fact a thing in the world at all, and so all language must be taken away and understood to apply differently to God than it does to creatures – “whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> As the individual negates the names that she has previously attributed to God, a recognition of what kind of being we are discussing comes into view.

This negation leads us properly into the third highest stage of knowledge of God-unknowing. This is the height of Pseudo-Dionysius’ mystical ascent. Unknowing is the space beyond affirmations and beyond names, where the only mode proper to God is silence. Unknowing is a positive claim in regard to what kind of being God is. God is not the highest thing in a category but God is beyond categories, beyond all things. God is not supreme among existents, but different altogether. In this space we recognize

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<sup>30</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 53.

transcendence for what it is- not separation but distinction, not agnosticism but freedom from the world of things. It is silence and speech, and the overcoming of the difference between them.

Pseudo-Dionysius is concerned primarily with emphasizing the degree to which divine existence exceeds and is distinct from human existence. God is superabundant life, but divine life is also different from human life. In this way, the distinction between Creator and creature is one of degree *and* kind. This qualifies the possibilities of human knowledge of God. The *kind* of being God is exists outside matter. God as Trinity is ‘Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness’.<sup>32</sup>

The Cause of all is above all and is not in-existent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible.<sup>33</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius claims that God is not properly an object of knowledge, but that this does not preclude proper knowledge of God. Transcendent things must be known transcendentally—the mode of knowledge must be appropriate to the thing known. Though there is an incommensurability between human ways of knowing and divine reality, Pseudo-Dionysius presents a way for the human mind to ascend toward God by way of its human mode of knowing, eventually leaving the limitations of mind behind and being received into God. For Pseudo-Dionysius, contemplation ends in mystical experience.

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<sup>32</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 135.

<sup>33</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 141.

All of these claims ought to prompt us to further worship of God because all of these claims derive from an affirmation of divine transcendence- God is wholly other, beyond being, who lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). Despair over the limits of human knowledge is not the appropriate disposition.

Pseudo-Dionysius' articulation of the function of theological language, read together with Thomas Aquinas, offers us a clear sense of what knowledge of God is possible. According to Thomas, we can say things that truly refer to God but we do not know *how* they refer. Our limitations with respect to divine speech have less to do with the limitations of the material than with the surpassing excellence of the divine. God exceeds human modes of knowledge, but this does not mean that human knowledge is flawed, or that we can know or say nothing true about God. It is just that *what* we can say must reflect what kind of being God is.

#### Knowing God Christologically

My argument to this point has consisted of prolegomena, illustrating by engagement with the theological tradition what can and cannot properly be affirmed of God. I have followed the biblical principle that humans cannot see God (Exod. 33:20), and yet also affirmed we can have true knowledge of how God is with the world. This knowledge is available both in Scripture and through theological reflection on what exists.

Christian theology affirms that God is immaterial and invisible. These two claims are correlated but not identical. Scripture affirms that no one can ever see God (Exod. 33:20; John 1:18), because sight requires that the thing seen is mediated through matter,

and God is immaterial.<sup>34</sup> Our inability to see God, however, is not due simply to the fact that God does not have a body-- God is not embodied because of what kind of being God is. An affirmation of transcendence, therefore, grounds also the Christian claim of divine invisibility.

Christians claim, however, that Jesus makes a decisive difference for our knowledge of God. Until the incarnation, God had appeared *in* creatures but not *as* a creature. I will rely on this significant semantic distinction throughout the rest of this dissertation in order to identify precisely what the mode of God's being in the incarnation entails. Until Jesus, there was no divine-human person. There were theophanies – miraculous occasions of divine presence (e.g., the burning bush in Exod. 3) and narrative accounts of divine provision (e.g., parting the Red Sea in Exod. 14), and yet until Jesus there was no personal revelation of divine love. Knowledge of God is not *only* available in Christ – the Hebrew Bible is filled with accounts of the mighty works of God, and the way in which these works communicate the presence of a divine reality that protected and provided for Israel. Nevertheless, until Jesus, we did not have an identifiable singular instance of God's material presence in the world.

Christians traditionally affirm that Scripture serves to reveal what kind of God it is that we serve, and the distinctive of the Christian Scriptures is their witness to Jesus Christ. For Christians, it is Jesus that serves as an unsurpassable source of knowledge about God. In Christ, in his body, his work, and his presence in the material the

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<sup>34</sup> Eastern and Western Christians disagree on whether God's essence will be seen in the life to come. Western Christians believe that we see the essence of God in the beatific vision, while Orthodox Christians affirm that we see only the divine energies. No Christians affirm that we can ever *comprehend* the divine essence.

challenges of knowledge of God are met. We see in Jesus God enmattered. We know God in Jesus Christ, and we can abstract from Christ's presence to a true knowledge of God.<sup>35</sup> That is why seeing Jesus is the most proper theological act.

Appreciating what I mean by this statement is going to structure everything else I say in this dissertation. It is my conviction that only in Christ can we have a vision of who God is. In Christ, therefore, the limitations of the material are somehow met without God ceasing to be transcendent or matter ceasing to be finite. The vision we receive there, in Christ, exceeds any other vision we might receive. It is not only possible, therefore, but also necessary that Christian theology begin and end with Jesus.

This is not to say that the image of Jesus has not unearthed significant challenges for the Christian church. Nor is it to say that the language of sight is itself unproblematic. Visions of Christ have been used to authorize violence, to solidify patriarchal social structures, and to minimize the severity of innocent suffering. Visions of Jesus must accompany faithful reading of the biblical text. But it is nevertheless only Jesus who offers us a particular, unsurpassed knowledge of God in this world, a knowledge that is not limited by divine transcendence but is made most excellent by it, as it is a vision of the divine in flesh.

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<sup>35</sup> "True knowledge" does not equal "comprehension", or sight of the divine essence.

## **Chapter 2: Nicaea, Chalcedon and the Possibilities of Christological Sight for Seeing**

### **Jesus**

#### Introduction

Chapter 1 explored the significance of the claim of the first part of John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God.” In Chapter 2, I move on to explore in greater depth the way the church has understood how the next part of the verse can be true: “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” The mere claim *that*



Jesus is God's Son does little to address the particularities of what Christians mean when they confess that Jesus is God. *That* Jesus is God's Son is a confession of faith. In Jesus we have God enmattered, a unique and unrepeatable incarnation of God. Christians can find grounding for this confession in the prologue to John's Gospel (especially John 1:14). However, such a confession leaves much to be desired in the way of explanation.

As Jaroslav Pelikan notes,

the simplistic identification of Jesus Christ as God could be said to make a certain kind of Christian sense... One could speak this way while kneeling to pray, but it was harder to do so when standing to teach or sitting to write.<sup>36</sup>

The years leading up to the Council of Nicaea in 325 can be seen in light of this desire to articulate clearly the historic confession "Jesus is Lord" by addressing its implications for God's way of being – in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The ecumenical creed that eventually arose from the Council of Nicaea evidences a desire in the fourth century church to 1) clarify the Son's (or Word's) role in the divine economy, especially 2) its implications for the relation between the Father and the Son, with respect to 3) the preexistence of the Son.<sup>37</sup> These claims are logically but not theologically separable. The affirmation of belief in "one God the Father Almighty,

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<sup>36</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 178.

<sup>37</sup> Though many of these distinctions arose already at the Council of Nicaea (325), the creedal formulation that we know today as the Nicene Creed comes from the Council of Constantinople (381). I will refer to the Nicene Creed throughout, as my interest is in pointing to the theological implications that have been received from the Creed itself, more than the historical Creed of Nicaea which differs slightly from the later Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. See Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012)

creator of heaven and earth” reflects two claims fundamental to the Judeo-Christian tradition: God is one, and God is Creator. What Nicaea claims thereafter about Jesus Christ is rooted in these two affirmations. The Nicene Creed, therefore, can be seen as a Christian extrapolation of Jewish claims rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

I have spent much of Chapter 1 discussing how what we can know of God mandates what we can say about God. Throughout I have relied on several distinctions between God and all other possible objects of predication to affirm that God is transcendent and so differs *differently* from everything else we talk about. This claim, insofar as it is proper to the Godhead, has implications for Christian speech about Jesus. Transcendence functions differently relative to Christ than it does to God the Father. God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, is transcendent as *totaliter aliter* – completely otherwise. By virtue of the Incarnation, God the Son is *Emmanuel* – God with us. Though the Son remains transcendent in his divinity even after the Incarnation (because transcendence is not a matter of spatial or physical distance), his enfleshment renders him visible, and thereby allows us to say things about God that we were unable to say previously. Christ’s being with us in bodily form is the condition for the Christian vision of Jesus, but the divine nature remains inherently and unalterably immaterial. The claim that God is always “otherwise,” plus the claim that God is Emmanuel – here with us – introduces a fundamental puzzle to Christian belief and doctrine. Though we cannot know how two realities, one transcendent and infinite, the other material and so necessarily finite, can be realized in one person, most Christians over the past millennium and a half have affirmed both.

Much is at stake in any attempt to speak Christianly about Jesus. Though my dissertation is most interested in making a case for what we *see* in Jesus, what Christians *say* about him – their Christological speech – is perhaps the more appropriate category for this chapter. In it I will be attempting to disentangle what was at stake theologically in two of the creedal formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Nicene Creed (381 CE) and the Chalcedonian definition (451 CE). These two historic documents were both affirmed by Christians attempting to address significant theological questions. At bottom they are working to clarify what we need to *say* about the union between God and creation in order to remain faithful to what we *see* in Jesus. Focus on the language of the creeds is, therefore, appropriate for discussing conciliar developments, so long as it is remembered that this language was used *in the interest* of declaring “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us” (1 John 1:1-2). It is important to remember that these creeds, though they emerged out of a political context affected by the partisan interests of their day, were intended to reflect the liturgical practices of the church. Clarifying the claims of the apostolic tradition (what was “handed down”) required precise theological formulations that were drafted amidst strong theological and political dissent. But much truly was at stake, not least making sense of the church’s practice of baptizing according to a threefold formula. This was one impulse behind this theological work (e.g., Did the liturgical language appropriated from Matt. 28:19 imply that one had been baptized into God, or into a man?). In any event, the two councils together reflect the dual dimensions of God’s Incarnate life –

Nicaea was concerned largely with what it means for God that Jesus is God, while Chalcedon concerned what it means for humanity that Jesus is God.

A few notes before proceeding might be helpful in orienting the reader toward my tack in discussing the Nicene Creed. First, my presentation does not intend to offer a comprehensive historical overview. This is not to devalue the significance of historical and political factors on theological development, nor to act as if the creed arose out of history as a “pure” religious document. No such text exists. My decision to discuss the Nicene Creed and *not* the historical details of the Councils of Nicaea or Constantinople is, therefore, intentional. Many classic treatments of conciliar development in general focus on the “purifying” function of such councils, wanting to emphasize that the Holy Spirit worked through history to bring *this very document* to life. Such a belief is not only naïve, it seems to miss the very purpose of theological speech. Theological speech functions to refine claims about God, but this process of refining occurs within the very real constraints of human language and knowledge. The desire to claim a final statement about God, therefore, shows a reluctance to embody the task of theology *as* humans, who are necessarily finite and dependent on divine grace. In other words, to treat a conciliar document as “final” would be to treat it as divine. Even the most conservative Christian statements on biblical inerrancy steer away from such a claim.

Seeking to identify which views leading up to a particular council were “orthodox” and which were “heretical” reveals a similar misunderstanding of theological speech. The two categories are interdependent and develop only in relation to each other. In Lewis Ayres’s words,

Within the tensions of pre-existing Christian belief are found the precursors both of what will come to be counted heretical and what will come to be counted

orthodox. In the course of these controversies what will count as orthodox emerges and defines the heretical in contradistinction to itself.<sup>38</sup>

This process of development is proper to human speech about God. I will not, therefore, arrange my discussion into orthodox and heresy (“winners and losers”), but in terms of the big theological questions that arose in the context of these debates.

Second, I intend to offer a theological reading of the creed itself, articulating what arises out of the creed *as speech about Jesus*. Hopefully out of such a discussion I will succeed at clarifying what in particular was theologically at stake at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

Finally, throughout, I have used gendered language for the Trinity. I do this for three reasons. First, the particular terms “Son” and “Father” get at some of the central theological questions relative to the relationship between the divine persons that Nicaea was hoping to address. Second, to use neutral language (“God” for the Father and “Word” for the Son) might allow readers to assume that in Jesus we have a divine principle and not a divine person. Also, language of “Word” might foreclude the claim that the person of God who was incarnate was a *very* particular “who”, and not simply one among many manifestations of God in the world. Put simply, God’s Son has a name, and it is Jesus. Gender-neutral language can potentially hide the stunning particularity of this theological claim.<sup>39</sup> Finally, while there are many proposed alternatives to traditional language that honor the metaphysics of the Trinity, none of them has achieved any degree

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<sup>38</sup> Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 79.

<sup>39</sup> Whether the maleness of Jesus presents a theological challenge for feminists is a sound theological question (to which I would offer a resounding no), but addressing such a question belongs to another piece.

of ecumenical consensus, so that use of traditional language, for all its evident shortcomings, is least likely to give rise to misunderstanding.<sup>40</sup>

### Nicaea and Christology

Soteriology – “Son of God.” That Jesus was made incarnate “for us men and for our salvation” is a claim fundamental to the Nicene Creed and to Christian belief long before Nicaea (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 5:9; Tit. 2:11).<sup>41</sup> Though the Nicene Creed arose out of a desire to squelch incorrect understandings of Jesus’ relation to God, all of the parties agreed that Jesus was the agent of human salvation. That Jesus is the one who saves indicates some particular relation between Jesus and God. Of course, there was not necessarily agreement in regard to the way in which Jesus can be said to save humanity from sin. But the level of unanimity on Jesus’ role as redeemer must not be overlooked in discussions of fourth century Christology.

Christians agreed that only *God* could save, but agreement on this did not lead to any kind of uniformity in regard to how *Jesus* is able to reconcile the world to God. And though it might initially seem that agreement on the end could allow for disagreement on the means (Christ is Savior, however it is that he does it!), at stake are significant claims relative to the status of Jesus and the unity of God, claims that in the end make all the difference between being able to uphold a logically coherent monotheism. If it was truly *as God* that the incarnate Son reconciled the world *to God*, it was necessary to find a way to uphold the deity of Christ. Otherwise, we would be baptized in the name of one who

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<sup>40</sup> For a good discussion of orthodox alternatives, see Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit* (Valley Forge: Continuum, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Though in the creed soteriological claims follow claims of Christ’s ontological relation to the Father, I am treating soteriological claims first here because of their logical priority.

was somehow less than God, or even into a human! The issue in particular, therefore, of whether Christ was human – a creature – or God – the Creator – became particularly contentious.

The Nicene claim for ontological equality between Father and Son is rooted in a particular soteriology. Athanasius (ca. 295-373 CE) is perhaps the clearest resource in the tradition for articulating this claim:

For his it was once more both to bring the corruptible to incorruptibility and to save the superlative consistency of the Father. Being the Word of the Father and above all, he alone consequently was both able to recreate the universe and was worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to intercede for all before the Father.<sup>42</sup>

While the issue of Christ's having to suffer on behalf of others raises important questions about the dynamics of atonement, what is crucial for the present discussion is

Athanasius's insistence on the Word's divinity as a condition of his capacity "to recreate all." By taking on human flesh, Jesus "assumed a body capable of death" in order that death might be banished "from them as straw from the fire."<sup>43</sup> Death could only be vanquished, however, if incorruptibility was joined with corruptible flesh. This was a metaphysical claim for Athanasius – the defeat of death necessitated the existence of one who could bring together a corruptible body with the incorruptible power of God.

Therefore, in order to save creation from corruption and remove the punishment of death from creation, Christ had to be fully God.

In his becoming Incarnate, Christ effected a new creation, one that we as humans are invited into (2 Cor. 5:17). What was needed to redeem the world was nothing less

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<sup>42</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 56.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

than God. Again, all sides agreed, “that salvation was the purpose of the coming of Christ and that immortality and impassibility were the consequence of that salvation.”<sup>44</sup>

The question was what had to be true of Christ for him to be able to do this work.

According to Athanasius and other Nicene theologians, for Christ to provide immortality and impassibility, those characteristics proper only to God, Christ had to be God.

How a human *could* be God raised significant questions relative to God and Creation. As Athanasius claimed, the traces of sin left all of creation with the effects of corruptibility. What was needed was one who was free of these traces in order to save creation from them, but since all of creation had been effected, what was needed also was one who was not a creature. The Nicene Creed, therefore, claims strongly that Christ was not a creature but rather Creator.

Preexistence – “Begotten Not Made.” Arguing for the Son’s preexistence with the Father is sometimes considered mostly as concerned with disabusing the Arian claim that, “there was [a time] when he was not.” Though historians caution against reference to “Arians” as a theological party, there was considerable sympathy among Christian bishops in the early fourth century for some kind of subordinationism, according to which the Father was the sole divine originator and sustainer of the cosmos.<sup>45</sup> Under such a view, the Son certainly could be – and was – affirmed as preexistent, but not as eternal and therefore not divine. To claim, “there was [a time] when he was not,” indicates that in the beginning the Father was alone (i.e., without a Son). Under such a view, the procession

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<sup>44</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, 232.

<sup>45</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 100–26.



of the Son from the Father was not natural and intrinsic to the Father, but occurred for an “economic” purpose (viz., creation and salvation).

Under this view, the Son was preexistent (i.e., existed before and as a condition of the creation of the world), but not eternal. Since eternity is necessary to divinity, under such subordinationist views the Son therefore could not be conceived of as “truly God.” In response to this view, at Nicaea it was affirmed that the Son’s existence was *intrinsic* to God. Just as to be Father was proper to God, to be Son was to be *eternally* God; indeed “the relationship of Father and Son is constitutive of the divine life.”<sup>46</sup> To say that God is Trinity is to make an affirmation of how God is God *in se*.

Of course such a distinction is only helpful so far as it goes – as Karl Rahner insisted, the immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity. But to insist that God’s actions in the world are internally consistent with God’s nature is not incompatible with insisting that there is an existence proper to God that is not necessitated by a particular need of creation. This insistence will require particular claims relative to the Son’s generation from the Father. That the Son exists eternally in the Trinity and not only to fill a need present in creation is a fundamental presupposition of the Nicene Creed. The inner relations of the Trinity are not only economic and thus are independent of the needs of creation. The relations of the Trinity are utterly free and spontaneous, indicative of the love that upholds all of Creation.<sup>47</sup> The Logos, the preexistent Son, is not created

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>47</sup> See Colin Gunton, “And in One Lord, Jesus Christ... Begotten, Not Made,” in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher Seitz (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 45.

(whether in or before time) but exists eternally. Christ is not just a means to an end, whether that end is creation or redemption. Rather,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-17)

The kind of relationship that exists between God the Father and God the Son is one characterized by mutuality and love, not subordination. The obedience that we see on behalf of Christ is offered to God freely because of their unity (John 10: 30), not because God the Father is ontologically superior.

That the Son exists eternally contains in it another theological claim central to the Nicene Creed and also to this dissertation. Christ is not a creature because creation itself exists through him *not* as emanation (ensuing first from God and then “through” Christ as through a funnel), but as a fully-fledged inaugurator of the process. Creation properly derives from the Son as it does from the Father.

If the Son is not one with God the Creator, there are two options. Both are theologically inadequate. First, if the Son is not Creator one might conclude that he is God but not in the same manner as the Father is God, so that we would have is a Son who is “divine” but somehow less than God the Father. This option impairs our ability to make foundational claims about God based on our vision of Jesus. Second, if the Son is not Creator, then he is a creature, and therefore unable to effect our salvation, for salvation must be the work of God from beginning to end.<sup>48</sup> Put simply, if the Son is a

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Torrance, “Being of One Substance with the Father” in Seitz, *Nicene Christianity*, 57.

creature what we see in him is not God. Our Christology, therefore, is impacted both in terms of what it can say soteriologically and epistemologically.

In claiming that the son was “begotten not made”, the creed is making an affirmation (even an exclamation!): Christ is not a creature. The Son’s existence is intrinsic to God, reflective of the Trinitarian identity and indicative of the Trinitarian life. It is characterized by generosity and freedom. In this mutuality “consists the distinctive love of God.”<sup>49</sup> To call Jesus the preexistent Son is to be able to affirm that the entirety of the work of God can be found in him. In Christ we have not only soteriology, but protology and eschatology as well; “the Son of God is the mediator not only of redemption but of creation also.”<sup>50</sup> The close conjunction of these two claims are too seldom emphasized in Christology. In redeeming creation from its corruption, Christ is continuing his work as Creator, and anticipating the redemption of all things. In him all things cohere, “and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). The reconciliation anticipated already in creation is effected in the cross and will be fully realized at the end of all things.

The benefit of Nicaea, therefore, is that what we encounter in Jesus is no less than God. To identify the preexistent and fully divine Son with the particular person of Jesus is the essential theological claim of Nicaea relative to Christ’s preexistence and identity as uncreated and thus divine. The one who is eternally begotten, therefore, is also this

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<sup>49</sup> Seitz, *Nicene Christianity*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 43. Arius would not necessarily have denied Christ as “mediator”, but certainly would have resisted his status as Creator.

very particular Jesus Christ. He “is Son quite apart from and in advance of being Jesus of Nazareth—for Jesus of Nazareth has a begetting in time—and yet he is not Son apart from being Jesus.”<sup>51</sup> The identity of the Son is to be God eternally, and to be Jesus in the Incarnation, the one “in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 2:9). Nicene Christology has cosmic implications. In him both as creator and redeemer our future hope is also found.

Identity and Distinction: *Homoousios*, Non-Identity, and the Road toward *Hypostasis*

We have up to this point made significant headway in articulating Christ’s divine identity. And yet much remains to be said regarding how Christ is the same as God. Perhaps the doctrinal innovation most clearly associated with the Creed of Nicaea is the affirmation that Christ was *homoousios* with God. What was affirmed by claiming that Christ was “consubstantial” with the Father was a unity in identity and operation between Father and Son. However, given the intrinsic difficulties with talking about God at all (see Chapter 1), describing how God who exists immaterially and Christ who exists as the Incarnate One could be one and the same raises very complex questions.

Language of “substance” attributed to God and the Son can go wrong in two ways. First, it can indicate that there is some definable “stuff” of which God is made. Because God is “otherwise,” God is not an identifiable entity alongside other entities and thus not categorizable as other entities are. There is a particular “whatness” of God that constitutes God as God, but because God is simple, there is nothing separable about God’s existence that would allow us to categorize this substance in terms of genus and species. God is what God is eternally and without diminution. There is no beginning or

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<sup>51</sup> Seitz, *Nicene Christianity*, 44.

end in God. Claiming that Christ is “consubstantial” with God can falsely suggest that there is some “thing” by which God can be identified, and furthermore some way in which Christ derives from the “stuff” of God.

Of course, in the Incarnation God *does* take on a (created and therefore finite) substance. Christ’s particular existence is God enmattered. This is the innovation of the Incarnation – in Jesus we see God because in him we have a visible, identifiable “someone,” who is God. Put another way (and as will be developed in the discussion of icons in the next chapter), with Christ we can use our crayons. What we draw is no less than God, but only because God is here as Jesus, revealed in matter, are we able to make images of God. Crayons do not get us very far when applied to God the Father, but the disciples could draw Jesus and recognize his physical particularities, particularities that identify him as Jesus, and subsequently as God. But the divine nature remains invisible and uncategorizable even after Christmas.

A second problem with speaking of substance relative to the Father and the Son is that it can be taken to indicate a “materialist diminution,” whereby the Son derives from the Father as a slice of bread derives from a whole loaf.<sup>52</sup> What results from this diminution is two entities whose *composition* is identical, but the *quantity* of the first is altered. The Son, it seems clear, does not derive from God in this way for two reasons. First (and as already noted), there is no “stuff” of God that is separable from what God is. The “particular whatness of God” is that God *is* God – divine simplicity means that God simply *is*.<sup>53</sup> Second, to call Jesus “Son” indicates neither that he is less than God, nor that

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<sup>52</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 94.

<sup>53</sup> For more on this concept, see Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 267-280.

God the Father is somehow less for begetting the Son (indeed, one might insist that in being God as the eternally self-giving one, God the Father is somehow “more” in begetting!). Because God is infinite, God’s self-giving does not entail any loss of divine substance. So the Son can have all that the Father has (John 5:30).

### Trinity

What *homoousios* intended to emphasize was a unity in act that presupposed an ontological and essential unity between God the Father and God the Son. Even the earliest Christians affirmed the soteriological necessity that Jesus was one with God.<sup>54</sup> Though the Council of Nicaea went quite a ways toward clarifying Trinitarian language and articulating the natural relation of the Father to the Son, it did not provide the language for discussing this distinction. That Christ was *homoousios* with God affirmed his essential divine status, but raised questions regarding the coherence of Christian monotheism. How could there be two distinct entities who were both simultaneously God?

Later in the fourth century, Trinitarian developments from the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzen) helped to clarify the relation between God the Father and God the Son, as well as the Holy Spirit (whose role “as the one who justified sinners and perfected the elect” logically required his own divine status).<sup>55</sup> Because salvation was a divine act from beginning to end that involved all three (viz., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), a way was needed to affirm all three persons as divine. The language that was deployed to this end was *hypostasis*, which Gregory of

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<sup>54</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Nyssa utilized to indicate a “particularizing characteristic”.<sup>56</sup> This is in distinction from what is universal and attributed therefore to the nature (*ousia*). These distinctions between hypostasis (particular) and *ousia* (universal) served to allow for a fuller articulation of soteriology, whereby the Son restores humanity to the Father through the work of the Spirit, without relying on a subordinationist or modalist view of the Father and Son, both of which collapse the Trinitarian life into the reality of God the Father.

Gregory of Nyssa uses the example of three human persons, all of whom can be classified under the heading “hypostasis”, to describe how the three persons of the Trinity can all share in the name “God”:

Peter, James, and John are called three humans, despite the fact that they share in a single humanity. And there is nothing absurd in using the word for their nature in the plural, if those who are thus united in nature be many. If, then, general usage grants this, and no one forbids us to speak of two as two, or of more than two as three, how is it that we in some way compromise our confession, by saying on the one hand that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have a single godhead, and by denying on the other that we can speak of three gods? For in speaking of the mysteries [of the faith], we acknowledge three hypostases and recognize there is no difference in nature between them.<sup>57</sup>

It was clear to Gregory that “because the divine operation is observed to be one, the divine act must also be one.”<sup>58</sup> In fact it was precisely this observed unity in operation that funded Gregory’s claims to God as Trinity. What is observed in the work of God from beginning to end is a unified work the purpose of which is to unite humanity with God. This singular focus provides its own doctrinal claim – the work of God is a

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<sup>56</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*, vol. 1 in *Christ and the Christian Tradition*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 373.

<sup>57</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, 221, quoting Gregory of Nyssa, “That There are Not Three Gods.”

<sup>58</sup> Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 348.

coherent unity, focused in a particular way in the person of Christ, who exists not as a site of rupture with the divine plan but as a location entirely consistent with God's will for the cosmos, indeed as the very affirmation of the Trinity's work in Creation. In Christ, God has said that this is precisely what God's work is like, and indeed that this is who God is. A doctrine of the Trinity, as Gregory affirmed, indicates that, "we do not see between the Father and the Son a partnership of Godhead but a unity."<sup>59</sup> We can look at Christ and say, "This is God." And we can confess the three hypostases, in their distinctiveness, as one God by virtue of their common *ousia*.

The Cappadocian distinction between hypostasis and *ousia* succeeded at indicating a particular entity and universal essence, respectively, but it lacked a certain philosophical thoroughness simply because it was still in its nascent form. Gregory was able to say that "the *hypostasis* is formed by a whole complex of *idiomata*" (characteristic particularities), but Gregory's emphasis was on the fact that "the identifying particularities make it possible to contemplate, to see, to distinguish the hypostasis."<sup>60</sup> However, as Grillmeier notes, the analysis of the Cappadocians concerned "the 'thing' more than the 'person'", the realm of "material categories" more than personal characteristics.<sup>61</sup> Though their instincts were correct in observing that the persons of the Trinity were unified by a single motivating nature and distinguished by a constellation of particular characteristics, the Cappadocians did not land on the concept of person ("the who") to locate these characteristics. Person is a particular philosophical innovation that really only emerges in the aftermath of Chalcedon.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 348, 359-360. The latter is a quote from Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>60</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 374.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 375.



### Towards the Chalcedonian Definition

The Nicene Creed affirmed that Jesus was *homoousios* with God and thus fully divine. How he was this while also being fully human became a theological focus in the post-Nicene period. While the Cappadocians offered the language of *hypostasis* to indicate a particular existent with unique located characteristics, the clear identification of hypostasis with “person” remained to be secured.

After the Nicene affirmation of the Son’s divine identity, serious theological concerns arose relative to Christian teaching. If the Son was truly God, how could God be said to be born and to die, as is said in the Gospel narratives? The *Theotokos* controversy (resolved in 431, at the Third Ecumenical Council) and the later theopaschite controversies (vindicated at the Second Constantinopolitan Council in 553) are the natural outgrowth of the Nicene *homoousion* claim. Thus, as Jaroslav Pelikan notes, after Nicaea the emphasis shifted from the pre-existent Son to the incarnate one.<sup>62</sup>

There are numerous heuristic devices adopted to separate theological opinions from one another in this period. Scholars often refer to the “Alexandrian” and “Antiochene” schools of theology, which emphasized Christ’s divinity and humanity, respectively; as well as between Christologies “from above” and “from below.” What was at stake for all was precisely *who* Christ is – the divine Son? a human being? Both? At Nicaea it was affirmed that Christ was *homoousios* with God. The Definition of Chalcedon (451) added that Christ was *homoousios* with humanity as well. Both of these claims were affirmed through further elaboration of the concept of hypostasis.

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<sup>62</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, 226.

*Theotokos*. Though it might surprise today's Protestants, Mary was at the heart of the next cycle of Christological questioning. The fourth-century church continued to be preoccupied with defending conceptions of the divine found in Greek philosophy – in this case, impassibility, which affirmed God's unchanging reality. Of course this affirmation became complicated when related to God Incarnate. Conceiving of God as inhabiting someone's womb and then undergoing the normal processes of human development struck some theologians as particularly problematic, and even blasphemous. For Nestorius (386-450 CE), the devotional claim that Mary was the mother of God (*Theotokos*, literally "God-bearer") implied full divinity to the embryonic Christ. Such a claim could not square with Nestorius' view of divinity. Indeed for Nestorius the crucial difficulty was the idea that the impassible God could be born.

The earliest recorded use of *Theotokos* dates to 324, in the encyclical of Alexander of Alexandria against Arianism.<sup>63</sup> The liturgical use of language calling Mary "God-bearer" raised some significant theological concerns for those more comfortable with a view of the Son that emphasized his impassibility. For many, the idea of an impassible divine identity was incommensurate with the necessary corruptibility that is attendant to humanity. Nestorius, whose name is so often identified with heresies denying the full divinity of Christ, found the language of *Theotokos* particularly repellant: "God does not have a mother – a creature did not produce the Creator."<sup>64</sup> Jesus was an instrument for God and not to be identified directly with the Son. In his First Sermon against the *Theotokos* (ca. 428), Nestorius argues:

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<sup>63</sup> Pelikan, *Emergence*, 241.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

That which was formed in the womb is not in itself God. That which was created by the Spirit was not in itself God. If that were the case, we should manifestly be worshippers of a human being and worshippers of the dead. But since God is within the one who was assumed, the one who was assumed is styled God because of the one who assumed him.<sup>65</sup>

The theological problem for Nestorius lay in identifying God directly with the human being Jesus Christ because of the passibility and mortality necessarily attendant to humanity. Indeed it was Nestorius' thoroughly transcendent view of God that interfered with his ability to confess Jesus' full divinity.

Nestorius was thoroughly Nicene and so affirmed without any qualification the divinity of the *Son*. Moreover, he sought to affirm as strongly as possible the Son's presence in Jesus: "God is undivided from the one who appears, and therefore I do not divide the honor of that which is not divided."<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, Nestorius resisted ascribing a fully divine identity to the human being Jesus of Nazareth, because doing so in his mind mitigated Jesus' true humanity. Nestorius insisted on separating God the Son and the human person of Jesus in order to respect the integrity of the divine and human realities respectively.

Metaphysically, Nestorius' Christology functions by identifying two discrete identities in the Incarnate one - the divine Son on the one hand, and the human being Jesus of Nazareth on the other. These exist side by side, but they do not compose a "true ontological union"—a single union in the sense of a single identity. God "formed out of the Virgin a temple for God the Logos, a temple in which he dwelt."<sup>67</sup> For Nestorius the

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<sup>65</sup> Richard A. Norris and William G. Rusch, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 130.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

relation between the human and the divine natures is one where each nature retains its own identifiable characteristics *and* these characteristics must be parsed out between two distinct hypostases. Nestorius was worried that if there was not a human hypostasis distinct from the divine, then there wasn't a human nature either. For him *hypostasis* meant concrete individual, so to say that Christ lacked a human hypostasis separate from the Word meant that Christ wasn't fully human. This worry can only be corrected by the later specification of hypostasis not as particular (v. universal) but as who (v. what).

From Nestorius' perspective, however, the human and divine natures exist together in what he described as a moral union, but not inseparably. This way of thinking leads Nestorius to his theological claims regarding the person of Jesus. Because for Nestorius *hypostasis* means "concrete instance" and *not* "a particular person," he is unable to conceive of how the impassible one would undergo suffering and death. This for him is a category error: God cannot die, therefore Christ cannot be properly God:

That which was formed in the womb is not in itself God. That which was created by the Spirit was not in itself God. That which was buried in the tomb was not in itself God. If that were the case, we should manifestly be worshipers of a human being and worshipers of the dead.<sup>68</sup>

In the issue of the *Theotokos*, Nestorius conceded that Christ was due veneration because he was God in the qualified sense described above (viz., by virtue of moral union), but this honor was inappropriately being attributed to his human form in liturgical use of *Theotokos*. Nestorius' language reveals how he thought of the relationship between Christ's two natures: Christ is an instrument, a meeting place, a pledge, a temple, and an image, but not truly a unity between God and humanity.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 135-145. All of this language appears in Nestorius' Second Letter to Cyril.

The Greek word Nestorius repeatedly uses for the union of divine and human in the incarnation, *synapheia*, describes two things that are conjoined, but not essentially united.<sup>70</sup> The Nicene Creed “predicates of one and the same subject, the eternal Lord and Son, eternal procession from the Father and a temporal birth in the incarnation.”<sup>71</sup> Nestorius recognizes this orthodox emphasis: “For this inexpressible unity is not made up from the natures, but it is an inexpressible unity *of* the natures.”<sup>72</sup> The problem for Nestorius comes in speaking of Christ, the unified subject to whom both human and divine characteristics must be addressed. Nestorius “regards ‘Christ’ superficially only as the sum of the two natures and sees these in turn merely as a collection of qualitative expressions.”<sup>73</sup> Christ is “the sum of the properties of Godhead and manhood,” but he is “sum” in a mathematical or compositional sense, in which one plus one equals two – and from which one can therefore be subsequently subtracted – not a true union of both.<sup>74</sup>

Nestorius’ inability to speak more persuasively about the conceptual problem of Christ’s unity reflects more about his historical location than his own intellectual deficiencies. The concept of *hypostasis* that emerges from the doctrine of hypostatic union defined at Chalcedon was still in need of refinement. Nestorius does use *hypostasis*, but (following the Cappadocians) he takes hypostasis to mean concrete particularity. He therefore feels compelled to speak of a divine hypostasis *and* a separate human hypostasis in Christ as a means of affirming the presence of genuine divinity and

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<sup>70</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 459. Grillmeier is hesitant to say whether “synapheia” for Nestorius indicates a substantial unity.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

humanity in Jesus, but in doing so he is thinking of a particular instance of a generic nature. A hypostasis for Nestorius is simply the concrete realization of a nature, whether that of God, humanity, or a rose, not a particular mode of existence (viz., “whoness”). Though Nestorius can speak of “one and the same subject” in Jesus, he is referring to two natures joined in *synapheia* and not (to anticipate the later language of Chalcedon) of two natures hypostatically united in a particular “who.”

Though Nestorius seems to understand that the divinity and humanity in Christ are “one and the same” subject, he rejects what would later be called the *communicatio idiomatum* (“communication of properties”): the ascription of human traits (i.e., features characteristic of a human nature) to the divine subject (such as saying that God suffered on the cross), or divine traits to a human (calling Jesus Creator).<sup>75</sup> Nestorius is trying to resist a theological confusion of the two natures, and thus a denial of their integrity. The confusion that results, however, is metaphysical:

Nestorius ventures to make both eternal and temporal expressions about [Christ]. He thus reduces the subject ‘Christ’ to the sum of the two natures and only rarely leaves room to consider the bearer, the subject of these natures. This preference of Nestorius for ‘nature’ instead of ‘subject’ or ‘person’ seems to be decisive. Wherever he says ‘God’ or ‘man’ in his discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum* we must read ‘Godhead’ or ‘manhood.’<sup>76</sup>

Nestorius could logically worship Christ and attribute his worship *only* to his divinity without honoring Christ’s human nature: “I divide the natures, but I unite the worship.”

Nestorius does not deny that there are soteriological implications to such a view; in fact, he articulates just what they are:

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 454.

If you want to lift up someone who is lying down, do you not touch body with body and, by joining yourself to the other person, lift up the hurt one while you, joined to him in this fashion, remain what you were? This is the way to think of the mystery of the incarnation.<sup>77</sup>

For Nestorius, the Son always remained what he was – truly divine – and by virtue of his being God was able to effect human salvation. Through Christ as the one with whom the Son is united we are truly saved, but the Son remains distinct from the human being Jesus who is encountered. In short, for Nestorius, the human flesh of Christ does not make perfect our perception of the divine. The implications of Nestorius’ view for this dissertation are particularly pronounced. For Nestorius when the disciples saw Jesus they saw a human being who was *not*, strictly speaking, the Son. When Thomas touched Jesus’ wounds (John 20:24-29), that encounter was with the human person Jesus. He was not touching God the Son. Our ability to make direct theological claims about God from our vision of Jesus is lost if we accept Nestorius’ denial of the communication of properties.<sup>78</sup>

Cyril and Apollinarius. We have seen that Nestorius’ lack of a personal concept of hypostasis precluded his ability to confess the true unity of Jesus and the Son. For Nestorius, in order to affirm both natures it was necessary to affirm a duality in Jesus – divinity and humanity each have their own reality, and so for the two to exist simultaneously there must exist Godhead and humanity. Nestorius was not ignorant of

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<sup>77</sup> Norris and Rusch, *The Christological Controversy*, 125.

<sup>78</sup> Karl Barth warned about just such a Christology in *Church Dogmatics* II-2: for Barth, Jesus’ divine and human nature were precisely *not* “two planks rashed together” but instead a real substantial unity of human and divine. What is at stake here is our ability to make coherent theological claims that are rooted in Christology, not only in second order theological reflected but in first order apostolic witness. Only by holding to claims of a substantial hypostatic union can we make such claims.

the distinctiveness of divinity – indeed it was his very emphasis on divine transcendence (a transcendence that existed in a competitive manner) that prevented his calling Mary *Theotokos*. For Nestorius such an appellation neglected a fundamental characteristic of what it is to be God- impassibility.

Nestorius’s chief opponent was Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), who was an ardent defender of the *Theotokos*. For Cyril, to be the incarnate God the Son is to be embodied.

We do not worship a human being in conjunction with the Logos, lest the appearance of a division creep in by reason of that phrase “in conjunction with.” No, we worship one and the same, because the body of the Logos is not alien to him but accompanies him even as he is enthroned with the Father.<sup>79</sup>

Cyril rejected Nestorius’ preferred *synapheia* and replaced it with the *mia physis* (one nature) formula. Instead of two natures conjoined, Cyril wanted to affirm that what we have in Christ is *one nature*.

Theologically, what was most important to Cyril was affirming the unity of Christ. For him, Nestorius’s Christology posited an unacceptable division in Christ. What happened in the Incarnation according to Cyril was that God truly became human without ceasing to be God: “God the Logos did not come into a man, but he ‘truly’ became man, while remaining God.”<sup>80</sup> For Cyril, “incarnation is something quite different from being ‘conjoined’ with a man” (Nestorius’ preferred formula).<sup>81</sup> For Cyril the body of Christ was truly the Son’s, and the humanity was, correspondingly, united to God in such a way that what is worshipped in Jesus is truly God. This union had a “substantial character”— that is, it addressed what Jesus *was* in terms of psychosomatic

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<sup>79</sup> Norris and Rusch, *The Christological Controversy*, 134.

<sup>80</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 477.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*



composition.<sup>82</sup> It was not a “mere seeming” or a psychological union alone. Jesus was fundamentally divine and human.

It was in order to make such claims that Cyril adopted the *mia physis* formula initially propounded by Apollinaris of Laodicea (d. 390). In the dynamic dialectic of fourth century Christology, this moved him away from Nestorius and closer to Apollinaris – a strategy that created problems of its own. For Apollinaris the *mia physis* formula had best represented the “vital, dynamic relation between Logos and flesh,” securing the point that the animating energy of Jesus was divine.<sup>83</sup> This emphasis on unity, however, came at the expense of attributing full humanity to Jesus: in order to express the vital union of Logos and flesh, Apollinaris claimed that the Logos took the place of the human *nous*.<sup>84</sup> The degree to which Christ could be said to possess a full humanity, therefore, came into question.

Apollinaris’ insight was an anthropological one. He sought to speak of a real union of two integral persons “while preserving the authenticity and autonomy of each of the essences without the absorption of one by the other (which is the conception of monophysitism).”<sup>85</sup> Here the mathematical puzzle of the incarnation again comes to the fore – “two complete entities cannot become one.”<sup>86</sup> The soteriological necessity that

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>84</sup> *Nous* is variously translated, but corresponds to the “spiritual principle” of a person. For Apollinaris, it is this superior principle (common to all humans) that the *Logos* replaced in Christ. Both Adam and Christ possess a body and a soul, their difference is in terms of this third principle. I am leaving it untranslated so as not to cause additional confusion. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), esp. 7-11.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>86</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 332.

Christ is divine remains the focus. Therefore, Apollinarius allows that the human nature of Christ is incomplete – without a *nous* – in order to argue a true ontological unity.

In order to secure the fundamental identity of the human Christ with the eternal Son, Apollinarius held that the union between divine and human in Christ is essential and not accidental. He sought to avoid a unity that was prone to conceptual decomposition:

The idea of a merely external, accidental gift of grace to a ‘mere man’... is constructed too loosely for him. It can fall apart at any time, as ‘division’ is already an element in its outlines. It is therefore his purpose to interweave and join together God and man essentially and inseparably in Christ.<sup>87</sup>

What results, therefore, is a picture of Christ that possesses a diminished human psychology. The “vital, dynamic relationship between Logos and flesh” is impossible for Apollinarius to concede without an essential, ontological union that in turn leads to a diminished humanity in the person of Christ.<sup>88</sup> Christ was “clothed” in human flesh: “He is not a human being but is like a human being, since he is not coessential with humanity in his highest part.”<sup>89</sup> The Christology that results succeeds in its affirmation of the deep union between God and humanity in Christ, but fails to adequately consider the possibilities for the assumption of complete humanity that the Incarnation in fact provides.

Like Nestorius, Apollinarius lacked the subtleties required to express his view of the true synthesis of the two natures. Though Cyril of Alexandria’s emphasis on unity is often equated with the dominant and orthodox position leading up to the Chalcedonian definition, his articulation of the unity of “One Lord and Christ” (borrowed from

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>89</sup> Norris and Rusch, *The Christological Controversy*, 109.

Apollinarius) did not possess a clear metaphysical grounding either. He was, however, the innovator of the symmetric claim of Christ's consubstantiality: for him – in contrast to both Apollinarius and Nestorius – Christ was both *homoousios* with God and *homoousios* with us:

This same one is coessential with the Father, as to his deity, and coessential with us, as to his humanity, for a union of two natures has occurred, as a consequence of which we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord.<sup>90</sup>

It was indeed fidelity to the Nicene Creed that motivated further discussion of the relation between the two natures in Christ. What was affirmed about Jesus in claiming that he was *homoousios* with us has deep soteriological implications. Not only that he was able to render our salvation, but what that salvation entails are both addressed under a claim of Christ's full humanity. Because Christ was fully human, he is able to offer humanity back to God. Because Christ is also truly "one of us", he is able to image for us what a deified humanity looks like. And finally, because Christ is truly human, we with human eyes are able to see what God is like (2 Cor. 3:18).

Hypostasis Revisited. Cyril's writings emphasize that the unity between God and humanity in Christ is a true union, not two distinct identities conjoined. Cyril also emphasizes that Christ is *homoousios* with humanity- truly human. In order to occupy this position "midway between Apollinaris and Nestorius" and remain faithful to the theological consensus at Nicaea, Cyril needed to articulate more clearly the unity exhibited between God and humanity in the person of Christ.<sup>91</sup> The union that exists is a true union, but Christ lacks none of the characteristics that make us human (e.g., a human

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 142 from Cyril's "Letter to John of Antioch."

<sup>91</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 479.

soul or mind). For Cyril “a distinction of the natures is necessary, a division is reprehensible.”<sup>92</sup> To defend this position he adopts language of a “union in the order of the hypostasis.”<sup>93</sup>

In his second letter to Nestorius, Cyril works to talk about union of the two natures under the hypostasis:

We do not say that the Logos became flesh by having his nature changed, nor for that matter that he was transformed into a complete human being composed out of soul and body. On the contrary, we say that in an unspeakable and incomprehensible way, the Logos united himself, in his hypostasis, flesh enlivened by a rational soul, and in this way became a human being and has been designated “Son of man”... Furthermore, we say that while the natures which were brought together into a true unity were different, there is nevertheless, because of the unspeakable and unutterable convergence into unity, one Christ and one Son out of the two.<sup>94</sup>

What Cyril is trying to do in this discussion of a “union in the order of the hypostasis” is to articulate the way in which the Logos truly became one singular identity. Though he lacks sophisticated language, “it is clear that Cyril in fact transfers the unity in Christ into the ‘personal’ realm while ascribing a duality to the natures.”<sup>95</sup> This distinction is particularly clear when read alongside Nestorius’ use of hypostasis, which frequently indicates concrete particularity, ie, to distinguish God the Son from Jesus. Cyril intended instead to secure a substantial, actual unity between God and humanity in the person of Jesus without altering either nature.

Cyril’s use of hypostasis has not reached the clarity of interpretation that it will later reach after Chalcedon. In his efforts to isolate the theological inadequacies of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Norris and Rusch, *The Christological Controversy*, 134.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 132–3.

<sup>95</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 482.

Nestorianism, Cyril neglects to distinguish between nature and hypostasis—he uses the two synonymously.<sup>96</sup> In fact, his emphasis on unity functionally downplays the humanity of Christ, treating it as a kind of “accidental zero.”<sup>97</sup> Though Cyril repeatedly refers to two identities in the Incarnation, what is theologically stressed is the “one Incarnate nature of God the word” and the soteriological necessity of the human nature, not a functional explanation of its actual reality. In this way he mimics the Apollinarian model described above.

Cyril’s theology emphasized the unity of the God-man under the hypostasis.<sup>98</sup> For him this was a soteriological necessity- “otherwise it would have been the blood of a mere man that offered salvation.”<sup>99</sup> He repeatedly refers to the inability of humans to grasp the mystery – his is an “antinomy clothed in apophatics.”<sup>100</sup> Though Cyril’s emphasis on unity triumphed as the orthodox position against Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus, his position has the potential to lead to either Monophysitism of the Eutychian variety (where the divine overwhelms the human nature) or Apollinarianism (where Jesus does not possess a human *nous*).

Cyril’s difficulty is understandable. There are three terms circling here that need careful definition if incoherence is to be avoided. The first, nature, concerns the essence of an identity. Humans have a human nature, God a divine one, and Jesus somehow *both*. Person, of course, introduces the puzzle – Paul is a human person, God a divine one, and Jesus, though fully human, is somehow a divine person. Because of the presumed

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<sup>96</sup> Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 23.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. This was, of course, Nestorius’ concern.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

incompatibility between divine and human traits, many of the positions I have briefly considered offered a view of Christ where either the divine or human person overshadowed the other reality in the Incarnate Christ. All of these positions considered divine and human natures as entities with a competitive relation, so that the existence of one nature functionally occludes the other.

What Cyril and Apollinarius were both pushing for was a theological claim that emphasized the essential unity between divine and human that existed in the concrete human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Cyril adopted the Apollinarian language of “one incarnate nature” to stress the unity of the divine person in Jesus. Language of hypostasis was utilized and continually refined in order to articulate this very particular, singular identity of Jesus.

The Chalcedonian Definition. The language of the Chalcedonian Definition is particularly elegant, drawing from previous theological engagements (Nicaea in particular) to construct a framework for speaking about Jesus. The Definition itself is composed of two paragraphs, the first focusing on “the selfsame one”- the unity of the subject, the second utilizing four privatives (all of which begin with the Greek “alpha”) to describe how the two natures cohere. One can therefore divide the Definition here into claims relative to the existence of single identity (first paragraph), and claims relative to those characteristics that comprise that identity (second paragraph).

There are in the first paragraph of the Definition four claims affirming Christ’s “same-ness” (*not* similarity!) to humanity.<sup>101</sup> The Definition claims that Jesus is perfect

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<sup>101</sup> Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 109.

in deity and humanity, actually God and actually human, with a rational soul and body, and of the same reality as God and as us (the double *homoousios*). Structurally these claims form an echo, a repetition that illuminates the coherence of theological claims that are seemingly contradictory. Jesus not only possesses perfection in terms of his divine-human existence, but he is *actually* both divine and human. He has a rational soul and a material body (traits which for Nestorius precluded his being truly divine) - but he is nonetheless *homoousios* with God. The logical ordering of these claims seems to raise the question of Christ's identity and then answer it with its opposite – though Christ is perfect in humanity, he is nonetheless truly God. Though he possesses a rational soul and body, he is nonetheless *homoousios* with the divine. The language of the Definition does not avoid the disagreements that led to it, but rather utilizes them in order to solidify its radical theological claims.

The second part of the first paragraph uses the Nicene Creed to further emphasize Christ's divinity with an additional logical pairing. “The same was begotten from the Father before the ages as to the divinity” ensures the Son's eternal preexistence with the Father. This claim relative to the eternal existence of the Son precludes any confusion of Christ with a creature. Also, in these “latter days for us and our salvation was born as to his humanity from Mary the Virgin Mother of God”. By deploying again the language of “the same”, the Definition is drawing its readers back to the use of this word at the beginning of the paragraph, even as it is making its most radical theological claims yet: the self-same Jesus is both the preexistent Son *and* the one born of the Virgin. What we have in the first paragraph is a clear articulation of the two natures of Christ.

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The second paragraph addresses how we apprehend the two natures, and how this apprehension functions. The paragraph opens with the claim that Christ is “in two natures” (not “from two natures”, as Chalcedon’s opponents would prefer).<sup>102</sup> These three words already indicate the theological force of the paragraph: “the unity of Christ is not to be sought in the sphere of the natures.”<sup>103</sup> Though the two natures exist, a blending is not to be made of them: “the nature is the unimpaired principle of the *distinction* in Christ”.<sup>104</sup> The unity is to be found elsewhere, as we will see shortly.

Next the four privatives appear- our apprehension occurs “without confusion or change, without division or separation.”<sup>105</sup> These four privatives are often translated to retain their consonance in Greek- “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.” The language of the Definition is again referring to previous theological arguments within the Christian community. Confusion of the two natures so that one nature predominated was a theological accusation made against Eutyches, Nestorius was guilty of dividing the natures, and Apollinarius famously contrasted them, so that the noetic functioning of Christ could be undeniably affirmed as divine. Christ is, therefore, entirely composed of these two natures – there is no way to conceive of who Jesus is

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<sup>102</sup> This was Eutyches’s position, but it also became the rallying cry of miaphysites (like Severus) who rejected Eutyches’s denial of Christ’s true humanity but still didn’t like the two-natures language of Chalcedon.

<sup>103</sup> Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 549.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 541; emphasis mine.

<sup>105</sup> This translation is from Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds*, 109. Various attempts at translating the four “alpha privatives” (*asunkutos, atreptos, adiairetos, achoristos*) typically choose to emphasize either the consonance of the pairing or the theological claims (by attempting a more direct theological translation). Pelikan chooses “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” (Pelikan, *Emergence*, 264). Grillmeier also speaks of “confusion” and “separation” (Grillmeier, *Apostolic Age*, 537-40).



apart from his divine-humanity. The two natures cannot be separated from one another, nor have they combined to form a new kind of thing. Though the divine and human have not been mixed or confused, they nonetheless exist as a union that is indissoluble, because they exist *as a single hypostasis*: Jesus of Nazareth, who would not be who he is without the presence of both natures.

This language of hypostasis is the focus of the next part of the Definition. In order to identify how both natures exist without one overwhelming the other, the Definition identifies one hypostasis and one “person” (*prosopon*) in Jesus. Though, as we have seen, the term hypostasis was deployed for important theological purposes already in the fourth century with the Cappadocians, it often indicated a distinction in kind (particular versus universal) rather than defining personal identity as such. With the Chalcedonian Definition we have the utilization of both hypostasis and *prosopon* to identify what kind of being Jesus was:

The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one Person [*prosopon*] and one hypostasis. He is not split or divided into two Persons, but he is one and the same only begotten Son, God the Word, The Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>106</sup>

The Chalcedonian Definition adds some terminological clarity to what already in the Nicene Creed was affirmed *theologically* - the necessity of Christian worship of Jesus Christ as *one* Lord.

The *kind* of person Jesus is is further delineated by the one hypostasis/one person language of the Definition. Jesus was not a different kind of person in mode but in

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<sup>106</sup> Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds*, 109-110.

identity – “In Jesus the Logos wills and acts humanly.”<sup>107</sup> The one whom we see in Jesus, therefore, is God. But Christ is not any different with respect to nature (i.e., in terms of *what* he is as a human being) from any other humans “The difference between Jesus and all other humans is one of predication.”<sup>108</sup> We call Jesus “God”, but this indicates no diminution (or increase!) in his humanity. The humanity of Jesus is God’s, but Jesus is not human through another mode or form than what is common to all of humanity. It is just that in the Incarnation God has claimed this humanity for God’s own. The transformation that ensues from that union is what is notable, but it is not something that distinguishes Jesus’ humanity in itself from that of any other human. Because Jesus is God, *who* he is is unique, but *what* he is remains common to us.

Further Refinements of Language of Person: The Theopaschite Controversy. It is this very distinction between *who* and *what* that will come to define the essence of Chalcedonian Christology, but at the time of the Council itself the distinction was still in its nascent form. At issue is what is apprehended in the person of Christ. Though what we see in Jesus might seem to be a rather simple question, it contains within it the heart of the pre- and post-Chalcedonian Christological disagreements. At base, the question concerns whether the unity that we apprehend is genuine or simply apparent:

At issue is “who” lies inside the particular *prosopon* of Christ, and what is the starting point for determining that. Both Nestorianism and Cyrillian Chalcedonianism acknowledge that there is one Christ who is one particular or *hypostasis* or *prosopon*, and that furthermore this one Christ is divine and human in his natures.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ian A. McFarland, “Spirit and Incarnation: Toward a Pneumatic Chalcedonianism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 13, doi:10.1111/ijst.12047.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Justinian, *On the Person of Christ: The Christology of Emperor Justinian*, trans. Kenneth Paul Wesche (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997), 17.

This agreement on the Christ who appeared does not harmonize the more fundamental ontological disagreements regarding who Christ *is*. As Wesche notes, Nestorius could wholeheartedly affirm Christ's "*undivided appearance*" without subscribing to an ontological unity relative to his person.<sup>110</sup>

It is at this point that the theological development of the concept of "personhood" becomes vitally necessary in order to clarify the import of what was already stated in the Chalcedonian Definition. Wesche notes that Cyril and Justinian "start from 'inside' the *prosopon* of Christ, i.e. from the Divine Logos. Nestorius, on the other hand, and the theologians who share his Christological perspective, start from "outside" Christ, i.e. from that which can be visibly seen, the "undivided appearance" or *prosopon*."<sup>111</sup> The unity that Nestorius affirmed was therefore an apparent and not an ontological one.

Post-Chalcedon, the significance of Nestorius' somewhat pedantic distinction (between existence and appearance) becomes apparent. Cyril and Justinian insisted on an essential unity, a union under the hypostasis. This union, as Wesche notes,

understands hypostasis in terms of identity, i.e. the subjective core, the "self" or "who" of Christ, which is one, and is seen to be the Divine Logos himself so that the terms "Jesus", "Christ," and "Divine Logos" are identical, referring to one and the same subject. The *hypostasis*, then, is the foundation, not the product, of the union, for it is the eternally existing Divine Logos, the one through whom all things came into being in the first place.<sup>112</sup>

By identifying hypostasis as a personal concept, Christ's existence as one both "truly human" and "truly God" is secured.

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

Just as theological questions arose from the ascription of Mary as *Theotokos*, the nature of intra-Trinitarian relations came into question again when a group of monks insisted on saying that “one of the Trinity was crucified.”<sup>113</sup> The statement itself was quite innocuous, as already at Nicaea the church affirmed that “for us and our salvation” Christ was made incarnate and then crucified. The implications of such a statement, however, required a further articulation of the relation between the divine and human in Jesus, and of the relationship of Jesus to the immanent Trinity.

The central issue of the Theopaschite Controversy was whether and how the Trinity suffered in Christ’s crucifixion.<sup>114</sup> Opponents of the formula worried about its implications for divine impassibility – how to affirm divine impassibility on Good Friday without reverting to a low Christology became the central theological question of the early part of the sixth century. The answer required was a further clarification of the relation between nature and hypostasis.

Put squarely, Justinian in his “Edict on the True Faith” writes that “nature and hypostasis do not mean the same thing.”<sup>115</sup> What Justinian is indicating is a unity of the person under the hypostasis. In doing so, he is trying to secure against a two hypostases composition of Christ, where the individual who suffered on the cross is identified as human and not divine: “What Nestorius in fact wanted to exclude unconditionally was the statement that the ‘divinity’ suffered. He expressed this, however, in concrete terms:

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<sup>113</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *The Development of the Discussion About Chalcedon*, vol. 2 in *Christ in Christian Tradition*, (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 317.

<sup>114</sup> Dated between 518-535, from the appearance of the Scythian monks to Pope John’s decision.

<sup>115</sup> Justinian, *On the Person of Christ*, 178.

the God in Christ did not suffer, the human being Christ suffered.”<sup>116</sup> Such a denial that the hypostasis of the human nature is divine threatens the unity that is necessary for a theologically and psychologically coherent understanding of the person of Christ. What was required was a further clarification regarding the relation between nature and hypostasis, or nature and person.

Justinian claims that “one and the same suffered and redeemed us”, and yet the two natures remain distinct:

Wherefore, when we speak of one composite Christ constituted of each nature, that is of divinity and humanity, we do not introduce confusion into the union. And while we known our one Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos of God who was incarnate and became man, in each nature, this is in divinity and humanity, we do not introduce into his one *hypostasis* a division or separation of parts, but we indicate the difference of the natures of which he is composed which is not abolished because of the union since each nature exists in him.<sup>117</sup>

Justinian secures this difference by insisting, in line with the Definition of Chalcedon, on one *hypostasis*, under which exists two natures. Where he goes beyond the explicit language of Chalcedon is in the explicit statement that the hypostasis is the personal element of Christ - that which identifies him as a particular “someone.” Were the divine nature absent, Christ would cease to be the particular who that he was, one who “is Son of God by nature, [while] we are [sons of God] by grace.”<sup>118</sup> As the particular who that he is, Jesus partakes of both divine and human natures, but that composition does not preclude the fundamental union that allows him to be identified as the very particular person of Christ. The theopaschite controversy forced an articulation of the relationship

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<sup>116</sup> Grillmeier, *Development*, 333.

<sup>117</sup> Justinian, *On the Person of Christ*, 165–6.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 167–8.

between nature and hypostasis, a relation that allowed a doctrine of impassibility to be retained while simultaneously claiming that Jesus was God. What Christians learned to say, subsequently, is that Jesus suffered in his human nature, but the divine nature did not suffer, even while Jesus in his divine person hypostatized both divine and human. The two natures reality of Christ, therefore, becomes logically necessary if the crucifixion of Christ is to be taken as having any soteriological efficacy. If we are saved in some way through Jesus' suffering, Jesus must both suffer and be divine.<sup>119</sup>

After the theopaschite controversy and the Second Council of Constantinople that resolved it, we have secured a view of one person in two natures that remains the Christological metaphysic for a "high" Christology. That Christ is the divine "Who" opens up significant potential for Christological seeing as a theological act. For this dissertation, securing the two natures hypostatically united is critically important. Nestorius could and did affirm a two-natures Christology. What needs to be said is more than this, however—in order for seeing Jesus to be seeing God, the single divine identity needs to be revealed through the *human* nature of Christ. The hypostatic union allows us to affirm the *communicatio idiomatum*, and it ensures that our vision of Christ reveals who God is.

This is the coherence of Chalcedonian Christology - that we see one person, even as we affirm two natures. It is also why *seeing* Jesus contributes something critical to the work of Christology. Though the conceptual framework exists to affirm two things simultaneously in language (antinomy and polyphony are examples of this, the latter

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<sup>119</sup> A Nestorian Christology, therefore, leads at some point to an exemplarist view of atonement.

popularized in Biblical studies by the use of Mikhail Bakhtin), the visual medium doubtless holds advantages in this area.<sup>120</sup> That images inherently contain the ability to communicate such a multiplicity is one of the significant contributions of seeing to Christian theology.

I have in this chapter articulated the Trinitarian and metaphysical dynamics of Christology, beginning with the Nicene Creed and its articulation of how the development of the doctrine of the Trinity secures Christ's status as divine, and then explaining how the Chalcedonian and neo-Chalcedonian developments relative to metaphysics and anthropology identify Christ as fully human and yet also as the same eternal Son of God, and therefore as the divine one whom we can *see*. Though it is often considered as an afterthought (or, more precisely, ignored altogether), visibility is a crucial component of the incarnation. Certainly Jesus' suffering provides a meaningful arc to the theological narration of his life and ministry, but it is incumbent upon us to consider his very visibility as significant - indeed as that aspect which provides the unifying thread between creation and incarnation. Though his death is deeply significant, the Gospels are not composed only of accounts of it. What we are given instead is an account of Christ, the divine one, as he lived and ministered, thereby revealing the divine "Who". The Gospel of John beckons again, not toward the crucified one, but to the one very much alive in his ministry- "come and see."

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<sup>120</sup> For an example of the fruitful use of Bakhtin and polyphony in Biblical studies, see Carol Newsom, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text" in *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 3-31.

### Chapter 3: Icon Theology

#### Introduction

The Council of Nicaea secured the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian affirmation that God is one God in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Council of Chalcedon responded to the inevitable question this doctrine generated regarding how the Son could be human as Jesus and yet part of the Trinitarian God. The formula that resulted – that Christ was two natures in one hypostasis – attempted to articulate Jesus’ belonging both to divinity and humanity, and yet the meaning of “one hypostasis” was still uncertain. Only with the Theopaschite controversy does hypostasis become understood as a particular “who.”

This chapter picks up at this period in history, where hypostasis has been given its particular personal interpretation but all of the implications that attend this development have yet to be considered (and, indeed, still have yet to be considered). Specifically, this chapter concerns itself with the ability of Christ to be depicted visually, and how Christological thought provides the basis for this ability. Whether the veneration of icons was to be allowed in Christian worship presented a significant challenge to certain understandings of Christology, and required a sophisticated understanding of hypostasis to be vindicated of charges of heresy.

The concern was whether those who venerated icons were guilty of idolatry. Of course, worshipping a created thing *is* idolatry- what was required here was for the object of Christian worship in venerating depictions of Jesus to be seen not as creature (since clearly only created – and therefore finite – things can be depicted), but as a divine



“Who.” That the worship directed toward an image of Christ might be appropriately given to Jesus as the divine Who is the Christological takeaway of iconodule theology. The arguments over the proper use of icons reflect a still emergent Christology, one that was achieving clarity only through disagreement.

In their arguments for the legitimacy of images of Christ, icondules make an argument that becomes fundamental for the use of icons: in the incarnation, God made an image of himself in Jesus. The incarnation, therefore provides the logic for the making and veneration of images. In venerating icons, we recognize that the Son became human and yet remained truly God. His visibility was thanks to his humanity, but does not detract in any way from his divine identity. That his humanity is God’s own offers a strong defense for the use of icons: in Christ’s body we see God not in spite of flesh and blood, but because of it.

That images could be helpful or edifying in religious use was not a unique claim of the iconodule theologians. Gregory the Great famously articulated the use of images as “Bibles for the poor” in the sixth century, though generations of art historians have argued over precisely what these words meant. My argument in this chapter is not concerned with the religious use of images or with Christological imagery in general, but with the specific theological implications that seeing Jesus holds for theology. Whereas the Hebrew Bible emphasized proclaiming and retelling the mighty acts of God in *words*, the person of Jesus offers a singular, particular occasion for *vision*. In Jesus “the ancient priority of hearing in Biblical thought...had been forced to yield to the priority of

seeing.”<sup>121</sup> What happened in Jesus was not a disjunctive revelation of divine love (or of divine anger!), but a revelation that occasioned its own particular mode, and therefore its own uniqueness.

Various theologians throughout the Christian tradition have pointed to the significance of a “visual theology”, though their influence is admittedly minimal. The iconoclast controversy in eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium brought to the fore two Eastern Christian theologians who insisted on the significance and even the *necessity* of images for Christian worship. The writings of John of Damascus (d. 749) and Theodore the Studite (d. 826) help us to articulate this “visual theology” as an appropriate outworking of the Chalcedonian distinction between hypostasis and nature. These two theologians offer credence to the book of John’s invitation to “Come and See.”

#### Leo III and the First Period of Iconoclasm

The emperor Leo III (685-741) faced external threats from Arab Muslims, whose conquest of North Africa was complete by 711, just six years before he came to power in 717. The Arab attempt to seize Constantinople in 717 was unsuccessful, and this solidified Leo’s power and his reputation as a competent leader.<sup>122</sup> It also contributed a particular kind of religiosity to his reign. Though Leo had succeeded in holding invading armies at bay, this success placed in clear display the general weakness and vulnerability of the empire. His success in repulsing the Arabs only revealed how one external attack

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<sup>121</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (1990; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 99.

<sup>122</sup> For more on the history of the Byzantine empire during this period see Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire*, rev. sub. ed. (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 41–92.

could devastate the empire. Such insecurities were easily transposed into a spiritual key.

As noted medieval historian Robert Browning puts it,

If the Byzantines were the chosen people, destined in the fullness of time to lead the rest of the world to salvation, their present sorry state must be the result, if not of positive sin, at least of backsliding. The community as a whole must be doing something displeasing to God. It was the duty of a monarch consecrated by God to put an end to error and to lead his subjects back to the course which was their destiny.<sup>123</sup>

Leo and his envoys sought to find evidence of sin in the empire that was unique to their time period. Certainly adultery and gluttony were enjoying no particular renaissance, but one error that Leo identified as particularly prominent in his period was the veneration of icons.

By the fifth and sixth century the veneration of icons had developed into a way for Christians to venerate Jesus, the mother of God, and the saints.<sup>124</sup> Icons were prevalent at pilgrimage sites and were even credited with miraculous healings and conversions, including that of St. Theodore of Sykoe, who was reported to have been healed by water dripping from an icon of Christ.<sup>125</sup> In addition to the prevalence of icons in lay religion, the institutional church had authorized pictorial representations at the Quinisext Council held under Justinian II in Constantinople (692), where pictorial representations of Christ and not merely symbolic ones were encouraged:

In some pictures of the venerable icons, a lamb is painted to which the Precursor points his finger, which is received as a type of grace, indicating beforehand through the Law, our true Lamb, Christ our God. Embracing therefore the ancient types and shadows as symbols of the truth, and

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 54. It is notable that this supersessionist thought is present in the theology of the iconodules as well.

<sup>124</sup> For more on this transition see Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>125</sup> Andrew Louth, *Greek East And Latin West: The Church AD 681-1071* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 44.

patterns given to the Church, we prefer “*grace and truth*,” receiving it as the fulfilment of the Law. In order therefore that “*that which is perfect*” may be delineated to the eyes of all, at least in coloured expression, we decree that the figure in human form of the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, Christ our God, be henceforth exhibited in images, instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death, and his redemption which was wrought for the whole world.<sup>126</sup>

The Quinisext Council judged that images of the human Christ, in that they refer honor to the Trinity, were most appropriate for Christian worship. The conciliar canon indicates not just popular acceptance, but official ecclesial endorsement as a preferred means of venerating Jesus. It was this very popularity of the practice of icon veneration that seems to have led to the first period of iconoclasm. Faced with the general instability of his empire, Leo sought to discern a possible religious cause:

like every Byzantine of that age, [Leo] had wondered what had been the cause for God’s anger in allowing so many military defeats. He deduced that since iconophile rulers had all had a bad end, whereas iconoclast emperors had had glorious burials, icon veneration, despite official church teaching, was at fault.<sup>127</sup>

The theological institution of iconoclasm, therefore, evidently derived as much from Leo’s attempt at self-preservation as from any particular theological insight or conviction.<sup>128</sup> But whatever Leo’s exact thinking may have been, in 730 he ordered the destruction of all icons, including personal icons held in private homes.<sup>129</sup> The

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<sup>126</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Henry R. Percival (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 401.

<sup>127</sup> Roman Cholij, *Theodore the Stoudite: The Ordering of Holiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55.

<sup>128</sup> Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, 7.

<sup>129</sup> Browning, *The Byzantine Empire*, 55.

persecution and even martyrdom of iconoclasts followed.<sup>130</sup> Leo's son Constantine V's continued military success convinced his detractors that his father's iconoclast theological stance had been justified and rewarded by God. As will be discussed in detail below, in 754 the iconoclasm of Constantine V was officially commended and the veneration of icons condemned at the Council of Hieria.<sup>131</sup>

Of course, iconoclasm was more than simply a political response to threats to the Byzantine Empire. At stake was the ability to depict Jesus as the divine "Who", and indeed the theological possibility of depicting Jesus at all while retaining a Chalcedonian Christology (i.e., without either separating or confusing the natures). Two monastic theologians, John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite, rose to the task of answering the threat of iconoclasm, and both relied on the principles of Chalcedonian Christology to do so.

#### John of Damascus

John of Damascus was a monk living far from the reach of the Byzantine Empire, first in Damascus (before he took monastic vows) and later in Jerusalem, where he wrote his *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*.<sup>132</sup> Though his writings did not offer a definitive refutation of iconoclasm, they laid the groundwork for thinking about icon veneration as a theological issue, not simply as an issue of obedience to a biblical text or a question

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<sup>130</sup> Scholars disagree on the extent of martyrdom as it relates to veneration of images. Nevertheless, the cessation of veneration as a politically acceptable mode of worship created significant social upheaval.

<sup>131</sup> Though this council was initially recognized as an ecumenical council, it was later overturned.

<sup>132</sup> Tradition holds that this was at Mar Saba, though this cannot be confirmed. Andrew Louth, introduction to *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* by John of Damascus (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 9.

with mostly political and imperial implications. John offers several defenses against the accusation of idolatry that was being brought against iconodules. What he emphasizes most clearly is that in becoming incarnate, God allowed for depictions of God-self to be made through the person of Christ. Before God became incarnate, God could not be depicted because God was immaterial. After the incarnation, however, depiction was possible. Depicting Jesus, therefore, is theologically appropriate, and is in line with God's economic work in the world:

if we were to make an image of the invisible God, we would really sin; for it is impossible to depict one who is incorporeal and formless, invisible and uncircumscribable. And again: if we were to make images of human beings and regard them and venerate them as gods, we would be truly sacrilegious. But we do none of these things. For if we make an image of God who in his ineffable goodness became incarnate and was seen upon earth in the flesh, and lived among humans, and assumed the nature and density and form and color of flesh, we do not go astray.<sup>133</sup>

For John, the incarnation is the logic that allows for pictures of Jesus. In the incarnation God became flesh and therefore depictable. Making images of God, therefore, ought no longer be suspect: “everywhere we use our senses to produce an image of the Incarnate God himself.”<sup>134</sup>

Incarnation and Material Reality. Arguing for the fittingness of pictorial depiction of Christ from the incarnation, however, did not satisfy iconoclasts. Iconoclasts were preoccupied with what kind of transaction occurred when an icon was venerated- was the iconodule worshipping wood and stone? Were they worshipping the picture itself? John

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<sup>133</sup> John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 82. John also notes here that “the intellect is not able to pass beyond the bodily.”

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

uses a Platonic distinction between image and archetype to move iconoclasts away from a crass materialism.

John quotes Basil the Great's claim that "the honor given to the image ascends to the archetype."<sup>135</sup> The icon is an important instrument involved in real worship, but what is worshipped is not the image itself, but that which the image represents. John notes that such treatment of an image is not unique to icondules- if one were to deface an image of the emperor – or even a beloved friend – this would constitute an affront to the one depicted. This does not mean that defacing a picture of the emperor actually harms him, but that the symbolic lack of respect directed toward the emperor nevertheless has an actual value. John uses this illustration to claim that what is occurring in icon veneration is not only a symbolic worship but an actual one.

This, however, does not mean that the picture itself is worshipped. John understands human knowledge as dependent on material things: "it is impossible for us to reach what is intelligible apart from what is bodily."<sup>136</sup> Bodily things, therefore, are necessary in order for humans to reach knowledge of what is immaterial. This is for John the logic of the incarnation, and it also serves to describe the function of icons.

Individuals need to access God through material things, and the veneration of icons allows for such access. This does not mean, however, that icondules are worshipping the icon itself; rather, they are venerating the image as a means of honoring that to which it points. In other words, the matter of the icon is caught up in the worship, but is not the chief end of it:

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 93.

I venerate together with the King and God the purple robe of his body, not as a garment, nor as a fourth person (God forbid!), but as called to be and to have become unchangeably equal to God, and the source of anointing.<sup>137</sup>

In order to clarify the distinction between worship (*latreia*) and veneration (*proskynesis*), John utilizes a distinction between image and archetype.

The Image and the Archetype. The distinction between image and archetype has a long history upon which John draws. The image that is presented before a worshipper is a material picture of Christ and is venerated as an image of God. As already noted, the picture itself is not worshipped. What is venerated is the one whom the image represents, not the actual wood or paint or stone of the depiction:

An image is a likeness depicting an archetype, but having some difference from it; the image is not like the archetype in every way. The Son is a living, natural and undeviating image of the Father, bearing in himself the whole Father, equal to him in every respect, differing only in being caused. For the Father is the natural cause, and the Son is caused; for the Father is not from the Son, but the Son from the Father. For [the Son] is from him, that is the Father who begets him, without having his being after him.<sup>138</sup>

The Son is the only undeviating likeness of God the Father, and because the Son took flesh in the incarnation, God can be depicted through the incarnate Son. What is worshipped in the veneration of the image is the archetype toward which it points.

Images in the Hebrew Bible. John argues further that the veneration of matter is not new with Jesus but has a long history in the Hebrew Bible. For John, the Hebrew Bible offers no absolute prohibition on images but rather multiple examples of their use in the liturgical life of Israel. The people of Israel at many occasions venerated matter in order

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 25.



to honor God who had provided for them, or to remember God's acts on behalf of them, or to honor righteous men in their midst. Here, too, the distinction between honor and worship is crucial: "the veneration of worship is one thing, veneration offered in honor to those who excel on account of something worthy is another."<sup>139</sup> The former is indeed prohibited in the Decalogue, but the latter seems perfectly acceptable and even encouraged:

If you accuse me again, O Jew, saying, that I venerate the wood of the Cross as God, why do you not accuse Jacob of bowing in veneration over the head of his staff? But it is clear that in honoring the wood he did not venerate it, but venerated Joseph through the wood, just as we [venerate] Christ through the Cross, but do not glorify the wood.<sup>140</sup>

If such things were encouraged in the Hebrew Bible, than for John there is all the more reason to encourage them with the coming of Christ, because Christ does not merely point to the faithfulness and provision of God, but *is* that faithfulness and provision because he is God. While Israel set up twelve stones

so that, when your son asks you, what are these stones? You shall relate how the water of the Jordan failed at the divine command, and the ark of the Lord and all the people passed over." How therefore shall we not depict in images what Christ our God endured for our salvation and his miracles, so that, when my son asks me, what is this? I shall say that God the Word became human and through him not only did Israel cross over the Jordan, but our whole nature was restored to ancient blessedness, through which that nature has ascended from the lowest parts of the earth beyond every principality and is seated on the very throne of the Father.<sup>141</sup>

Christ does not merely signify divine provision (the snakes on a pole, Numbers 21:8), or signify a righteous life (the bones of Joseph, Genesis 50:25), both of which are venerated by the people of God. He *is* the image of the invisible God. Therefore honor is most

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 33. See also Jos. 4:6-7.

properly due to images of Jesus because they genuinely depict God: “If therefore we venerate the form of the Cross, making an image of the Cross from some kind of matter, how is it that we should not venerate the image of the Crucified One?”<sup>142</sup> Because Jesus is human, he is able to be depicted; and because Jesus is God, veneration is proper to him without veering into idolatry. He is a true image of God, therefore he can be worshiped.

In Jesus God appears *as* a material entity- this is the *novum* of the incarnation- therefore the veneration of matter acquires new significance. In becoming human, God opened the door for depictions of Jesus: “I see the image of God, as Jacob saw it, if in another way. For he saw an immaterial image, proclaiming beforehand what was to come to the immaterial eyes of the intellect, while I have seen the image of one seen in the flesh.”<sup>143</sup> The Incarnation sets up the possibility of depicting God, while an understanding of Jesus as the Son of God frees Christians from claims of idolatry.

The supersessionism of John’s arguments from the Hebrew Bible is hard to ignore; he frequently claims that the Jews were “prone to idolatry” and even accuses them of worshipping trees.<sup>144</sup> His argument was doubtless influenced by his experience with religious others, both Jews and Muslims, and their respective and radical aniconism. Nevertheless John’s argument regarding the *novum* of the incarnation is apt. In Christ, God has inaugurated a new kind of relation to matter. Therefore, a new disposition in relation to the veneration of material images is also appropriate.

Matter and Hypostatic Union. For John, venerating matter is a natural response to being humans who are enmattered. Again, because we exist as embodied beings, “it is

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 88.

impossible for us to reach what is intelligible apart from what is bodily.”<sup>145</sup> Moreover, the fact that God is the fashioner of matter means that there is no necessary block between matter and God. For John of Damascus, by relating to matter in the incarnation God began the work of redeeming it. Indeed this was the primary logic at work behind the incarnation, where God who is immaterial became matter for our sake. God’s positive relation to matter is made evident in the reality of the incarnation—nothing of God was violated by becoming flesh, but being flesh evidences economically the intrinsic Trinitarian reality, a reality whose appearance is not impeded by matter.

John is clear that everything material is created. Therefore, all matter derives from God. Venerating matter *qua matter* for John would constitute idolatry, but venerating God *through* matter is most appropriate. In John’s words, “I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake.”<sup>146</sup> That the “fashioner of matter” became matter “for us and our salvation” indicates for John that the one who became Incarnate is also the Creator God. Venerating matter, therefore, is acknowledging this implicit relation between what is depicted materially (the body of Jesus) and what is acknowledged- (Jesus’ identity as the eternal Son). In order to articulate how the body that is venerated participates in the Trinitarian reality, John relies on the doctrine of hypostatic union.

John understands that in the person of Christ divinity has been united to human nature, identifying the person of Christ as God but not altering the humanity itself. This union gives a distinctive (divine) identity to the resulting person but does not alter Jesus’

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 29.

humanity. He uses the example of a burning iron to make this apparent: “just as I am afraid of touching red-hot iron, not because of the nature of iron, but because of the fire that is united with it, so I venerate your flesh, not because of the nature of flesh, but because of the divinity hypostatically united to it.”<sup>147</sup> In this example it is apparent that for John hypostatic union does not indicate an alteration of nature. The change that transpires is neither in the matter of the flesh nor in the divinity of the Word—the *novum* is rather the union. There is no change in the Word’s divine status or in Jesus’ humanity: “the flesh became the Word without losing what it was, being rather made equal to the Word hypostatically.”<sup>148</sup> John feels confident that the icondules can venerate icons without veering into idolatry because the hypostatic union indicates that in Christ divinity and humanity are united under the hypostasis of Christ. Venerating images of the flesh, therefore, serves to venerate the divine person united with that flesh. For John, the logic of the hypostatic union is the same logic that allows for the use of icons in Christian worship. By becoming flesh, God was made manifest. Icons, as material representations of God, also make apparent Jesus’ humanity and so offer worship to the divine Word. That this worship occurs through matter is for John no more problematic than the Word’s appearance as flesh in Jesus.

The *novum* of the incarnation, moreover, bears further implications for material representations of the divine. For John icons gain meaning through the incarnation in two ways. First (and as already noted), the very appearance of Christ in material form makes possible visual representations. Where God was once immaterial, God can now be

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

seen. Second, the existence of Christ in flesh “gives to matter a new function and dignity.”<sup>149</sup> God “became matter for [our] sake, and in matter made his abode, and through matter worked [our] salvation.”<sup>150</sup> Matter, therefore, is not a problem to be overcome, but a possibility through which we are now able to see God. In becoming human, God was united with what is ours – created human flesh – “as a kind of life-giving and saving medicine.”<sup>151</sup> In the incarnation “our nature has been glorified and its very elements changed into incorruption.”<sup>152</sup> By becoming flesh God made matter God’s own. John’s defense of images relies on an understanding of all that is material as God’s own, including the very flesh of Christ.

#### The Council of Hieria

Though John offers a compelling authorization for the Christian veneration of images, his treatises did not decide the question. On the contrary, the imperial policy of iconoclasm introduced by Leo III in 730 was affirmed at the Council of Hieria in 754, which responded to John by presenting a sophisticated set of Christological arguments against the veneration of icons. The documents from the Council are particularly important because they represent one of the only iconoclast texts that remain.<sup>153</sup> All iconoclast documents were destroyed after the final vindication of the iconodule position

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<sup>149</sup> John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>150</sup> John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 70.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Louth notes that the word used here- “transelement”, is a rather rare word used in the Fathers “to describe the resurrection body, the transformed state of Christ’s humanity, and the change in the Eucharistic elements” (*Ibid.*, n27).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Louth *Greek East And Latin West*, 58.

(the Triumph of Orthodoxy) in 842. The arguments of Hiereia survived because they are contained in the proceedings of the Second Council of Nicaea (787).

The iconoclasts at Hiereia understood that more was at stake than a mere prohibition against idolatrous depictions of God. The document produced by the council is rooted in a carefully considered interpretation of Chalcedonian Christology. The anathemas contain affirmations that provide their own history of conciliar developments thus far: that Mary is properly called *Theotokos* (from the Council of Ephesus), that Christ has two natures (Chalcedon), and that in the incarnation one of the Trinity became flesh (the Second Council of Constantinople). To maintain this orthodoxy, however, the council felt strongly that icon veneration ought to be removed from the church.

The reasons stated for reinstating iconoclasm are primarily two. First (and more conventionally), the “worship of images” is a practice of “heathenism”, which Christianity rightfully rejected with the rest of heathen idolatry. The council declared that Satan himself initially led individuals to worship the creature instead of the Creator, and the incarnation was explicitly intended to move Christians away from idolatry. Under this rubric, the veneration of images was seen as a throwback to former pagan practices, not a redeemed Christian practice, in line with the theology that motivated Leo’s initial proscription of icons.

The second line of argument is both new and more sophisticated, reflecting a desire of the council to remain faithful to the decisions of Chalcedon.<sup>154</sup> For Constantine and the iconoclasts, if Christ was “in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 54–60. Most scholars agree that the theology of Hiereia was almost certainly that of Constantine himself.

indivisibly, inseparably”, than depicting Jesus would require depicting both natures. However, the divine nature cannot be depicted: “No one has ever seen God,” because God is uncircumscribable (1 John 4:12). For the iconoclasts, the *impossibility* of depicting the divine nature combined with the *necessity* of depicting it in a dogmatically faithful image of Christ presented an iconographic impossibility – and thus a descent into idolatry.

What was at stake was the ability of matter to mediate the divine. For Constantine, the choice in depicting God was between suggesting that Christ was *psilos anthropos* (“mere man”) or engaging in an idolatrous attempt at depicting the uncircumscribable God. Constantine took this dual concern of iconoclasm and articulated them as a “disjunctive syllogism” of Christological depiction. Either the iconodule drew God (which is not only impossible, but also idolatrous), or he depicted a Christ who was only human (i.e., *not* God, and therefore not worthy of veneration at all). For the iconoclasts under such an understanding, idolatry ensued necessarily from *any possible* Christological depiction.<sup>155</sup>

The two prongs of this disjunctive syllogism focus on divine uncircumscribability, and the theological implications of the depictions of Christ that would result if God is deemed circumscribable. On the first question, drawing a picture of God is impossible because the divine nature is uncircumscribed, i.e. there is no particular (and thus depictable) thing that God *is* (as argued in Chapter 1). For the iconodules, presuming to depict the divine nature was also idolatrous, because attempts to

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<sup>155</sup> Those who produce icons are traditionally referred to as “writers” of icons, not as artists. I have reflected this language where appropriate in the text.

depict divinity violate the prohibition on images in the Second Commandment.<sup>156</sup> If iconodules concede that the divine nature cannot be depicted (and thus circumscribed), then in depicting Christ they are necessarily tending toward an unorthodox Christology. The picture that would result, therefore would either depict only the human nature or a *tertium quid*, something that was neither divine nor human. Either alternative is heretical: the former amounts to a (“Nestorian”) separation of the two natures of Christ; the latter implies their (monophysite) confusion.<sup>157</sup> In the words of the council,

What avails, then, the folly of the painter, who from sinful love of gain depicts that which should not be depicted--that is, with his polluted hands he tries to fashion that which should only be believed in the heart and confessed with the mouth? He makes an image and calls it Christ. The name Christ signifies God and man. Consequently it is an image of God and man, and consequently he has in his foolish mind, in his representation of the created flesh, depicted the Godhead which cannot be represented, and thus mingled what should not be mingled. Thus he is guilty of a double blasphemy--the one in making an image of the Godhead, and the other by mingling the Godhead and manhood.<sup>158</sup>

The Council’s concerns line up exactly with the affirmations of Chalcedon: Christ must be affirmed as one God “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”

This conclusion of the Council of Hieria- banning icons altogether in order to preserve Chalcedonian Christology- was not the final word on icon veneration. What the syllogism of Hieria misses is the theological relationship between an understanding of hypostasis, which developed out of Chalcedon, and icon veneration. That Christ’s

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<sup>156</sup> This is, of course, according to the Orthodox and Reformed numbering; Catholics and Lutherans count the prohibition as part of the First Commandment. However numbered, the prohibition is contained in Exodus 20:4-6 and Deuteronomy 5:8 (cf. 4:15-19).

<sup>157</sup> Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, 67–98.

<sup>158</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Henry R. Percival (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 543.



personal identity as God provides a sound defense and even demand for icons in Christian worship was not missed by Theodore the Studite. For Theodore, the logic of the Incarnation was the argument for icon veneration. Icons were not merely allowed for Christian worship, but were a natural development of Christian theology precisely because of the reality of God seen in Jesus Christ.

### Theodore the Studite

Theodore the Studite offers the Christian church one of the soundest defenses of icon veneration. His zeal in defending icons was borne in part out of his historical location- Theodore's life, more than John's, placed him at the center of the iconoclast controversy. He was born in 759 during the reign of Constantine V, just five years after the Council of Hieria had officially suppressed the veneration of icons. The fortunes of the iconoclast and iconodule parties shifted significantly at several points during his career. Leo IV, the son of Constantine, was married to an iconodule, and his very short reign (775-780) allowed for iconodule policy to be briefly reinstated.<sup>159</sup> Subsequently, under the auspices of the Empress Irene the Second Council of Nicaea was convened in 787 to condemn the Council of Hieria and its iconoclast teaching. While not presenting much in the way of original argument, Second Nicaea offers a strong affirmation of the veneration of images:

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and

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<sup>159</sup> Iconodule policy would be made official at 2 Nicaea, 787 CE.

Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence, indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.<sup>160</sup>

Following the arguments of John of Damascus, Second Nicaea held that because veneration of images passes the honor over to the prototype, and because such veneration moves the believer toward more righteous behavior, icon veneration should not only be tolerated, but encouraged. In Second Nicaea, iconoclasts had found an ally.

By the time Leo V became emperor in 813, however, Byzantium was again under significant threat by the Bulgars, and Leo determined that icon veneration might have contributed to the divine wrath that seemed to bring such crushing circumstances to the empire.<sup>161</sup> Leo inaugurated a second period of iconoclasm, during which he sought to reinstate the iconoclast conclusions of the Council of Hieria over the iconodule policy of Second Nicaea, acting against the advice of Theodore the Studite and other church authorities.<sup>162</sup> In a dramatic switch, by 815 the Council of Hieria (the iconoclast council) had been reaffirmed as orthodox and the decisions of Second Nicaea (which were

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.

<sup>161</sup> There were two emperors who ruled between Leo IV and Leo V, Nikephoros (802-811) and Michael I Rhangabe (811-813). Nikephoros' son, Staurakios, reigned for only two months in 811 due to battle injuries that caused his death.

<sup>162</sup> Chohij, *Theodore the Studite*, 55–6. The religious advice given to Leo was mixed, notably the advice from John the Grammarian, who had previously been a writer of icons and now supported the official iconoclast policy.

iconodule) overturned.<sup>163</sup> In this switch one can discern how the relationship between official policy on icons and imperial power were closely linked.

The destruction of icons and persecution of iconophiles followed the reinstatement of Hieria, and Theodore, among the most outspoken opponents of the policy, was arrested and imprisoned in 815 for nearly six years. He wrote extensively during this time. Theodore's fiery rhetoric serves to communicate his conviction that to deny the use of icons is to deny the incarnation itself. For him this was not a matter of *adiaphora* but of fundamental theological significance. Theodore charged that iconoclasts "reduced Christ to a mere ghost."<sup>164</sup> Iconoclast policy, therefore, was a significant theological error that needed to be corrected.

The crux of Theodore's argument is that the same logic that allowed for the confession of Christ's full humanity also allows for Jesus to be depicted. Theodore expands on John's argument for the appropriateness of Christological depictions with his claim that iconographic representations are not simply permitted but actually necessitated by the incarnation, and he responds to the Christological objections to icons presented at Hieria by claiming that a personal understanding of hypostasis sets the foundation for depicting Jesus.

In his argument, Theodore explains the theological misunderstandings that have led to iconoclasm, among them 1) improperly applying an understanding of *homoousios* to image theory, and 2) misunderstanding the concept of hypostasis and its attendant distinction between the general and the particular. He stresses in particular the

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 60.

implications of a personal understanding of hypostasis for Christian iconography, noting that it is the failure to appreciate this point that underlies the iconoclast misnaming of icon veneration as idolatry. Against this position, Theodore maintained that icon veneration properly honors God as the one we see in Jesus:

we do not even know that the Godhead exists at all, or what sort of thing it is, as it alone understands about itself. But because of his great goodness one of the Trinity has entered human nature and become like us. There is a mixture of the immiscible, a compound of the uncombinable: that is, of the uncircumscribable with the circumscribed, of the boundless with the bounded, of the limitless with the limited, of the formless with the well-formed... For this reason Christ is depicted in images, and the invisible is seen. He who in His own divinity is uncircumscribable accepts the circumscription natural to His body.<sup>165</sup>

In the incarnation, the uncircumscribable one became circumscribed. Depictions of the incarnate one allow the Christian to have knowledge of who God is.

*Homoousios*. Theodore introduces two important theological clarifications at the very beginning of his *Treatise on Divine Images*. The first relates to the language of *homoousios*, introduced to orthodox theology in the Nicene Creed to indicate that the Son is “of one essence” with the Father. To claim that the Son and the Father are *homoousios* is to insist that the Son is everything the Father is without being the Father- the Son is everything that the Father is, but *as* the Son. Father and Son are alike in their very substance or “whatness.”

Iconoclasts had been invoking language of *homoousios* in relation to image theory. At Hiercia the iconoclasts had insisted that, just as Christ was *homoousios* with God the Father, so the image was *homoousios* with the archetype. The image and the

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<sup>165</sup> Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 21.

archetype shared an essence, and therefore the only appropriate “image” of God was the Eucharist, because only the Eucharist – the very body and blood of Christ – *is* God.<sup>166</sup> For iconoclasts, therefore, only the bread and the wine constituted a “true image” of Christ. In this way, the Eucharist was used as an argument *against* icon veneration- it is not possible that a mere icon (which everyone acknowledged did not share the divine nature) could be truly the image of God. At the Council of Hieria, Constantine clearly articulates this perspective:

The only admissible figure of the humanity of Christ, however, is bread and wine in the holy Supper. This and no other form, this and no other type, has he chosen to represent his incarnation. Bread he ordered to be brought, but not a representation of the human form, so that idolatry might not arise. And as the body of Christ is made divine, so also this figure of the body of Christ, the bread, is made divine by the descent of the Holy Spirit; it becomes the divine body of Christ by the mediation of the priest who, separating the oblation from that which is common, sanctifies it.<sup>167</sup>

In this way, iconoclasts demand that an image of God, to be appropriate, must be directly chosen by God and mediated by a priest.

Iconodules, however, argued that this interpretation actually *reduces* the Eucharist to a mere “image” of God, and not a real (“natural”) presence.<sup>168</sup> Iconodules denied that the relation between image and archetype was a consubstantial one (i.e., *homoousios*). They also held that the Eucharist is the actual “real presence” of God, not simply a “true image.” For iconodules the iconoclasts are erring in two ways: they confuse essence and nature, claiming that the relation between image and archetype (and therefore between

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>167</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Henry R. Percival (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 543.

<sup>168</sup> Louth, *Greek East And Latin West*, 62.

icon and God) is an essential relation instead of a natural one. They also inadvertently weaken their Eucharistic theology. For the iconodules, the iconoclasts reduce what we have of God in the Eucharist from a “real presence” to a “real image.” The distinction between what occurs in the Eucharist and what occurs in icon veneration for iconodules is that in the Eucharist God is actually present in the blood and wine of the meal.<sup>169</sup> Iconodule veneration of icons parallels more accurately a symbolic or pneumatic understanding of what is undertaken in the Eucharist- the cross is to be venerated because of what is depicted, just as the bread and wine are honored because of what they represent.<sup>170</sup> So John argues regarding the relation of matter to the icon: “if the shape of the cross is destroyed I throw away the wood!”<sup>171</sup> What the icon effects is a relationship between the venerator and the archetype, not a veneration of matter *qua* matter.

For Theodore, the argument for the claim that image and archetype are consubstantial is invalid because the two do not share an essence. To assume that the image is *homoousios* with the archetype is to claim that the two share an essence, but that is not how icons function. Rather “we say that Christ is one thing and His image is another thing by nature, although they have an identity in the use of the same name... It is Christ by the identity of name, but the image of Christ by its relationship.”<sup>172</sup> Further-

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<sup>169</sup> This understanding in the Reformation will be referred to as a doctrine of “real presence”, but such terminology is not extant yet.

<sup>170</sup> An interesting parallel here could be made between what happens if Eucharistic bread remains after the congregation partakes of it by advocates of real presence and by advocates of a pneumatic or symbolic presence. For advocates of real presence, *all* of the consecrated bread must be consumed because it is the real body of Christ. Advocates of a pneumatic or symbolic presence, if leftover bread were to remain, make French toast. This is because the bread itself is not what is honorable, but what it represents.

<sup>171</sup> John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 75.

<sup>172</sup> Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 31–2.

more, Theodore explains that what is being directed toward an icon is not worship, because “divinity is not present in them by a union of natures,” and worship is due only to divinity.<sup>173</sup> Instead there is an honor due to the icon by a “relative participation, because they share in the grace and the honor” of what is signified.<sup>174</sup> It is not the wood of the cross that is being venerated, but the One whom the cross signifies.

In fact, it is precisely because they are *not* consubstantial with God that icons exist. In the incarnation, the Son took on flesh and therefore the possibilities of depiction. Such an argument affirms divine uncircumscribability, claiming that what is venerated is the human nature while the divine nature, though honored in the veneration, remains unseen. Because God is transcendent, and the divine nature uncircumscribable, the only way God can be known to us is by way of an image that is fundamentally different from God. The difference, though, is not on the level of identity but of substance. Though the Son is the image of the Father (Hebrews 1:3), other images are not consubstantial in this same way. An icon of Jesus, though it identifies a subject and therefore does share a name with what it represents, does not share an essence with the one it identifies.

That the image and the archetype are not consubstantial is all the more obvious for Theodore because he views circumscribability as a property of creation. To be a created nature is to be circumscribed.<sup>175</sup> Because God is not a creature but rather Creator, it is obvious to Theodore that God would not as God be subject to circumscription. This is the same as saying that the divine nature does not participate in creatureliness. But

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

because God has deigned in Christ to become incarnate, God has chosen for God's own a (created) body capable of being drawn. Christ, as God in two natures, possesses both divine and human characteristics, and among the human characteristics assumed with a human nature is circumscribability. The divine nature itself has not taken on the properties of circumscription- it is the Son who has. In drawing a picture of Jesus, the iconographer is depicting the one who is God. The image made of Jesus, however, is *not* God in the same way that Jesus is God.

Hypostasis- Particular versus Universal. Theodore has identified one error of the iconoclasts- in confusing essence with nature, the iconoclasts have assumed that an icon is essentially related to what it represents and therefore consubstantial with it, instead of being naturally related to it- offering a true representation without sharing an identity. The Son is the image of the Father, therefore, but in a different way than an image of Jesus and Jesus as he appeared to his disciples are both identified as Jesus.

The second significant distinction Theodore makes is to define more clearly what a hypostasis is, and how a proper understanding of hypostasis underlies all icon veneration. For Theodore "it is not a nature which can be portrayed but a hypostasis."<sup>176</sup> In writing an icon, the iconographer attempts to depict the *person* of Jesus, *not* the divine *or* the human nature. To understand this distinction, it is helpful to review again the difference between nature (a general category of "whatness") and hypostasis (a particular, personal matter of "whoness").

Because nature is a general category, it is impossible to depict. Those characteristics of humans that we all share are not depictable as such: humans are

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 12.



rational, but rationality cannot be depicted; humans have eyes and hair, but these cannot be depicted in the abstract, but only under certain determinations - particular textures, colors, and lengths (or even their absence in the case of individuals who are blind or bald). The same is true for depictions of Jesus. One cannot draw Jesus' human nature, but only the particular modifications of that nature that define him as the particular human being he is – most broadly identified as a man and then occasioning certain physical traits as the iconographic tradition relative to Christology has inherited them.<sup>177</sup>

If this principle is misunderstood, than indeed accusations of idolatry would apply to iconodules. What an icon seeks to depict is not humanity in general- in venerating an icon, worshippers are not seeking to honor “the human.” Rather, what is being venerated is the particular *person* Jesus Christ through his (depictable) materiality. It is this human being that is being venerated: the Word who enhypostasizes the human nature. This is consistent with John of Damascus's remarks about not venerating matter, but venerating instead the one who became matter, though expressed here by Theodore in a much more Christologically sophisticated form.

Theodore's understanding of hypostasis allows for images of the bodily Christ because hypostasis indicates a particular individual and not a general category. When iconographers write icons of Jesus, they are doing so according to iconographic conventions in order to represent the man Jesus Christ, not a general humanity or a

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<sup>177</sup> It is worth noting here that particular depictions of Christ's hypostatic properties come from an inherited iconographic tradition that differs based on historic and geographic location. Of course Jesus had particular physical characteristics, but we as twenty-first century individuals cannot know what they were, and our “imagination” are often infected by racialized and gendered assumptions. “Seeing Jesus” depends in part upon this inherited tradition, and we would do well to remember to interrogate it periodically.

general manhood. Physical accuracy in depicting Jesus is not crucial. What is necessary is a depiction of Jesus that accords with Scripture and the iconographic tradition and indicates therefore the *particular* man, Jesus Christ.<sup>178</sup> Theodore acknowledges this:

Generalities are seen with the mind and thought; particular individuals are seen with the eyes, which look at perceptible things. If, therefore, Christ assumed our nature in general, not contemplated in an individual manner, He can be contemplated only by the mind and touched only by thought. But He says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." And He also says, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side"; thus He associates perceptible things with perceptible things. So Christ is perceptible, tangible, and visible with bodily eyes; and therefore He is circumscribed.<sup>179</sup>

Theodore understands hypostasis as the identification of an individual, indicating a particular individual versus a general category. This distinction between particular hypostasis and universal nature is perhaps the most fundamental claim necessary for understanding Theodore's defense of veneration of icons of Christ.

Hypostasis for Theodore is the theological category that allows for the veneration of icons. Theodore's discussion of hypostasis is perhaps the most illuminating example of the practical implications of this theological concept. Without a personal identification of hypostasis, one would be unable to affirm that in venerating an image of Jesus the divine hypostasis is being honored, not merely a human nature or an idolatrously circumscribed divine nature:

When I say 'man', I mean the common essence. When I add 'a', I mean the hypostasis: that is, the self-subsisting existence of what which is signified, and (so to speak) the circumscription consisting of certain properties, by which those who share the same nature differ one from another, for example Peter and Paul. When Christ said to the Jews, 'Now

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<sup>178</sup> For these reasons certain iconographic determinations of Jesus are non-negotiable, age and gender being two.

<sup>179</sup> John 20:29 and John 20:27. Note again the significance of visuality in John.

you seek to kill me,” if He had said simply “man,” He could have meant man in general. But when He added, “a man who has told you the truth,” He revealed His own hypostasis or person. For the relative pronoun “who” has the same effect as the article “a.” Therefore, although He assumed human nature in general, yet He assumed it as contemplated in an individual manner; for this reason the possibility of circumscription exists.<sup>180</sup>

Because Jesus is a human being, he is depictable. Such a principle is a necessity of depiction, but it is also a safeguard against idolatry: that the mind can move between Peter, Paul, and Jesus indicates that in worshipping Christ individuals will not be deceived about to whom they are directing their worship, that is, to the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

It is these principles that make Christ depictable. The eye does not see generalities, but rather particular perceptible things.<sup>181</sup> As assumed and hypostatized by the eternal Word, Christ’s human nature possesses particular properties that by the very definition (viz., their existence as material “properties”) are able to be depicted.<sup>182</sup> “Christ is called not by a common noun but a proper name”, and one can therefore draw pictures or write icons of Jesus.<sup>183</sup> The humanity of Christ is not a screen behind or beneath which God is concealed but a window on divinity.

Icon veneration in its very theoretical underpinnings acknowledges this. What occurs is not a crass worship of wood, ink, and stone, but an honor ascribed to the depiction of Jesus who is the divine hypostasis, an honor that “ascends to the prototype”- to God. The worship involved in icon veneration is most appropriate because it

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<sup>180</sup> Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 84.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-4.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

acknowledges Jesus' proper relation to the Trinity. Because icon veneration offers to God something that is due God (that is, worship and gratitude for the gift of God's son), Theodore is not content to argue that images are merely useful for the Christian. Rather he argues that the logic of the Incarnation *demand*s that images be used, and that they are necessary for Christian worship. If God in Christ became human, then it is fitting that we worship the human Christ who, since not present with us in human form, is venerated through depictions of his body. Theodore's treatise ends with a scathing quotation from Galatians- "Oh you foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"<sup>184</sup> For Theodore, the one "bewitched" is the one who does not see the honor in depicting Jesus. Theodore claims that Christ must be depicted in order to take the Incarnation seriously:

Therefore, since we confess that Christ has the relation of prototype, like any other individual, He undoubtedly must have an image transferred from His form and shaped in some material. Otherwise He would lose His humanity, if He were not seen and venerated through the production of the image.<sup>185</sup>

The implications of Theodore's argument for a visual theology are significant. Because Jesus is human, he can be seen and therefore depicted. Because he is the divine hypostasis, in seeing Jesus we can see God. Jesus is the divine "Who", but (following Chalcedon) he is this person humanly. He is God *as* the man Jesus, and as that particular human he *is* God the Word. In seeing Jesus, therefore, we see a divine "Who." If theology is the endeavor to better know and speak of who God is, than *seeing* Jesus is perhaps the most proper theological act.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 114. See also Galatians 3:1.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 112.

What is it, then, that we see when we see Jesus? How is it that we can develop a doctrine of God from such a vision? The New Testament gives us a few hints regarding this kind of visual theology. Perhaps the most compelling is given in the account of the Transfiguration, where seeing Jesus seems to be the point of the entire narrative.

#### A Test Case: Transfiguration and Christological Sight

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to him Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus (Mk. 9:1-4).

He was transfigured, then: not taking on what he was not, nor being changed to what he was not, but making what he *was* visible to his own disciples, opening their eyes and enabling them who had been blind, to see.<sup>186</sup>

The biblical account of the Transfiguration provides a particularly disclosive introduction to Christology. Included in all of the Synoptic Gospels, the Transfiguration offers one of the only occasions where *seeing* Jesus seems to be the central focus of the text.<sup>187</sup> “Seeing” here pertains to a certain kind of theological recognition, where sight is correlated with right theological understanding.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Brian E. Daley and John Behr, *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, Popular Patristics Series 48 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 221.

<sup>187</sup> The Transfiguration account occurs in Matthew 17 and Luke 9:28-36, but is absent from John.

<sup>188</sup> The absence of any discussion of the Transfiguration from the book of John is notable, particularly since John was supposedly a witness to the event. Perhaps it is the case that the Transfiguration provides the underpinning for John's entire gospel narration, situating his narrative as one of disclosure of the transformative knowledge of the Son of God. To include it would be to foreground a revelation that for John comes only through a series of personal encounters with the living Jesus, either in flesh or in the text of his gospel. In his study of the transfiguration, Andreas Andreopoulos offers two other possible reasons for John's omission of the Transfiguration narrative. Neither of them is terribly

The account in Mark 9 indicates that Jesus took with him three disciples, Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain, where “he was transfigured before them.”<sup>189</sup> His clothes were changed into a “dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mk. 9:3). Then there appears with him Moses and Elijah, representative of the Law and the Prophets, and therefore of Christ’s relation to and fulfillment of each. Finally, “a cloud overshadowed them”, from which a voice declared “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mk. 9:7). These three elements- the transformation of Christ’s clothing, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and a voice coming from a cloud and declaring Jesus’ divine identity- all combine to make this pericope a source of startling theological claims.

The garments of Christ, which undergo a transformation, are often interpreted as a means by which Christ is revealed, either by representing Scripture or representing Creation.<sup>190</sup> As Maximus the Confessor notes:

the whitened garments conveyed a symbol of the words of Holy Scripture, which in this case became shining and clear and limpid to them, and were grasped by the mind without any riddling puzzle or symbolic shadow, revealing the meaning that lay hidden within them. Thus they arrived at a clear and correct understanding concerning God, and were set free from every attachment to the world and to the flesh.<sup>191</sup>

The brightness of the garments for Maximus represents the illumination that occurred when the disciples recognized Jesus for who he was. In this brilliance, the words of

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compelling. See Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology And Iconography* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 42-3.

<sup>189</sup> Mark 9:2.

<sup>190</sup> The garments are also seen as a symbol of creation.

<sup>191</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert Louis Wilken and Paul M. Blowers (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 109.

Scripture were suddenly “shining and clear and limpid” to the disciples, so that what the words of the Hebrew Bible foretold was suddenly apparent.

For other interpreters, among them Andrew of Crete, the garments represent a twofold identity, being “those things in which he is wrapped and by which he is revealed.”<sup>192</sup> The garments represent at once the flesh of Christ, the humanity in which he is “wrapped”, and also that which presents the occasion of his being revealed for who he is. Though the language here could tend toward an insufficiently Chalcedonian Christology, suggesting that the humanity of Christ is a mere disguise and not proper to him, Andrew nonetheless makes an important point relative to the possibilities of Christological depiction, one made earlier in this chapter by John of Damascus.<sup>193</sup> Without the clothing of Christ’s humanity, God could not be seen. It is therefore the garments which represent this very humanity that undergo the dazzling transformation, for the humanity is the sight of the divine revelation. For Andrew the garments represent the possibility of seeing Jesus as the Word:

Only the otherness of the Unmoved is preserved immovable in this Mystery, because of the unconfused union, according to which the more perfect element dominates. To put it more precisely, the ineffable act of divinization offers this perfectly true demonstration of itself: the union and identity, in one real individual, of the elements that have come together, which we know has happened in a supernatural way from the very deepest structure of the Mystery.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Daley and Behr, *Light on the Mountain*, 192.

<sup>193</sup> Andrew of Crete lived between 660-740 CE. His arguments suggest he may have been familiar with the writings of John of Damascus. *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

Put more succinctly, and in familiar words, in the Transfiguration Jesus “became what he was before,”<sup>195</sup> his dazzling garments reflecting God’s Uncreated Light. Once again, matter here becomes a vehicle rather than an obstacle to the disclosure of divine glory.

John of Damascus, not surprisingly, follows a similar line of interpretation. For John the garments are “made brilliant through the imparting of the divine light”<sup>196</sup> in order to reveal Jesus as the One who is divine. The illuminating light, however, came from within: “Glory did not come upon this body from outside itself, but from within: from the super-divine Godhead of God the Word, made one with it in hypostasis, by an indescribable ordering of things.”<sup>197</sup> John goes on to give what is perhaps one of the most beautiful (if lesser-known) articulations of the implications of a Chalcedonian Christology. In one paragraph toward the beginning of his Homily on the Transfiguration, John articulates three significant components of Christology- 1) the implications of hypostasis for the relation of the two natures, 2) the implications of hypostasis for the *communicatio idiomatum*, and 3) the Trinitarian implications of hypostasis. John rightly notes that the import of the hypostatic union is in its claim regarding the unconfused, unchangeable, indivisible, inseparable relation between the two natures:

How can what is unmixed be mingled, and still remain unconfused? How can utterly diverse realities come together as one, and still not depart from the proper structures of their natures? This is the drama of the hypostatic union: the things united form one individual, one hypostasis, while their union preserves them in indivisible difference and unconfused hypostatic unity; the duality of natures is preserved through the unchanging

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 207-8.



incarnation of the Word and the permanent divinization, beyond all understanding, of mortal flesh.<sup>198</sup>

The amount of theological work John does in these three sentences is significant. Though his use of the word “mingled” might be misleading, John affirms that the natures are unmixed and unconfused, and that the union of the natures under the hypostasis does not detract from either one- the natures remain what they are. That the things united form “one individual, one hypostasis” emphasizes the unity of Christ’s person as the eternal hypostasis of the Word. John’s affirmation that this duality is preserved through the “incarnation of the Word and the permanent divinization” of the flesh indicates that, as the incarnate Word, the human being Jesus is eternally part of the Trinity, even as he exists “seated at the right hand of God the Father” in his resurrected form. Thomas’ ability to touch the hands of Christ in his post-resurrection appearances confirms this claim (John 20:24-29). The Son’s relation to the Trinity is an eternal one, a relation that is altered in no way in the incarnation.

Furthermore, the enhypostatization of the flesh makes the body of Jesus a seat of divine life and thus a vehicle of divine revelation. The third of the four sentences of John’s very dense paragraph introduces and confirms another significant theological premise that arises from a close reading of the transfiguration. In the transfiguration, those things that are proper to God are visible in Christ. The “literally hypostatic entity” of the man Jesus allows the divine qualities of God to be seen in Jesus. This is a dramatic claim. In Jesus

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 207-8.

those qualities that had previously been veiled by divinity are now apparent through the assumed human nature. In Jesus what was once concealed due to divine uncircumscribability is now revealed.<sup>199</sup>

To claim that the Transfiguration offers a compelling account of a vision of the uncircumscribable God is theologically unproblematic. *How* a vision of the uncircumscribable occurs is a bit more difficult to explain. The vision that the disciples are given of Jesus in the Transfiguration is a vision of Jesus endowed with the Uncreated light, but in no way changed. What we see in Jesus is not a human endowed with extraordinary capacities, but a human whose identity is God's: "the identity of the Son and the human 'I' are, as Chalcedon exists, one and the same."<sup>200</sup> What we see in Jesus, therefore, is nothing less than the second person of the Trinity. Jesus, begotten of the Father, has existed from the beginning with the Father- there was *not* a time when he was not. But it is in space and time ("later") that he became the man Jesus Christ. John of Damascus' affirms this in his homily: "For he is one, who eternally is one thing and later became the other."<sup>201</sup>

In Jesus, the humanity we see is God's. What we see are God's acts on behalf of the world, in human form. Indeed we can even say that we see "God's hands", without resorting to the anthropomorphism favored by the authors of the

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<sup>199</sup> It is worth noting that in the Western tradition "beatific vision" (the vision of God in the life to come) is offered as a true vision that reveals what in this life was uncircumscribable, though the divine nature remains unseen.

<sup>200</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 210.

<sup>201</sup> Daley and Behr, *Light on the Mountain*, 207–8.

Psalms. In taking on this hypostatic identity, God has taken on human form; therefore human characteristics can be ascribed of God. In this way, in the humanity of Jesus we can see God, because Jesus is God's humanity: "Jesus is one ontological entity, and the one ontological entity that Jesus is is the one person of the divine Son of God existing as a complete and authentic man."<sup>202</sup> The divine hypostasis can now be seen, and therefore the quality of divine love and divine relation to creation is apparent in a new way.

It is this "double conception of Jesus' oneness" - that the same One is both God and man- that grants seeing Jesus its theological foundation.<sup>203</sup> Indeed, the implications for a visual theology are rooted in the enhypostatization of the Son. Because of this "double conception", we are able to say that Jesus is the Son of God, and to predicate the works and acts we observe as belonging to a member of the Trinity. We are able to say that the Son of God is the "acting subject" of those acts predicated of Jesus.

#### Naturally His Own

John's homily on the transfiguration includes several statements that emphasize and clarify his Christological convictions. For John, the voice from the cloud that names Jesus' divine identity is providing confirmation of what is apparent to the disciples- Jesus is a divine person. The voice from the cloud is providing confirmation, but it is not that voice which brings revelation. The transfiguration is a moment when the disciples had their eyes opened to the truth of who Jesus is,

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<sup>202</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 174.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

but nothing about Jesus changed in that moment.<sup>204</sup> The change occurred in the disciples' capacity to see. What happened for Peter, James and John on Mount Tabor was that they saw Jesus for who he is:

He was transfigured, then: not taking on what he was not, nor being changed to what he was not, but making what he *was* visible to his own disciples, opening their eyes and enabling them who had been blind, to see. This is what the phrase means, "He was transfigured before their faces"; he remained exactly the same as he was, but appeared in a way beyond the way he had appeared before, and in that appearance seemed different to the disciples.<sup>205</sup>

John's theology of icons comes into play here. For John, Jesus' identity as the divine Word allows the divine Word to be apparent in Jesus. This is not idolatry, but a claim regarding who the human being Jesus is. The hypostatic identity of the man Jesus indicates that his humanity is not something past or behind which we must look to see God (as is the case with every other created reality), but the means *through* which God, in the person of the Son, is truly seen. Jesus' humanity is thus the occasion for seeing God. The transfiguration adds to that claim by showing (!) that there is nothing external necessary to render possible that sight. God is already present in Jesus; what must be altered, if anything, is our gaze.

The transfigured countenance that the account speaks of, according to John, comes naturally from within Jesus:

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<sup>204</sup> Luke's gospel is the only one that speaks of an "alteration" in the face of Jesus that occurred in the Transfiguration ("the fashion of his countenance was altered", Luke 9:29). Matthew says that "he was transfigured before them, and his face did shine" (Matthew 17:2), while Mark says simply that "he was transfigured before them" (Mark 9:2).

<sup>205</sup> Daley and Behr, *Light on the Mountain*, 221.

If someone were to see him [Jesus] at prayer, radiating light, they would recall that Moses' face, too, shone with glory. But Moses was glorified externally, the glory being bestowed on him from without; while the Lord Jesus did not possess the radiance of glory as something acquired, but as coming from the brilliance of the divine glory that was naturally his own.<sup>206</sup>

The divine glory that is “naturally his own” was made apparent to the disciples in the Transfiguration, confirming Jesus' divine identity by allowing the disciples to see who he was. It is the visual answer to Jesus' question to them in Mark 8:29- “Who do you say that I am?” Seeing Jesus, at least in Mark's Gospel, seems to be a theological act in that it provides a true source of theological knowledge.

The knowledge gained of Jesus in the transfiguration, however, does not seem to be only an answer to a Christological question, to be considered in secret and reflected on privately. Implicit in Jesus' transfiguration is a call to witness to the divine reality in Jesus by living a different kind of life. After the disciples have journeyed up the mountain with Jesus and his divine identity is revealed to them, they must then journey down with him toward his suffering and death. The same Son of God is present on the cross as was present on Mount Tabor. What was seen on the high mountain is a Christological reality that remains true even if it is at times not apparent in the same way.

It is not only journeying with Jesus toward his death that is demanded of the disciples, however, but a new kind of life as well. Shortly after the Transfiguration in Mark's Gospel is the story of a young man who comes to Jesus asking how he might gain eternal life. Jesus answers this man's earnest questions regarding discipleship with words that demand an even higher discipleship- “Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 219.

thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me' (Mark 10:21). Jesus' immediate love of this man seeks to call out from him all the love he can muster. So, too, is the discipleship demanded of Peter, James, and John after they were witness to the Transfiguration. As Leo the Wise claims in his homily: "If you remained on Mt. Tabor, the promise made to you would not have come to its fulfillment."<sup>207</sup> Seeing Jesus must lead to a transformed life, a life whose transformation is made evident by its renewed communal relation.

In the Transfiguration, the disciples beheld Jesus for who he was. They saw Jesus, and therefore saw the divine person. This sight granted them true knowledge of God without the cloak of apophasis. They saw the divine person (not the divine nature), and in that vision gained a true and direct knowledge of God that is available *only* in seeing Jesus. The Transfiguration account situates the rest of this dissertation because it claims that visions of Jesus are disclosive of divine things, and that these visions need not be miraculous in order to be disclosive. The Christological principles articulated thus far indicate that a vision of Jesus in a cradle (or even Jesus in the tomb!) is as potentially revelatory as that vision of Jesus on Mount Tabor. What is seen in both places is God. Theology, therefore, can derive from such a vision.

### Conclusion

Of all the witnesses to divine love who understood the relation between seeing Jesus and articulating a doctrine of God, perhaps the most articulate is Julian of Norwich, an anchorite from the 14<sup>th</sup> century whose theology serves to develop the claim that seeing Jesus is a theological act, and that Christological sight grounds, and even demands,

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 226.

missional living. Julian's theology is demanding in its ethic of care for neighbor, an ethic that is grounded in a foundational metaphysic which names God as the one who holds all creation in being. This protological claim is directly related to her soteriology- because God holds everything in being, everything that exists is held *together* by the self-same hand of God. Therefore, our eschatology too must reflect the universal held-ness of all creation. Julian's vision of Jesus undergirds her radical ethic of love: "In the end, love was what he meant." In Part II, I will examine how seeing Jesus locates Julian's theology.

Julian, along with many other mystical theologians of the medieval period, is often seen as building a theological system from a highly personal and idiosyncratic religious experience. Read this way, her "visual theology" might seem more an invitation to engage one's own imagination in the service of religious understanding than an invitation to engage with the historic confessions of the Christian church. In fact, Julian's theology is both. By grounding her theological epistemology in the actual person of Christ, Julian's visions affirm the theological work of the first three chapters of this dissertation. The divine nature cannot be seen, but Jesus can. Julian affirms throughout her Revelations that God is not angry with God's creation, not a grandfather in the sky whose disapproval humanity suffers under. It is in fact our own capacities that limit us- oppressed by sin, we are unable to turn our faces toward the loving light of God. In her visual theology, it is as if Julian says "I must take away your picture of God, but do not worry- I will give you Jesus." Jesus can be seen, and it is in these visions that we understand who God is. Julian situates her doctrine of God Christologically, and it is through such work that she can make the claims she does about who God is and how God

cares for God's creation. That "all shall be well" is not something Julian hopes for, but something that she knows to be true because she has seen God, and in the suffering Christ has seen the extent of God's love for and commitment to God's creation.



## Chapter 4: Julian and the Coherence of Vision

### Introduction

I have established up to this point that Christian theology contains an incipient “visual theology” that, though often unarticulated, helps to secure an understanding of who God is and how God is with the world. This “visual theology” is a distinctive feature of Christianity because its locus is the incarnate God in Jesus, who through the incarnation made the uncircumscribable visible and the one-beyond-Being apparent in an identifiable, particular physical body. The historic confession of “one person [*hypostasis*] in two natures” secures this claim, by affirming that in seeing Jesus we see the divine “Who”. The divine person who was gloriously apparent in the Transfiguration narrative is the self-same one that is present throughout Christ’s life.

All of these claims serve to articulate and organize a compelling Christian case for the visual, both as an illumination of our claims about God and as a divinely enabled mode of theological knowing. But I have yet to make strong constructive affirmations regarding the *theological content* of what is seen in Jesus. I have established that seeing Jesus is seeing the divine Who. This is a strong claim grounded in the Christology of Chalcedon and secures our salvation by establishing that the one who came “for us and our salvation” was none other than the Creator and thus able indeed to *effect* that salvation. There is yet more, however, to be derived from the vision of Jesus, namely, the particular character of this Who. Specifically, in seeing Jesus, we are able to secure our affirmations of divine love. In the physical body of Christ the boundless love of God is demonstrated. Through the life of this Who, what divine love is has been made apparent.

I will develop this point through a study of the work of Julian of Norwich, an English anchoress (1342-1416), and the earliest woman writing in the English language whose authorship has survived.<sup>208</sup> The first printed edition of her book was published in 1670, and since then her work has become a favorite source for historians and theologians alike. In addition to its historical value, Julian's book also contains significant theological claims. It is clear she intended it to be theologically instructive to a wide audience. It is not intended as a private retelling of her own experience, but as an account of what she was shown, and what it meant for all of her fellow Christians.

Just as Theodore the Studite argued that images are necessary for Christian worship, Julian of Norwich indicates the significance of a vision of Christ for her doctrine of God. This is clear for her because Jesus' divine identity always indicates the Trinity. Jesus can be a revelation of the Trinity because he is God—for her, technical questions regarding *when* he became God, or whether he was not fully God, never enter the equation. *That Jesus is God for Julian is a matter of faith that, once accepted, allows her to delve deeper into questions regarding God's character.* Put another way, Julian's Christology focuses its energy on the doctrine of God, not on questions of mechanism (*how* Jesus was God) but on theologically exploring how Jesus Christ as one of the Trinity discloses the heart of God. In fact, Julian's first revelation of Christ's suffering body leads her directly to a revelation of the Trinity.

For the trinity is God, God is the trinity. The trinity is our maker, the trinity is our keeper, the trinity is our everlasting lover, the trinity is our endless joy and our blisse, by our lord Jesu Christ and in our lord Jesu

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<sup>208</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 2nd ed. (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), xii.

Christ. And this was shewed in the first sight and in all. For where Jhesu appireth the blessed trinity is understand, as to my sight.<sup>209</sup>

Theodore the Studite argues that the incarnation of the divine hypostasis is the precondition of seeing God; for Julian, the fact that Jesus is this divine hypostasis made flesh makes him the starting point for theology. Julian, therefore, reasons from what she sees: from Jesus's bleeding and suffering body (even his *dead* body) to a compelling doctrine of God.

Julian's *Revelations* (sometimes called the *Showings*) come in two versions. In the Short Text, apparently written soon after the experiences there recounted, Julian narrates the visions as they occurred to her without much additional theological reflection. She also omits the parable of the lord and the servant, which (as she later recounts) was revealed to her at the time, but about which she lacked theological understanding at the time she first wrote. In the Long Text, written some years later, she includes this parable (which, as will be recounted in the next chapter, turns out to form the crux of Julian's theology), as well as sustained reflection on it and further additional reflection on her visions.<sup>210</sup> Because Julian's theology is more fully developed there, I will limit my consideration to the Long Text.

### The Context of Julian's Writing

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<sup>209</sup> *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love*, eds. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>210</sup> Julian's remark that her understanding of this parable came "twenty yere after the time of the shewing" (*The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 277) has led some scholars to date the Long Text to 1393, though such historical questions have little impact on this argument.

Julian's ongoing significance is reflected in the sheer volume of text written about her that exists today; yet, as recently as the mid-twentieth century, this has not been the case. How one reads Julian's texts depends in large part on one's assumptions regarding what kind of text it is—e.g., is this a text written by a woman who saw things intended to primarily bring comfort? Or is this woman, in her writing, aiming to shift the theological discourse of her day? All too often, assumptions about gender and “women's writing” have infected the reception of the mystical authors in the tradition of Christian theology. Before I survey the most significant of Julian studies in theology, it is worth a note regarding a category error often made in regard to Julian on the level of ascription.

#### Was Julian a “Mystic”?

There has been an interest in the modern study of religion in identifying the mystical element as a way to identify a universal habit of religious individuals, a habit that purportedly deviates from centralized or ecclesiastically mediated religious practices. To abstract this conversation briefly without caricature is nearly impossible, as mysticism is a category used theologically, psychologically, and philosophically, all to different ends.<sup>211</sup> I will attempt to characterize the use of this language, however, in order to articulate why this term in its typical significance is not properly applied to Julian.

Considered within a colloquial framework, a mystic is someone who undergoes an experience of God, either directly or mediated through visionary or other experiences. A mystical experience is characterized by “private, subjective, intense psychological

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<sup>211</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 265–343.

states.”<sup>212</sup> The goals of mysticism are many, but often include a fusion or annihilation of the self, a meeting between “the unmediated inner self” and “the unmediated transcendent God.”<sup>213</sup> Mystical texts are often assumed to communicate or translate this unmediated revelation.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, mysticism often indicates a particular route to sanctification, whereby an individual seeks something like the experience of God – the beatific vision - that is put off until the life to come.<sup>214</sup> What is sought is an experience of God that is continuous with Church teaching, one that enlivens the soul and encourages the individual and others on their journey back toward God.<sup>215</sup> Individuals like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are generally included in this category.

In the study of religion more broadly, mysticism has taken on a different meaning. As a category, it has gained in popularity and shape-shifted along with definitions and emphases in the study of religion in general. The word “mysticism” itself was only first used in 1736, though the phrase “mystical theology” had long existed.<sup>216</sup> The use of the word has been influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Williams James, and Ernst Troeltsch, by way of their emphasis on the “subjectivity of religious experience.”<sup>217</sup> With his publication in 1902 of *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Studies in Human*

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<sup>212</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>213</sup> Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

<sup>214</sup> In the Western tradition there are notable exceptions, these being the saints. The Eastern Church thinks differently about *theosis*.

<sup>215</sup> For one Roman Catholic perspective, see Rev Fr Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange O.P., *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* (Rockford: TAN Books, 2010).

<sup>216</sup> Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 11.

<sup>217</sup> Jantzen, *Power*, 8.

*Nature*, James in particular popularized the idea that human consciousness includes a mystical state. That this state was an integral component of religious experience was argued further by Rudolf Otto and his emphasis on the “numinous” as a category in religion.<sup>218</sup> That religion “cannot be limited to rational understanding” opens a door for mysticism as a coherent, and even necessary, way of being religious.<sup>219</sup> With these thinkers and others, mysticism became one way to counter the primacy of the “rational” which had enjoyed a certain primacy in some discussions of religion.

Within this context mystics are thought to be communicating in their writing an encounter of divine immediacy, where God is revealed with or in the soul. Though this impulse is construed as a universal dimension of religious experience, the experiences themselves are deeply personal and idiosyncratic. Perhaps because women were often those who used vision as a mode of theological argument (maybe because the more mainstream mode was closed off to them), or perhaps because women were wrongly deemed to be predisposed to resort to interior mental space, there is a stunning and common lack of respect for such a mode of operation - to the point that Dietrich Bonhoeffer could write that the silence required to teach about Christ “has nothing to do with the silence of the mystics, who in their dumbness chatter away secretly in their soul by themselves.”<sup>220</sup> By characterizing mysticism as a highly subjective state of idiosyncratic personal experience, scholars of religion can appropriate their own categories and prejudices and apply them to premodern religious texts. It is important to

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<sup>218</sup> See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford, 1958).

<sup>219</sup> Louise Nelstrop, *Christian Mysticism : An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 6.

<sup>220</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 27.

note this trajectory in a discussion of Julian because, although Julian is often categorized as a mystic, her mode of operation is quite different from the account of mysticism developed out of the work of James, Otto, and Troeltsch.<sup>221</sup>

Especially as it pertains to women, the category of mystic can serve to mute an individual's impact and personality, even as (or perhaps, *because*) it seeks to make it universal. Frederick Bauerschmidt takes issue with the way Julian is often included under the modern category of mystic because of the way the term is used to imply a universal accessibility that is due to, at least in part, a certain kind of personal "purity," according to which the mystic is secluded and uncontaminated enough that her insights can hold value for all time. As Bauerschmidt argues, this misses a fundamental component of Julian's theology, in that it

brackets Julian's historical situatedness in all its medieval and anchoritic peculiarity and gives to her a universal availability. However, this availability is bought at the cost of isolating Julian from the concrete beliefs and practices that shaped her thought, with the result that her theology is 'depoliticized' by being removed from any particular tradition, constituted by actual social practices.<sup>222</sup>

Julian was not a woman, enclosed in a room, who saw things. She was interpreting her visions to make claims that reimagine the social order of her day. She is not to be placed "in a protected sphere of 'interiority-self-affectivity-experience', safe from the forces of

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<sup>221</sup> The question regarding her relation to the term is so basic it is evident in the titles of three major monographs- Denys Turner's *Julian of Norwich: Theologian*, Grace Jantzen's *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, and Kevin Magill's *Julian of Norwich: Visionary or Mystic?* (London: Routledge University Press, 2006).

<sup>222</sup> Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich--Incorporated," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 76. Bauerschmidt's essay does an excellent job of articulating how mysticism as a construct contributes to the muting of Julian's theological innovations, and is itself a clear introduction to the claims he makes in greater depth in his book.

‘history-politics-intellect-doctrine’<sup>223</sup>—it is *precisely* her deployment of her interiority that seeks to influence Christian doctrine and the political in turn.

If Julian was not a mystic (at least in the popular sense of that term), then how are we to understand her theology? Julian’s text both reflects and diverges from dominant modes of theology in her own day. In the fourteenth century two modes of theology in particular were prominent.<sup>224</sup> The first, “scholastic” model was located in the universities. It is characterized by “a problem-based dialectical style” (evidenced in the ordered questions of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*) and existed to train clerics for ministry.<sup>225</sup> Its rigid order and style served its pedagogical purpose: it is “systematic” insofar as it is “teachable, portable, and transferable.”<sup>226</sup>

The second, “monastic” style grew out of a contemplative reading of scripture and prayer that was integrated into the life of a monastic community. For the monks theology was “not a subject in which courses are taken so as to acquire professional qualifications. It is rather their contemplative way of life.”<sup>227</sup> Monastic theology was deeply invested with scriptural interpretation and imaginative “play” with the texts that comprised the daily office, and therefore much of the monk’s time.<sup>228</sup> The disciplines of the monastic life—prayer, work, and study—often illuminate this mode of interpretation. In *Violence*

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>224</sup> I am drawing here on a heuristic employed by Denys Turner. See Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 3-17.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>227</sup> Turner, *Julian*, 6. For more on this, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961).

<sup>228</sup> For an interesting study of monastic reading practices and iconography, see Conrad Rudolph, *Violence and Daily Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).



*and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Citeaux Moralia in Job*, Conrad Rudolph offers an example of the open-ended engagement that characterized some monastic modes of thought. In discussing the illuminated capitals that the monks produced for the Gospel of John in the Bible of Stephen Harding, Rudolph writes,

In reading, hearing, and discussing the Gospel of John as part of *lectio divina*, the monk in the initial has lifted up his senses to the Gospel itself, to the evangelist himself, employing them in the process of divine enlightenment...The idealized Cistercian monk does not simply read the text of the Gospel: he internalizes it with an aim toward its spiritual exposition, assimilating the revelatory message of the eternity and equality of the second person of the Trinity inherent in this passage, the core of the central mystery of Christianity.<sup>229</sup>

Monastic theology, aimed as it was towards sanctification and illumination *through* study, was interested less in answering questions than in opening up new modes of thought.

Julian owes a great deal to both of these approaches, and yet her mode is not identical with either. Julian's approach to theology involves expositing the visions she received of Christ crucified. Her focus is less her private experiences of the transcendent one, and more her own attempts to make theological claims rooted in her vision of the person of Christ. Put another way, it is the visionary experiences themselves but rather Julian's exposition of them that stand at the center of her theology. Instead of offering what she saw, Julian tells her readers both what she saw and her interpretation of it. If a mystic is someone who has experiences, and then reports them, Julian seems more to be one whose experiences are *interpreted* to communicate the depth of her theology. Her

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<sup>229</sup> Rudolph, 88.

work stands as a challenge to those who seek to separate the “mystical” from the “theological.”

### Julian as Social Theologian

In order to appreciate the significance of her theological claims, it is important, too, to give attention to Julian’s historical location. The thirteenth century was a time of significant social and religious change in northern Europe. One change that is particularly relevant to Julian’s theology is the emergence of new ways of understanding and approaching Christ’s body. At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the doctrine of transubstantiation was officially recognized by the Catholic Church, affirming that “by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change [*conversionem*] of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood” (*Euch.* 4; cf. *Cat.*, §1,376). The host was therefore *actually* (i.e., using the language of Aristotelian metaphysics, “substantially”) Christ’s body, even though its external appearance was unchanged. Churches were oriented towards the altar, where the mass would be performed and the elements venerated. Elaborately decorated chalices and altarpieces further confirm the central significance of the Eucharist in medieval religious life, and the sacrament also took on a new role outside of the walls of the church. In 1246, the Feast of Corpus Christi was formally recognized by the Catholic Church, and its practice was instrumental in the deconsolidation of the Eucharistic host. The feast spread in popularity during the fourteenth century, with the Eucharistic elements paraded by clergy and laypeople alike from the church to the town square. The body of Christ became a central

focus of lay piety that now symbolically and physically could be accessed outside the Mass, and even outside the church walls.<sup>230</sup>

Furthermore, literary works were encouraging English laypeople to engage personally with the suffering body of Christ.<sup>231</sup> The English vernacular text *The Mirroure of the Blessyd Lyf of Jesu Christ* encouraged identification with Christ in his suffering. This development, sometimes called “affective piety” and often credited to the influence of figures like Anselm and St. Francis of Assisi, encouraged laypeople to identify with Christ in his sufferings and the holy family by imaginatively identifying with them, usually during the Holy Week narrative.<sup>232</sup> This practice was supposed to render in their hearts greater compassion and love for God.

The combined impact of the rise of affective piety for personal devotion and the widening significance of the Eucharist outside the context of the liturgy of the Mass help to contextualize Julian’s fixation with Christ’s wounds. Julian emotionally engages with Christ’s sufferings and experiences an increase in her own compassion from so doing. Furthermore, Julian’s understanding of the meaning of Christ’s body is not mediated by a priest. She is able to see Christ’s body and derive meaning from it at a considerable remove from the clergy and other formal ecclesial structures.

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<sup>230</sup> A classic study of this festival is Mervyn James, “Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town” in *Society, Politics, and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 16-47.

<sup>231</sup> Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 36. The installment of choir screens, which physically separated worshippers from the celebration of the Eucharist, is another example of this change.

<sup>232</sup> For an alternative viewpoint on the origins of affective piety, see Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). McNamer argues that women played a significant role in producing the texts that inaugurated this cultural change, and not only monastic theologians.

Frederick Bauerschmidt's book *Julian and the Mystical Body Politic* argues that it is the actual social practices of her day that Julian is seeking to reimagine in her theology.<sup>233</sup> For Bauerschmidt, understanding how Julian "imagines the political" is the key to understanding her theology. Bauerschmidt combines a historically attentive close reading with theoretical work (most notably Mary Douglas and Mikhael Bakhtin) to argue that Julian's preoccupation with the grotesqueness of Christ's crucified body indicates particular things about the boundaries of the ecclesial body, the church. As Bauerschmidt writes, "the key theological problematic with which she wrestles - how it could be true that 'alle shalle be wele' if some are damned, excluded from enclosure in God's goodness - is a question of how the boundaries of salvation are delimited."<sup>234</sup> That Christ's body is not a smooth body with definable margins indicates that "the body of the saved is one that can be whole only in the transgression of its boundaries by its identification with the infinite mercy of God displayed in the crucifixion of Jesus."<sup>235</sup> It is through his brokenness that Christ has invited all to participate in the Church.

As Sarah Beckwith notes, in the fourteenth century in particular writing the body of Christ was itself an act that rewrote the social order. By envisioning

the central symbol of the mass, the body of Christ, outside its liturgical, ecclesiastical setting and into the urban landscape, [there is] a departure which constitutes simultaneously an appropriation and an expansion of the terms of reference of Christ's body, and which changes its orientation and the potentialities of its meanings.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>236</sup> Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 32–33.

Though Beckwith is not addressing Julian directly, Julian is memorializing this same kind of “expansion” in her book. By envisioning Christ’s broken body as it appeared to her, Julian is reinterpreting a reality that had previously been under ecclesiastic control. She is using her vision of Christ crucified to claim her own theological authority, and then imagining new ways to organize the bounds of the church.

### Julian as Feminist Theologian

In addition to its claims about the reordering of the social world, Julian is also making claims about the possibilities for reordering one’s interior life. Julian writes at length about sin and suffering, both the way that humans are affected by these realities and the way in which theology can change our disposition toward them. Julian’s answer to the question of sin diverges in significant ways from the answer that dominated the theologies of her day, with its debt to Augustine’s doctrine of original sin.<sup>237</sup> For this reason, feminist theologians have shown a particular interest in Julian’s theology.

In her discussion of Julian’s innovations regarding sin and suffering, Grace Jantzen, whose 1987 work on Julian was one of the early attempts to consider her theology, draws on contemporary feminist conversations regarding the relation of a traditional doctrine of sin and the feminist concerns famously articulated in Valerie Saiving’s essay, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.”<sup>238</sup> In this essay, Saiving takes issues with the traditional decision “to identify sin with self-assertion and love with

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<sup>237</sup> I will discuss the particularities of Julian’s understanding of sin in more detail in Chapter 5. For more on the cultural relevance of this concept, see Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The emergence of a Western guilt culture, 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).

<sup>238</sup> Carol P. Christ, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Reissue ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992).

selflessness,<sup>239</sup> definitions that have little to do with women's experience. Following Saiving, Jantzen does not reduce all sin to pride, but rather understands sin as the cause of our suffering and personal fragmentation. Christ, who in his suffering found solidarity with ours, promises to bring healing and full restoration from "the fracture within the human being."<sup>240</sup> For Jantzen, "the task of spirituality is to become a whole person, to reunite our sensuality with our substance in union with God."<sup>241</sup> The claim that "all shall be well" is a promise that we, too, can experience growth in wholeness.

Jantzen argues that Julian is an "integrated theologian" whose experience secures her theological argument.<sup>242</sup> Though experience certainly can exist as a highly subjective, personal category, for Julian experience instructs her theological insights:

Thus for Julian it is experience, which, though not allowed to break loose from its moorings in natural reason and the teaching of the Church to fly away into fantasy land, nevertheless breathes life into scholarship and dogma. Julian attributes spiritual experience directly to the 'inward grace-giving operation of the Holy Spirit.' By 'experience Julian does not mean only the sort of experiences she had in the revelations, unusual visions and words from God, though these would be included. She means, rather, the day by day experience of the love and comfort and enlightenment of God, which enables us to make steady unspectacular progress in knowing ourselves and responding to the love of God which liberates us to respond in turn to others. Experience in this sense is both a basis from which we better understand doctrine, and a practical consequence of that understanding, as we discover in our daily lives the truth of God's love and delight.<sup>243</sup>

Experience thus serves to invigorate and revive the life of the believer as she journeys toward God. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. For Jantzen, Julian's use of experience is not

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>240</sup> Jantzen, *Julian*, 170.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 105.

an idiosyncratic and highly private retelling, but evidence of the Spirit's grace and of the transformed life of the believer. Put another way, Julian's experience is intended and perceived to have relevance to our lives.

Many feminist theologians have similarly adopted Julian as a patron saint of sorts, in part due to Julian's language of Jesus as Mother, a practice that accords with more modern desires to speak of the motherhood of God and to introduce feminine imagery into the theological vocabulary. As Jantzen notes, Julian uses language of maternity not simply to exchange pronouns, but to emphasize the way in which the Christian life as a return to God is truly a return to one's source.<sup>244</sup> Julian's work here - which includes not only maternal language but imagery depicting Christ as nursing and nurturing the church - is a rich and beautiful resource, and yet Julian's status as a feminist theologian is not reducible to her use of this language. For Julian, maternal imagery is a natural correlate of the theological work relative to the understanding of creation and God she offers in the first chapters of the Long Text. By the time she reaches Chapter 60, it is evident how and why such language is appropriate. One should not, therefore isolate the fruit of feminine language from her profoundly liberating doctrine of God, which is articulated at the very beginning of the showings, because for Julian this language is only as significant as the theological vision that undergirds it.

#### Julian's Christological Particularity

Finally, Julian's theology is characterized by its Christological particularity. The entire text of the *Revelations* is based on Julian's visions of Jesus. As Bauerschmidt notes, her

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<sup>244</sup> She does this, in part, by utilizing an interesting reading of Lacan. See Jantzen's new introduction to *Julian*, vii-xxiii.

theology is characterized by “a refusal to seek God apart from the human body of Jesus, crucified at a particular time and place in history.”<sup>245</sup> This does not mean that Julian devotion exemplified a misplaced emphasis on the body of Christ—this was not a woman “struggling unsuccessfully to overcome the flesh.”<sup>246</sup> There is a tendency when interpreting medieval woman religious to use modern categories to understand these women’s lives (what Caroline Walker Bynum calls the “money and sex” approach to understanding their vows of poverty and chastity).<sup>247</sup> For Julian, as for many other contemplatives, a focus on Jesus’ physicality does not indicate a misplaced or repressed sexuality but – as will be emphasized in what follows – a theological conviction about who Jesus is—God incarnate.

Though it is doubtful that Julian was directly familiar with the language of the ecumenical councils, her focus on Christ’s body is deeply Chalcedonian. For Julian, there is no God to be sought apart from Jesus, because Jesus *is* God. She therefore does not see Jesus as a mere substitute for a vision of God the Father. In Chapter 19 Julian’s “reason” suggests to her that she “Look uppe to heven to his father:”

And than sawe I wele, with the faith that I felt, that ther was nothing betwene the crosse and heven that might have dissesede me, and either me behoved to loke uppe or ells to answeere. I answered inwardly with alle the might of my soule, and said: “Nay, I may not! For thou art my heven.”...Me liked no nother heven that Jhesu, which shalle be my blisse when I come ther.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ*, 108.

<sup>246</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 29.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>248</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 187



Julian here is not evidencing a preoccupation with the material for its own sake, but (like John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite) following through on the implications of the claim that the Jesus whose body she sees *is* one of the Trinity (cf. John 14:9!).

Thus, the principle that seeing Jesus is seeing God is the basic theological assumption that frames Julian's interpretation of her visions. Julian's vision of Christ is possible because in the Incarnation God became visible. Furthermore, what Julian sees in Jesus is one who is truly God. In seeing Jesus, she does not need to abstract or extrapolate from him to reach God. She encounters God directly in this body. The content of her visions, therefore, is also the source of her eschatological hope.

That Julian's vision of Jesus leads her to the particular claims it does - specifically, that "all shall be well" - is secured because it is precisely this person who in his incarnation ensured that this would be the case. Julian *sees* Jesus because in the Incarnation God became visible, and she sees *Jesus* because he is the one in and through whom "all shall be well." The Incarnation rendered possible the sight of the one who affected her salvation, and who indeed is the core principle of her salvation.

Julian's theological claims are both radicalized and secured by the fact that they are derived from her vision of God incarnate. Her claims are radical because it is truly God that she sees in human form. That her visions are of God incarnate secures their truth: *what* she sees (viz., a tortured, bleeding body) is able to secure her Christian hope, because *who* she sees is nothing less than God. Placing her hope in the suffering body of Christ is placing her hope in the Creator of the universe.

This revelation, however, is not one that leads to *comprehension*. As with all God-talk, there is always a remainder of things left unsaid. And yet it is as close as Julian can possibly come. The Jesus Julian sees is really a revelation of God:

This triune God revealed to Julian in her vision of Jesus is not... a human projection or construct, imposed on the ineffable reality of God; it *is* the reality of God... In other words, the corporeal, suffering humanity of Jesus, in all its categorical particularity, is not simply a symbolic wrapping around an ineffable, transcendental experience, but is the actual appearance in history of the triune life of God, the mutual indwelling love of Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>249</sup>

The genius of Julian's text is its ability to maintain both the apophaticism proper to God (because divinity is not identified with any *thing* in the world), while simultaneously *seeing* God in Christ. That these two things are simultaneously possible is due to Julian's Chalcedonian assumptions - Jesus is fully human and fully divine. *Julian is therefore able to secure a doctrine of God that is characterized by a firm conviction of God's love for and gentleness towards God's creation without making God out to be a being in the world.* Radical transcendence is maintained, and yet God is never made out to be a cold, indifferent being (the typical caricature of a "radically transcendent" view of the divine). Julian's text vibrates with both a theological *novum* and a reliance on tradition, two things that are very difficult to hold together. This is possible because of her approach to the topic. Throughout, one can almost hear Julian's own voice counseling: "I need to take away your vision of God, but do not be afraid, because I will give you Jesus - one whom you can see, and the one in whom your hope is found."

### **The Content of Julian's Theology**

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<sup>249</sup> Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich--Incorporated.", 84.

Julian is deeply concerned that Christians leave behind a vision of God as an indifferent, removed being who desires to punish God's creation. That sin stands in the way of the divine-human relation is anathema to Julian's vision. And yet she does not revise her doctrine of God by making God out to be a being in or continuous with the world.

Instead, she finds her understanding of who God is by looking at Jesus. In seeing Jesus, she is able to see both God's power and God's love, God as creator and as redeemer. She sees God as Mother, as one who means only love towards creation, and yet she never blurs the lines between Creator and creature. Such a vision of theology has rarely been found in the Christian tradition.

### Cruciformity

For Julian, Christ is revealing himself to her in order to communicate divine love. In fact, it is clear that, for Julian, God is committed to just this kind of visual revelation.

She writes:

Our lord god will that we have great regarde to all the deedes which he hath done in the great noblete of all thing making; and of the excellence of manes making, the which is above all his works; and of the precious asseeth that he hath made for mans sinne, turning all our blame into endlesse worshippe. That meaneth he thus: "Behold and see, for by the same might, wisdom and goodness that I have done all this, by the same might, wisdom, and goodness I shall make well all that is not well, and though shalt see it."<sup>250</sup>

The revelations clearly connect creation ("all the deedes which he hath done in the great noblete of all thing making"), humanity ("the excellence of manes making"), and Christ's suffering ("the precious asseeth") with what God has chosen to reveal to Julian through Christ.

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<sup>250</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 125,127.

Julian's visions are characterized by a very particular vision of Christ. The Jesus she sees is not engaged in the ministry of healing and teaching, but in his suffering and death. It is the *crucified* Christ on whom Julian focuses - "the suffering Jesus in all his corporeal particularity is not something that Julian seeks to move beyond."<sup>251</sup> This is not an experience of courtly love with a divine paramour, but a vision of a man whose suffering was as terrible as Julian could imagine.

In seeing Christ crucified, however, Julian never indicates that the one whom she sees is other than God. That the God she sees suffers as a human for Julian means that 1) God is committed to God's creation, 2) that God is no stranger to human suffering, and 3) that "nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Rom. 8:38-9). In becoming incarnate and dying, God did all that was possible to reconcile humanity to God-self. Because Julian does not hold to a transactional view of the cross (that it represents a substitution or a sacrifice demanded by God), the cross for her is not primarily a site of revelation relative to anthropology (i.e., it speaks not primarily to how sinful we are), but primarily – and as she entitles her book – a revelation of divine love. In seeing Christ crucified, Julian is not moved to consider her own or others' sin, but to consider the depth of divine love.

Though the revelation of Christ crucified is particular and concrete, this does not mean that the vision requires no interpretation. It is, in fact, the immediacy of the revelation that Julian initially finds most confusing—how can Christ's suffering mean God is love? Julian writes,

And after this, I saw God in a pointe- that is to say, in my understanding- by which sight I saw that he is in al thing. I beheld with advisement,

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<sup>251</sup> Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich--Incorporated.", 86.

seeing and knowing in that sight that he doth alle that is done. I mervyled in that sight with a softe drede, and thought: “What is sinne?” For I saw truly that God doth alle thing, be it never so litile. And I saw truly that nothing is done by happe ne by aventure, but alle by the foreseing wisdom of God.<sup>252</sup>

Julian’s question here is one that has plagued the Christian tradition since its inception—how is God’s “foreseing wisdom” related to the reality of sin? There are two typical (though here severely caricatured) ways of answering this question. According to the first, sin creates an impasse between God and humanity, a problem addressed by introducing Jesus as fundamentally a “solution.” In this configuration, Christ represents the conceptual answer to a puzzle more than a person who reveals God’s own life. Jesus is an “input” into an equation between God and humanity, and represents a discontinuity with God’s intention for the world. In Anselm’ of Canterbury’s words, “sinful human beings owe God, on account of their sin, something that they cannot repay but that they must repay if they are to be saved.”<sup>253</sup>

By contrast, in the second approach, Christ’s suffering does not reveal God’s “plan” for the world, because God does not have a directive aim. Christ suffering might reveal other things about God—that God’s love is not exempt from suffering, and in fact that God’s love is so great as to choose to include suffering. Christ’s suffering could also represent solidarity with suffering humanity, indicating that God loves and suffers with the world. Under this construal, when we see Jesus crucified, we see a tragic outcome,

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<sup>252</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 163.

<sup>253</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 288. Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* actually relies on a more sophisticated system than simply one of “inputs” and “outputs”. However, it is his initial articulation that later was caricatured by many within the Protestant Reformation tradition.

not an efficacious one. C. S. Song writes “the cross of Jesus... is a scandal to Abba-God as well as to humanity, perhaps more to the former than to the latter.”<sup>254</sup> The cross for Song is a scandal precisely because it does *not* “fit” with some preconception of a divine plan: “Yes, the cross is a scandal to the Abba-God of Jesus. Surely this God and not the God of the traditional belief and the official religion that abandoned Jesus, did not want it to happen.”<sup>255</sup> For Song, the cross shocks our human sensibilities because it is entirely out of line with the character of the God of Scripture, and not revelatory of that God.

Julian does not answer the question of the meaning of Christ’s suffering in either of these ways. When asked “how can Christ’s suffering mean God is love?” Julian *begins* with the fundamental conviction that “love is our lord’s meaning.”<sup>256</sup> Julian begins with the assumption that God is love (cf 1 Jn. 4:8), and the theological conviction that Jesus is *always* God (i.e. Jesus’ divine identity did not change during the duration or course of his life and ministry). Therefore, Christ crucified must reveal divine love.

As Jantzen writes, this is not the

substitution of a subjective emotion for the objective standard of the passion of Christ. How can one say simultaneously that the cross of Christ is the measure of theological understanding and yet that the cross itself must be interpreted? Is it not the measure after all? Closer reading, however, shows that there is no confusion in Julian’s mind. The passion itself is understood as love, as the supreme manifestation of the love of God. But this in turn brings with it a revision of the common understanding of what love means. It is true that love is the measure; but this is not just any sentimental idea of love. The passion of Christ offers a principle for understanding what love really is; it is the standard by which love itself must be measured.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> C.S. Song, *The Scandal of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 82.

<sup>255</sup> C.S. Song, 84.

<sup>256</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 379.

<sup>257</sup> Jantzen, *Julian*, 91–92.

In the wake of seeing the crucified Jesus, any other conceptions regarding who God is, who Christ is, or what love is have been entirely upended. But this subtle shift - that Christ's death is God's love, and that theology ought to use these claims as a starting point - is extremely significant for understanding Julian's theology.

For Julian, that love is evidenced in the suffering body of Jesus is less an aesthetic problem (How could something so awful be beautiful?) and more a theological insight. Because Julian believes that Jesus is God, she sees God's character revealed in Christ's suffering. The cross becomes the chief symbol of her theology. As Denys Turner notes, for Julian the cross is "the embodiment of her epistemology:"

The mystery of the Cross reveals to Julian what we can know of the Trinitarian nature of God, and it is in that connection between the Cross and the Trinity alone that the theological unity of Julian's work is to be found. If it is in that narrative fragment, in that broken, paradoxical story of the Cross, that anything is shown insofar as the Cross reveals the Trinity to her, and reveals the Trinity to be nothing but love, compassion, and pity.<sup>258</sup>

The love that is revealed on the Cross indicates what kind of power love possesses:

And of this knowing are we most blinde. For some of us beleve that God is almighty and may do alle, and that he is alle wisdom and can do alle. But that he is alle love and will do alle, there we stinte.<sup>259</sup>

Indeed, the love that God possesses is the love that is willing to do *everything*, even that final deed whereby all that is shall be made well.<sup>260</sup> It is a love characterized by its power and efficacy, even as it is revealed under the appearance of weakness and humility.

The love revealed in Christ's suffering body is the only way we can encounter a God who

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<sup>258</sup> Turner, 22-23. For Turner it is also very significant that the Cross function as a limit and symbol of Julian's combination of apophatic and cataphatic approaches to theology.

<sup>259</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 353.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

is otherwise radically transcendent, “for love maketh might and wisdom fulle meke to us.”<sup>261</sup> Those divine traits that are otherwise invisible and unapproachable - divine power and wisdom - are revealed in Christ crucified alongside traits like suffering and change that are not usually applied to God. This is possible because Jesus is the divine *person*, without being the divine *nature*.

Julian’s visions occurred after she asked the Lord for “thre giftes by the grace of God. The first was mind of the passion. The secund was bodily sicknes. The thurde was to have of Godes gifte thre woundes.”<sup>262</sup> In the midst of her bodily sickness, Julian’s priest set an image of the cross before her to contemplate: “He set the crosse before my face, and said: ‘I have brought thee the image of thy savior. Looke therupon and comfort thee therwith.’”<sup>263</sup> Julian is brought great comfort and strength from this crucifix, which miraculously emits “a comon light.”<sup>264</sup> It is notable, in fact, that it is an icon of Christ—a crucifix—that triggers her initial vision. Contemplating it leads her to pray for the second wound, “that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of his blessed passion, as I had before prayed. For I would that his paines were my paines...that for love would become a deadly man. With him I desired to suffer...”<sup>265</sup> Because for Julian God’s love is seen in the suffering body of Christ, this request is not as unusual as it is often made to appear. Suffering for Julian is not a condition that is foreign to the

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 125. The “three-nailed crucifix”, with a nail in each palm and one through both feet (as opposed to the a four nailed image) was an iconographic innovation of the thirteenth century. See Paul Binski, “The Crucifixion and the Censorship of Art around 1300” in *The Medieval World*, edited by Peter Linehan, Marios Constambeys, et. al. (London: Routledge, 2001), 52.

<sup>263</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 131.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 133, 135. The first wound was the sickness itself.



Christian disciple. For Julian, *experiencing Christ's suffering is the same as experiencing divine love*. Julian asks to suffer because she wants to know God's love, and she only knows what God's love is by looking at Christ's suffering body.

Some of the visions Julian receives are of Christ's suffering body, and others are visions that grant theological knowledge but are not themselves explicitly Christological visions (e.g., the hazelnut or the lord and the servant). In terms of Christological visions, for Julian it is *Christ's blood* and *Christ's suffering body* in particular that are revelatory. Many medieval contemplatives experienced visions of Christ to which they gave theological weight in their own writings. Some of these visions focused on the miracles of Christ, placing the individual among the witnesses. Others focused on the sufferings of Christ as events, walking the stages of the cross along with Jesus or finding a way to interpret their own individual piety along this journey, as with Veronica. Julian focuses on the gross corporality of Christ's suffering. Her contemplation is focused on the blood and the body as a means of self-disclosure. The abundance of Christ's blood and the pallor of his flesh are what she sees – and where her theological reflections reside.

Julian insists throughout that her revelations are thoroughly scriptural and in line with the teachings of the Church.

The shewing, made to whom that God wille, plainely techeth the same, opened and declared, with many prevy pointes belonging to our faith and believe which be wurshipful to be knowen. And whan the shewing, which is given in time, is passede and hidde, than faith kepeth it, by grace of the holy goste, into our lives ende. And thus, by the shewing: it is none other than the faith, ne lesse ne more, as it may be seene by oure lords mening in the same matter, by than it come to the last ende.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 149.

Though she speaks of “*prevy pointes*”, these are not the kind of secrets that characterize a sectarian approach to religion. They are rather truths that are often hidden, but that everyone is invited to know (Matt.13:11, Luke 8:10). Julian’s theology, though it reveals treasures “hidden in the ground”, aspires not to say something *new* about God, but rather to articulate the truths of the Christian faith that have been revealed to her, while remaining always faithful to the teachings of the Church. There are, nevertheless, innovations that come from reflecting on Christ’s body and deriving theological claims therefrom.

Among the things that distinguish her vision is that it is a complete or total vision of God’s work. For Julian to place the suffering body of Christ first is locate it as the source of theological revelation. Creation for her is not something that happened before the Passion—rather, the wounds exhibited in the Passion that found the whole world. When Julian sees the suffering body of Jesus, she sees creation and the end of all time enclosed in the suffering-love of God.

I have claimed previously that for Julian, divine love is made visible in Christ’s suffering body. Julian reflects on this body *in situ* - she does not reflect on what it *means* until she reflects on what it actually *is*, in all of its corporality. The cross for Julian is not a symbol to be contemplated in the abstract; it is the crucified body on which she focuses her attention.

Julian divides her revelations into sixteen “showings” which comprise 86 chapters in the Long Text. Several of these showings are centered on a particular revelation of Christ’s physical body. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus here on three visions related to Christ’s blood and two related to his body. The visions related to his blood – a

vision of the crown of thorns, a vision of the covering over Christ's face, and a vision of the abundance of Christ's blood – emphasize the universality of Christ's work, and the extent of his power. The visions of his body – the dessication of his flesh, and the wound that expands to hold all of creation – indicate the cosmic implications of his death. Julian treats first the blood of Christ, which flows abundantly from his body as he suffers on the cross. Once the flesh is depleted of blood, Julian moves her focus to his body, which yields its own theological truths.

### Visions of the Blood

The *first* Christological image Julian receives is of the moment of the Passion when the crown of thorns is placed on Christ's head:

And in this, sodenly I saw the red bloud trekile downe from under the garlande, hote and freshely, plentuously and lively, right as it was in the time that the garland of thornes was pressed on his blessed head. Right so, both God and man, the same that sufferd for me. I conceived truly and mightly that it was himselfe that shewed it me, without any meane. And in the same shewing, sodeinly the trinity fulfilled my hart most of joy...For the trinity is God, God is the trinity. The trinity is our maker, the trinity is our keper, the trinity is our everlasting lover, the trinity is our endlesse joy and our blisse, by our lord Jesu Christ and in our lord Jesu Christ. <sup>267</sup>

Julian sees the blood trickling from under the crown, “freshely, plentously”, and immediately affirms Jesus' divine identity as one who was “both God and man.”<sup>268</sup> That Jesus is both God and human is a matter of faith. She offers it to us here in the first showing because she will draw on it throughout the remainder of her text. How Christ's blood is revelatory of divine unity and divine love will become clearer as her revelations progress.

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

The *second* Christological image Julian receives is of the face of Christ, covered in blood. Julian sees the face of Christ, encountering “dispite spitting, solewing, and buffeting, and many languring paines, mo than I can tell, and often changing colour..”<sup>269</sup> His face undergoes changes of color, beginning at one ear and traveling across his face, so that one half is covered in dried blood, and then clears up and the change travels to the other half of his face.

This vision of Christ’s face is connected for Julian to a reassurance of God’s commitment to reveal Godself to her. Julian longs for “mor bodely light to have seen [the discoloration of Christ’s face] more clerly”<sup>270</sup> and is reassured that God will continue to reveal things to her: “If God will shew thee more, he shal be thy light. Thee nedeth none but him”<sup>271</sup> At this point in the showing, Julian does not yet understand the meaning of the covering. However, in the midst of her confusion she is assured that God will continue to reveal God-self through these bodily showings. Indeed, Julian claims that a vision of God is the source of the greatest comfort for the Christian:

If a man or woman wher there, under the brode water, and he might have sight of God—so as God is with a man continually—he shoulde be safe in soule and body, and take no harme. And overpassing, he should have mor solace and comforte then all this worlde may or can tell. For he will that we beleve that we see him continually thow that us thinke that it be but litle, and in this beleve he maketh us evermore to get grace. For he will be seen, and he will be sought, and he will be abiden, and he will be trusted.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

Even when faced with grave bodily danger, the vision of God not only brings comfort, but also safety. Seeing God rescues the soul from death and from fear. The sight of God *itself* is efficacious. The soul will be safe, and need not be afraid.

After Julian is assured that God will continue these revelations, she receives insight into what the covering meant: “It was a figure and a liknes of our foule, black, dede hame which our faire, bright, blessed lord bare for our sinne..”<sup>273</sup> Julian here is clearly doing Christological work, claiming that the flesh which Christ took on in the Incarnation was the site of Christ’s suffering, not the “faire, bright, blessed” reality of the triune Lord. Christ suffered in this (created) covering, not in his (eternal) Trinitarian life. Julian does not claim that the covering altered in any way the brightness of our Lord. Suffering, it seems, is only a shadow that alters his face and then continues to pass. That God took on this foul covering does not alter her view of transcendence, but it does make strong claims about divine love.

It is the face and its discoloration that Julian continues to mine for theological insight. She moves her contemplation to the shroud that covered Christ’s face, an increasingly popular devotional image in the fourteenth century:<sup>274</sup>

It made me thinke of the holy vernicle of Rome, which he portrude with his owne blessed face when he was in his hard passion, wilfully going to his death, and often changing of coloure. Of the brownhead and the blackhead, rewlyhead and leenhead of this image, many marveyled how that might be, standing that he portrude it with his blessed face, which is the fairhede of heaven, flower of earth, and the frute of the maidens wombe. Then how might this image be so discolourede and so farre from fairhead?<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Elisabeth Dutton, *Julian of Norwich: The Influence of Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 144.

<sup>275</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 159.

Again, it seems that Julian here is reflecting on a two-natures Christology, the shroud here representing that which Christ underwent in his suffering. She is not indicating that he was merely “cloaked” docetically in the possibilities of suffering, but indeed that he truly underwent them. What she is asking, it seems, is how could anything that encountered the most blessed, fair face of Christ be marked by such foulness? How is it that the world might yet bear the stain of decomposition, once it has encountered the fruit of the Virgin’s womb?

The shroud here is both a hiding and a revelation. Julian moves between direct reflection on Christ’s face, and reflection on the “vernicle”, or shroud that retained the mark of his face—“how might this image be so discolourede and so farre from fairhead?”<sup>276</sup> The way in which the shroud reflects both the imprint of the sacred face and the discoloration of his blood holds great theological truth for Julian:

I desire to say as I have understonde by the grace of God.

We knowe in our faith and in our beleve, by the teaching and the preching of holy church, that the blisshed trinity made mankind to his image and to his likenes. In the same maner wise, we know that when man fell so depe and so wretchedly by sinne, ther was no nother helpe to restore man but thorow him that made man. And he that made man for love, by the same love he would restore man to the same blisse, and overpassing. And right as we were made like to the trinite in oure furst making, our maker would that we should be like Jhesu crist, oure saviour in heven without ende, by the vertu of oure gainmaking.

Then betwene thes two he would, for love and for worshipec of man, make himself as like to man in this deadly life, in our foulhede and in our wretchednes, as man might be without gilt. wherof it meneth, as is before said: “It was the image and the liknes of our foule, blacke, dede hame,” wherein oure fair, bright, blessed lorde hid his godhede.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 159, 161.

In order to render us one day like Jesus Christ our Savior, “in heven without ende”, the Son needed to “make himself as like to man in this deadly life, in our foule, blacke, dede hame.”<sup>278</sup> Christ took on our sin, and his fairness was hidden by it.

Julian is making an important distinction here that is necessary to understand in order to understand her Christology. The language of “taking on” could suggest a docetic Christology, where Christ puts on humanity like a costume (e.g., as an appearance but not as something truly his own). But Julian does not claim that Christ’s humanity is a “mere seeming” in this way. On the contrary, for her that his flesh was truly his own is the condition for his undergoing suffering and for the redemption of our own humanity. What Christ “took on” was the foul, dead covering of our *sinful* humanity. The language of masking here seems to indicate what Paul claims in 2 Cor. 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” It was the form and likeness of the foul, dead covering that our fair, bright, blessed Lord bore when he took on human flesh for our sins. Christ made himself like us, “in our foule, black, dede hame,” in order that we might be remade into our blessed state. In this way, God in Christ did not merely “take on” humanity as a disposable instrument, but became fully human.

The shroud for Julian is not only a metaphor about the sins of humanity that Christ took on; it is also the condition of Christ’s visibility. Christ took on a sinful covering in order that we might be remade, but the sinful covering - the humanity - is also what allows God to be seen. It is the veiling of Christ’s divinity by flesh and its attendant suffering that renders the revelation of divine love in Julian’s vision possible. Julian

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 161.

affirms as well that “that so fair a man was never none but he, tille what time that his fair coloure was changed with traveyle and sorow, passion and dying.”<sup>279</sup> The suffering Christ undergoes increases his beauty, because it is in his willingness to suffer that we see the quality of divine love. The flesh is the condition of visibility, and the suffering of Christ - possible only because God took flesh - is what defines divine love.

The *third* Christological image centered around Christ’s blood comes in Julian’s fourth revelation. This image is of copious blood, now emerging from the wounds created by the scourging. This flow would soak the entire bed on which Julian lay if it did not disappear:

And after this I saw, beholding, the body plentuously bleding in seming of the scorgin, as thus: the fair skinne was broken full depe into the the tender flesh, with sharpe smitinges all about the sweete body. The hote blode ranne out so plentuously that ther was neither seen skinne ne wounde, but as it were all blode. And when it cam wher it shuld have falle downe, ther it vanished. Notwithstanding, the bleding continued a while till it might be seen with avisement. And this was so plentuous to my sight taht methough, if it had ben so in kinde and in substance for that time, it shulde have made the bedde all on bloude, and have passede over all about.<sup>280</sup>

Once again, the centering insight of this vision is the abundance of Christ’s blood. It is plentiful, abundant, overflowing. The blood, “most plentuous, as it is most precious”, was so abundant that “ther was neither seen skinne ne wounde, but as it were all blode”<sup>281</sup> The plenty of blood hides the flesh so that it is all that can be seen.

In this vision, the blood appears to stand in for the waters of baptism. Though “God hath made waters plentuous in erth to our servys, and to our bodely eese...yet liketh

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.



him better that we take full holsofmy his blessed blode to wash us of.”<sup>282</sup> The cleansing liquid that God intends is blood and not water – we are washed with it. Such an image is widely prevalent in Christianity, particularly in certain forms of Protestantism. For many reasons, however, language of blood and its necessity in reordering the divine-human relation raises significance concerns. Feminists and womanists in particular fear that the understanding of Christ’s blood as cleansing makes Christ into little more than a victim, and that cruciform living is thereby rendered profoundly *not* liberating for those whose lives are characterized by victimization. For Julian, however, blood bears little (if any) relation to sacrifice. The blood of Christ is in no way transactional. It is not a currency and has no juridical value. It represents the life-force of Jesus and the power of God. It is vitality; it is power; it is hope. Cruciform living is possible for all, therefore, because such living is characterized by the abundance of generative possibilities.

In other words, Julian’s focus here is not on the *necessity* of blood as a price paid for divine propitiation, but rather on its *abundance*, its “precious plenty.” It “overfloweth all erth” and is plenty enough for all who have lived and all who *will* live. The blood itself, as it flows through Christ’s resurrected body, continues to intercede for all of humanity before the Father. The plenteousness of Christ’s blood and its abundance for “all that is made” is a fundamental aspect of Julian’s theology.

That Julian rejects a transactional understanding of Christ’s death does not suggest that his death effected nothing. As the source of Christ’s life, his blood represents his divine-humanity. The copious blood of Christ, resulting from his wounds, is undeniably and inextricably related to the Passion. But its meaningfulness is as the

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

source of Jesus' vitality and life. Jesus' life for Julian is *who he is* – one of the Trinity. When this blood was shed, the *divine* life that Christ participates in was made available to us *humanly*. In being washed in it (or, under Eucharistic imagery, in ingesting it) we take to ourselves the possibility of and power for this transformation.

In seeing Jesus, Julian recognizes the power of God effected through his shed blood, and the way that this power is related to all that is made. This vision frees her to a different kind of life in the world. Julian recognizes that her humanity has been offered to God through the death of Christ. By the shedding of Christ's blood, that which makes her human has been restored. The change that derives from the passion is objective - there is a "status change" in Julian's humanity - but there was no change needed relative to the divine disposition. Julian's understanding of the "power of the blood" is able to affirm that the blood truly effected something without depicting God as "rather like a dictator, only larger and more arbitrary."<sup>283</sup> For Julian to argue that God is Love, she needs to retain a vision of God that is *less* like a human person, in the sense of being less subject to whims, tempers, and misunderstandings. And yet the person of Christ is fully human throughout. Though God is disclosed in humanity, we must take care not to project a particular kind of human being on God.

In offering a claim of God's love from her vision of Christ's suffering body, Julian does not claim that Christ's blood has a merely visual (or revelatory significance). God's love for her is connected to his "willing to do everything", and he is *able* to do everything because of his might, power, and wisdom. To quote this turn of phrase again:

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<sup>283</sup> Dorothy Sayers, "The Dogma is the Drama," *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 17.

And of this knowing are we most blinde. For some of us beleve that God is almight and may do alle, and that he is alle wisdom and can do alle. But that he is alle love and will do alle, there we stinte..<sup>284</sup>

The blood of Christ is what has the power to reunite heaven and earth and break the bonds of death:

Beholde and see the vertu of this precious plenty of his dereworthy blode! It descended downe into helle and brak her bondes and deliverd them, all that were there which belong to the courte of heven. The precious plenty of his dereworthy blode overfloweth all erth, and is redy to wash all creatures of sinne which be of good will, have ben, and shall be. The precious plenty of his dereworthy blode ascendeth up into heven in the blessed body of our lorde Jesu Crist, and ther is in him bleding, preying for us to the father, and is and shal be as long as us nedeth. And evermore it floweth in all heaven, enjoying the salvation of all manking that be ther and shall be, fulfilling the number that faileth. <sup>285</sup>

The blood frees those who have already gone to the grave. It is available to all who are living. And it ascends to the Father and intercedes for all who have ever lived. The blood is efficacious for all who live, for all who have lived, and for everyone who will ever live. Its abundance is the source of Christian hope.

In becoming human God became a creature who could suffer and die. But also in becoming human, Jesus became one whose life could perform divine love materially. When Julian sees the blood, she sees that God loved her. Its power lies not only in its symbolism (i.e., as baptism, or as the means by which we are reunited with God) but in its revelation. Put another way, the blood of Christ for Julian is not to help us remember Christ's death, but it is intended for us to better know the love of God that was revealed in it. As I will discuss in the next chapter, for Julian it is significant that we know how

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<sup>284</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 353.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 167,169.

much God loves us. This knowledge alone contributes to the subjective change humanity experiences from the atonement.

### Visions of the Body

The two remaining showings that center on Jesus' physicality focus on his broken body. The fourth (in the eighth revelation) is of Christ's dessicated face and bloodless body. The fifth revelation focuses on a wound in Christ's side. After such extensive and theologically powerful reflections on the abundance of Christ's blood, an image of Christ's drying flesh is both obvious (the blood has already flowed away from his body in the previous image, so of course it is dried up) and puzzling (if the blood is the site of theological meaning for Julian, what does Christ's body mean without it?). In the *fourth* image Julian couples the desiccation of Christ's body with his physical thirst, indicating that Christ suffered not only from the natural processes incumbent upon death and loss of blood, but also from the cruelty of his tormentors. She writes graphically of the sufferings he endured, including those caused also by the physical world through the cold wind:

I saw the swete face as it were drye and blodeles with pale dying; and  
sithen more browne blew, as the flesh turned more depe  
dede...Blodlesshed and paine dried within, and blowing of the winde and  
colde coming from without, met togeder in the swete body of Christ.<sup>286</sup>

The meaning of this painful drying up of "alle the lively spirites of Cristes flesh"<sup>287</sup> is difficult at first to discern, but it seems that the first claim contained here is that Christ suffered as much as was possible. The blood that issued from his wounds, though miraculous in its quantity and its generative possibility, did not then result in a

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

miraculous recovery of his flesh. Jesus' body truly died as a result of his sufferings. The desiccation of Christ's flesh ought to emphasize that Jesus suffered as much as was possible, and then truly died. He was not saved from any trial that creation might undergo.

But just as all of creation suffers vicariously with Christ, so all of creation can hope to share in the new life through which we are invited by Christ's blood. How this is possible is made evident in the fifth revelation Julian received. It is a revelation that perhaps more than any other thus far grounds her theology:

With a glad chere oure good lorde loked into his side and behelde, enjoyenge. And with his swete loking he led forth the understanding of his creature by the same wound into his sid, within. And ther he shewed a fair, delectable place, and large inow for alle mankinde that shalle be saved to rest in pees and in love. And therwith he brought to minde his dereworthy blode and his precious water which he let poure all out for love. And with the swete beholding he shewed his blisseful hart even cloven on two. and with this swete enjoyeng he shewed to my understanding, in part, the blessed godhede, as farforth as he wolde that time, strengthing the pour soule for to understande as it may be saide: that is to mene, the endlesse love that was without beginning, and is, and shal be ever...This is the understanding, simply as I can sey, of this blessed worde: "Lo how I loved the."<sup>288</sup>

The Lord looked into his side and beckoned Julian to follow. He then "shewed a fair, delectable place, and large inow for alle mankinde that shalle be saved to rest in pees and love."<sup>289</sup> Julian is claiming that the wound in Christ's side is our home, the place for the Christian to dwell and the place where we will be kept safe. This is not all she means, however. Not only are we invited into the wound in Christ's side, to dwell in him, but

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 201, 203.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 201.

there is room there for all of us there. The wound in Christ's side has enough room for all that is made.

Furthermore, it is the body of Christ that forms the boundaries of the church. Julian has just given us her ecclesiology. The wound marks the boundaries of the body of Christ, both physical and ecclesial. It is the flesh of Christ's body that forms the walls of the church, and all are welcome to be held there in love. As a wound, it is open to the world. This is not a closed, contained body but one whose porousness provides the occasion for communion. We are welcomed into Christ through his wounds.

The life that we will live in Christ is characterized by peace and love. It is a vision of all of humanity, "rooted and grounded in Christ", sharing in the goodness of God. This vision returns us to an earlier one, a vision that comes after seeing Christ's blood:

In this same time that I saw this sight of the head bleeding, our good lord shewed a ghostly sight of his homely loving. I saw that he is to us all thing that is good and comofortable to our helpe. He is oure clothing, that for love wrappeth us and windeth us, halseth us and all becloseth us, hangeth about us for tender love, that he may never leeve us. And so in this sight I saw that he is all thing taht is good, as to my understanding.<sup>290</sup>

The love of God "is oure clothing, that for love wrappeth us...hangeth about us for tender love." It encloses all of humanity in gentleness and kindness. Furthermore, it wraps all of humanity *together*. We are bound to Christ through his kindness and thereby bound also inextricably to each other. The work of Christ is a glue that in reconnecting us to God, binds us also to each other. It necessarily works in both directions. The wound is

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 139.

the cruciform image that confirms this spiritual vision. This wound encloses the whole world. We are all wrapped together in the love of God, in his kindness and gentleness.

Through her discussion of the blood and the body of Christ, it is clear that Julian is giving us a Eucharistic image. Instead of partaking of the body and blood however, Julian inverts the Eucharistic imagery: rather than our taking the body and blood into ourselves, we are taken into Christ's body. But just as with the sacrament, Julian's understanding of Eucharist is what forms the boundaries of the whole church. One need not, however, confess to partake. For Julian, one is first held by the love of God, and then confesses that it is safe there. This experience of divine love is the grace that both precedes and makes the sacrament.

### **Conclusion**

Julian's vision of Christ's blood and suffering body, itself grounded in her contemplation of a physical image of Jesus, form the foundation of her theology. Because Julian believes God is Trinity, she posits no difference in character or attitude between the first and second persons of the Trinity. The second person is incarnate to reveal the love that constitutes the Trinity, not to act as mediator between an angry Father and a sinful humanity. Julian's vision of the divine person in Christ leads to her understanding of the relationship between creation, salvation, and eschatology. For her, "first things" and "last things" are held together in the person who is both Creator and Redeemer.

In this chapter, I have focused on the immediate content of Julian's visions, while in the next I will explore how she develops her theological reflection on these visions and how they relate to the major topics of Christian doctrine: Trinity, creation, and redemption. In short, I will address how Julian's understanding of the person of Christ

secures the continuity of God's work in the world. For Julian, when Jesus is seen, God is revealed. Julian's argument is that this vision opens up a range of ways in which humans are freed to live in the world. In the Incarnation, there was not only an *objective* change in humanity (our humanity was restored in Christ), but a *subjective* change as well - sin is seen as what it is, simply a condition of being human and not a reality that stands between divine love and the world. For Julian, to understand this is to experience oneself as a new creation, dearly beloved by God.

## **Chapter 5: Julian's Vision of Coherence**

### Introduction

Fundamental to Julian is the claim that Christ is himself before all things, and the one in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:17). Julian makes this claim on the basis of her vision of Jesus. When Julian sees Jesus, she sees not only the source of her redemption, but also one who is part of the Trinity, the source of creation and also her future hope. Her vision of Jesus, therefore, orients her understanding of "all that is made." For this reason, Julian's motivation in writing is to grant the church a new picture of Jesus, a picture that will invite the seer into a new kind of life. Julian's theological



“seeing” is grounded in her Christology, which has a fundamentally Chalcedonian character. This means that, although she recognizes with Thomas Aquinas that God’s “essence is above all that we understand about God and signify in word,” she considers Jesus to be truly God, and therefore truly revelatory of God’s relation to the world.<sup>291</sup> Precisely *because* Jesus can be seen, he provides for Julian the most trustworthy knowledge of who God is – and thus of what God is like.

Julian’s emphasis on vision reflects the primacy of Christology to her theological framework. Her seeing of Jesus is not only an exercise in mystical theology, but also a way to speak truly about the God who is revealed in Scripture. Because Julian claims to know God only in Jesus, she does not make speculative claims about the divine nature, or about possible acts of God considered in abstraction from her vision of Jesus (for example, election and the eternal status of the soul). Thus, Julian refuses to speculate about judgment, because it is proper only to the first person of the Trinity. That Julian “sees no judgment” is a component of her theological method, because judgment is not proper to Jesus, and Julian sees only Jesus (John 3:17, 12:47). Julian refuses to speculate on what has not been revealed to her in Christ. She also refuses to engage counterfactuals, because the only world she sees – and thus the only reality on which she is authorized to comment – is the one that has in fact been redeemed in God through Christ. Her emphasis on vision, therefore, is less about a general epistemological prioritization of the senses than about relying on Jesus to refine our speech about God.

Julian’s theology revolves around the one she has seen. Because seeing Jesus determines what Julian is willing and able to say theologically, her understanding of

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<sup>291</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, .1. 13. 1.

redemption differs rather significantly from some traditional Christian treatments of the subject. Julian's understanding of redemption is not shaped by the categories of judgment, guilt, or blame. Jesus relates to the world as one who communicates God's love. Julian withholds discussion of judgment, because for Julian to talk about judgment is to talk about something that is proper to God the Father, something Julian affirms that she cannot see. It is above her paygrade. For Julian, you cannot talk about God apart from what is revealed in Jesus. Julian's theology of vision, therefore is about reflecting our human inability to know the divine nature in our speech about God. What we know is the person of the Son revealed in Jesus. Julian's focus on Christ reflects this conviction.

Unlike the case in much contemporary theology, where the category of divine judgment is subject to serious question by theologians, Julian's claims regarding the absence of judgment in God could draw on little cultural capital. It is important to remember that Julian had a clear, though somewhat unofficial, relation to the church of her day. As an anchorite, she lived within the church walls and was considered a confidante and counselor to many who visited.<sup>292</sup> Her references throughout to "mother church" could, of course, reflect different things—perhaps a strategic attempt to avoid sanction and maintain her own personal safety. However, such references might also reflect a genuine desire to stay within the walls of the church (both physically and theologically!), while still communicating what she sees in Jesus. Seeing Jesus for Julian is not a way to contradict church teaching, but arises from a conviction that one cannot talk about God apart from what is revealed in Christ. Thus (as will be seen in more detail

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<sup>292</sup> The most famous "visitor", of course, is Margery Kempe.

below), that Julian sees “no sin” is not to make a claim about the inner depths of the divine nature, but about this divine person and his relation to the world.

In line with the principles of Chalcedonian Christology outlined in Chapters 1-3, at the heart of “seeing Jesus” for Julian is understanding *who* God is. Because Julian does not attempt to “see” the invisible divine *nature*, she focuses her attention on Jesus as a divine *person*. This does not mean that for Julian the one she has seen in Jesus is any less God than the invisible first person of the Trinity, or that her vision of Christ contrasts with what is true of the divine nature. Rather, she treats her vision of Christ as directly revelatory of *who* God is, and thus of *how* God is with the world. Because of her own theology -- particularly her Trinitarianism -- Julian believes the vision of Christ she has received is trustworthy and revelatory of God.

This has a direct effect on how Julian thinks about the incarnation. Instead of seeing Jesus through an “occasionalist” lens, as a movement of God demanded by human sin, Julian understands Jesus as an eternal revelation of triune love.<sup>293</sup> This is how Julian can experience her first vision of Christ’s suffering and immediately speak of the Trinity. Julian’s vision of Christ’s suffering body leads immediately and even necessarily to a vision of the Trinity because Christ, for her, is primarily a revelation of the Trinity. *What Jesus reveals is not an interruption of God’s love or intent for the world, but a final and clear revelation of the eternal love that is the Trinity.* By understanding Christ as always “one of the Trinity,” Julian’s visions of Jesus bleed out affirmations about the triune God. Because for Julian the Trinity is always consistent with itself, it never strays from Love

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<sup>293</sup> What is intended by this statement is the Son’s place as always “One of the Trinity.” Julian is not concerned with the *logos asarkos* question.

into anything else. Therefore, Julian's understanding of the incarnation flows directly from this belief in the unity of the Trinitarian life.

In fact, this consistency serves as a significant theological insight throughout Julian's *Revelations*. One might even say that for Julian, creation, redemption, and eschatology are all *one Trinitarian act*. This is the immediacy of Julian's vision. What the Trinity is eternally is communicated in Christ in terms of human temporal experience. Our experience of God in Jesus, however, occurs in time, and so does our understanding of salvation. By emphasizing throughout Christ as "one of the Trinity," Julian avoids an explanation of his person that is purely economic. Though she does not state her intentions in these terms, Julian is working to avoid a Christology that collapses the "person" of Christ into the "work." This is critical, because what Jesus *does* he accomplishes only because of *who* he is, and who he is is always one of the Trinity. Jesus' incarnate reality reveals God's triune life. And this triune life, once seen in Jesus, clarifies the shape of Christian life in community.

Julian's thorough Trinitarianism also contributes to a certain difficulty in reading her text, a difficulty that sometimes leads readers to undervalue or misunderstand her claims. Because Christ is the heart of Julian's theology and is revelatory of the Trinity, a vision of Christ is simultaneously (if implicitly) a revelation of the whole of Christian theology. This does not mean that a vision of Jesus demands no more of the Christian, but rather that within the vision of Christ a true revelation of who God is and how God is with the world is contained. It is not a reductionist claim, but rather the opposite: for Julian, a vision of Jesus expands to include a vision of all that is made. It follows from

this that Julian's vision of the whole of Christian faith can be introduced in many different ways. But because the Trinity is at the heart of her claims, I will start there.

### Trinity

As already noted, Julian's very first "showing" brings with it a revelation of the Trinity. After seeing the plenteous blood trickle from where Christ's head was pierced with the crown of thorns, Julian suddenly sees the Trinity.

For the trinity is God, God is the trinity. The trinity is our maker, the trinity is our keeper, the trinity is our everlasting lover, the trinity is our endlesse joy and our blisse, by our lord Jesu Christ and in our lord Jesu Christ. And this was shewed in the first sight and in all. For wher Jhesu appireth the blessed trinity is understand, as to my sight.<sup>294</sup>

Julian's first vision of Jesus leads directly to a discussion of the Trinity because for her Jesus is always one of the Trinity. His identity is never separated from that of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, even though only Jesus (and not the Father or the Spirit) is incarnate and, therefore, visible. The language Julian uses here and throughout the *Revelations* to speak of the Trinity provides insight into what Julian understands of the Trinity: God is maker, keeper, everlasting lover, endless joy and bliss.<sup>295</sup> This language indicates how Julian perceives the various relations of the Trinity: creator, re-creator, and generator of love. The fourth characteristic – "endlesse joy and our blisse" – seems to speak of the kind of love that the Trinity shares, and that is generated in us by our love of God.<sup>296</sup> The triune God shares God's love with the world, and we thereby are invited to partake of it. The love that founds the Trinity is the same love that creates the world.

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<sup>294</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 135.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, textual notes in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 134.

This kind of triune language reoccurs throughout Julian's writings. Julian writes that God made us, restored us, and keeps us.<sup>297</sup> God is might, wisdom and love.<sup>298</sup> God treats the world greatly, sweetly, and tenderly.<sup>299</sup> For Julian that God is love, and that Christ reveals this love, is evident in the pattern of Trinitarian relations made apparent by God's work in the world. In this way, *Julian's theology reflects a fundamentally consistent view of who God is and how God is with the world*, such that when Julian speaks of Jesus she always speaks also of the Trinity. This will become especially apparent in her discussion of redemption, where her parable of the lord and the servant reveals the fundamental consistency of God's work in the world. Julian affirms that God's love is evident in God's own life, and that God's work in the world is expressive of God's own being. In short, the claim that *God is how God acts* (i.e., the economic trinity is the immanent trinity, in Karl Rahner's formulation) accords with the idea that for Julian we know *what* God is like because we see in Jesus *who* God is. The vision we see of Jesus is one of love because God as Trinity is love.

Love is the most fundamental characteristic of the Trinity—indeed it is also the primary name for God (1 John 4:8). Love finds its meaning in God. This means that the most proper understanding of what love is, is found in the triune relations, as the relation between the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, expresses generativity, generosity, and energy towards the other. To affirm that, "God is love," is therefore not to apply a human concept to a transcendent God, but to reorient our own understanding of what love is on

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<sup>297</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 143.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

the basis of what is seen in Jesus. Because God's love is expressed in human form in Christ, the incarnation locates love in terms of what we can understand humanly.

Following Julian, we can say that God's love is expressed in the Trinity primarily as overflowing generosity. As Kathryn Tanner writes,

[God is] the giver of all good gifts, their fount, luminous source, fecund treasury and store house. Like an 'overflowing radiance,' God 'sends forth upon all things... the rays of Its undivided Goodness;' 'the divine Goodness... maintains... and protects [all creation] and feasts them with its good things.' In establishing the world in relationship to Godself, God's intent is to communicate such gifts to us.<sup>300</sup>

That in creating the world God intends to communicate the gifts of God's own life to us means that the life of the Trinity is extended to us through creation and re-creation. In creating and re-creating the world, God reveals who God is. Jesus is a revelation of God's love and, as such, is consistent *with* God's love. His life and death are a revelation of the Trinity, such that while the divine nature remains unknowable, the life, death, and resurrection of the divine person of the Son discloses the character of divinity. For Julian Jesus' life and death cannot be in conflict with how God is as Trinity and, in fact, reveal it.

The failure of much of Protestant theology to reflect this consistency of God's (economic) self-expression with God's own (immanent) life is arguably rooted in an inadequate understanding of the Trinity, and particularly in an inadequate understanding of the enhypostatic reality of Jesus. To affirm that Jesus is the divine "who" - a personal instantiation of the divine nature - means that what we see in Jesus is no less than God.

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<sup>300</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and The Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1. Tanner is quoting Dionysius, "The Divine Names."

Therefore, in Jesus is seen one of the Trinity. The rallying cry of the Theopaschite controversy - “One of the Trinity was crucified!”—is for Julian *precisely* what is at stake in “seeing Jesus.” Because Julian’s Trinitarianism never wavers, her affirmation that indeed Jesus is “one of the Trinity” reflects the impulses of a Chalcedonian Christology: the person of Jesus discloses the love of God that constitutes the Trinitarian life.

Julian’s Trinitarianism, therefore, lends her theology its emphasis on the love of God. Julian emphasizes divine love *because* she believes God is Trinity. The resonant claims she places in the Lord’s mouth - “Lo, how I loved the”- and her final insistence that “Love is what he meant” derive from this Trinitarianism.<sup>301</sup> In Chapter 23 of her *Revelations*, Julian offers a Trinitarian view of the suffering of Christ that helps to explicate the relation between her Trinitarianism and God’s love. In beholding Christ’s passion, Julian is reassured that this act expresses the unity of the Trinity:

And in these thre words- “It is a joy, a blisse, an endlesse liking to me”- were shewed thre hevens, as thus: for the joy, I understode the pleasance of the father; and for the blisse, the wurshipe of the sonne; and for the endlesse liking, the holy gost. The father is plesed, the sonne is wurshiped, the holy gost liketh.<sup>302</sup>

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit joyfully share in the bliss of Christ’s passion, which come in “five menneres.” The first four are the visions of Christ’s suffering: his bleeding head, discoloured face, plenteous bleeding, and deep drying. The fifth manner of his passion is its “joy and blisse.” It might seem that the first four manners of the passion - characterized as they are by torture and suffering - lead to anything *but* bliss. Julian is able to affirm this joyful quality of the passion, however, because of how she understands

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<sup>301</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 203.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.



the relation between the divine persons in relation to the passion. As will be explained in greater detail below, the passion of Christ for Julian is *not* a situation where Christ is punished in our place due to God's inevitable wrath. Rather, the passion is an expression of God's love, an expression wherein the entire Trinity finds joy and bliss:

Alle the trinite wrought in the passion of the Christ, ministering habondance of vertuse and plente of grace to us by him. But only the maidens sonne suffered, werof alle the blessed trinite endelessly enjoyeth. And this was shewed in this worde: "Arte thou welle apaide [satisfied]?" By that other worde that Crist seid—"If thour arte apaid, I am apaide"- as if he had saide: "It is joy and liking enough to me, and I asked not ells of the for my travayle but that I might apaye the."

And in this, he brought to my mind the properte of a gladdge gever. A glade gever taketh but litille hede at the thing that he giveth, but alle his desir and alle his intent is to plesse him and solae him to whome he giveth it. And if the receiver take the gift gladly and thankfully, than the curtesse gever setteth at nought alle his cost and alle his traveyle, for joy and delight that he hath for he hath plesed and solaced him that he loveth. Plentuously and fully was this shewed.<sup>303</sup>

Julian's language of "gift and giver" reflects her Trinitarianism. In her view, the passion is a gift given by the Son to the Father. The Son's love for the Father is so deep that even the enormous suffering he undergoes does not detract from his joy: "alle his desir and alle his intent is to plesse him and solae him to whome he giveth it." The giver, Christ, "setteth at nought alle his cost and alle his traveyle," out of his love for God. Certainly this gift is given by the Son to the Father on our behalf, but note that humanity is not even mentioned here. What Julian stresses instead is the inter-Trinitarian love that forms the core of the passion narrative. In her view, the love that the passion expresses is a love that is truly reflective of the triune life.

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 199, 201.

Julian's language here is careful: "Alle the trinite wrought in the passion of the Christ...But only the maidens sonne suffered, werof alle the blessed trinite endelessly enjoyeth." Though she emphasizes that the passion is a work of the Trinity, she does not claim that the entirety of the Trinity *suffered* the Passion—only the maiden's son suffered. Nevertheless, because of the unity of the triune persons, *all* the blessed Trinity endlessly enjoys the work and the fruits of the passion. Because Love is what generates the triune life, Julian can truly affirm that in seeing the passion, one can see the love of God, without affirming that the divine nature experiences suffering.

It is directly at this juncture that Julian's experience of and emphasis on "seeing Jesus" offers a distinctive contribution to Trinitarian theology. The kinds of questions that arise when theologians ponder whether the Father is "in charge" of the Son, or whether the Son "obeyed" the Father indicate from Julian's perspective a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Trinity is. The Trinity is a mystery, but the mystery lies more at the level of *how* these persons exist than *who* these persons are. Christ represents divine love in time because he is one of the Trinity and subsists in intimate relationship with the Father and the Spirit. Attempts to understand the incarnation or the suffering of Christ apart from this fundamental affirmation stray from this triune confession.

### Creation

Julian's understanding of what the world is and how it is preserved are consistent with her understanding of God as Trinity. The same God that made the world loves and keeps the world. The incarnation does not interrupt or transform God's relationship with the world; rather, in taking flesh God is being consistent with God-self and continuing the work of creation. It is characteristic of the divine love to always overflow its bounds, to

exist as the Giver of gifts (for the life of the Trinity is nothing but the Father giving to the Son in the power of the Spirit). Thus, although creation is not a necessary act, it is a natural expression of how God is eternally. Creation is an expression of divine love. It exists out of love, and continues to exist due to that love. In this way, Julian's understanding of creation is a further example of how her theology "coheres" Christologically. Because the world was made out of this triune love, it therefore reflects its character.

Julian's image of creation comes in Chapter 5 of the long text:

And in this, he shewed a little thing the quantity of an haselnot, lying in the palme of my hand as me semide [seemed], and it was as rounde as any balle. I looked theran with the eye of my understanding, and thought: "What may this be?" And it was answered generally thus: "It is all that is made." I marvayled how it might laste, for methought it might soddenly have fallen to nought for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: "It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it. And so hath all thing being by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the thirde is that God kepeth it. But what is that to me? Sothly, the maker, the keper, the lover. For till I am substantially oned to him I may never have full reste ne very blisse: that is to say, that I be so fastned to him that ther be right nought that is made betweene my God and me.<sup>304</sup>

Julian sees a small thing, a hazelnut, and understands that this is "all that is made."

Julian's wonder at the smallness of this revelation is met by an understanding of the love God has for this very small thing, and indeed of God's commitment to the betterment of God's creation. Already in her discussion of what creation is, Julian is drawing on the Trinitarian framework through which we are to understand her soteriology: though the world is very small, objectively insignificant in relation to God, yet it "lasteth and ever

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 139, 141.

shall, for God loveth it.” Because God is Trinity, and the Trinity is love, it is only natural that the world as an expression of divine love will be held in being by God. That “all thing [hath] being by the love of God” is an affirmation of the Trinity as the source of all life. There is not, therefore, under Julian’s scheme the possibility of asking whether God could have chosen not to create, or whether God at some point in time might dissolve God’s creation. Rather, Creation’s existence is held in being because of God’s irremovable love for it.

*For Julian, because God acts how God is, what creation reveals is not an act of necessity but a revelation of God’s triune love.* That the world exists fundamentally as a revelation of love communicates something about the triune Creator. David Bentley Hart, in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, writes about the nature of creation as an expression of God’s triune life:

The freedom of God from ontic determination is the ground of creation’s goodness: precisely because creation is uncompelled, unnecessary, and finally other than that dynamic life of coinherent love whereby God is God, it can reveal how God is the God he is; precisely because creation is needless, an object of delight that shares God’s love without contributing anything that God does not already possess in infinite eminence, creation reflects the divine life, which is one of delight and fellowship and love; precisely because creation is not part of God, the context of God, or divine, precisely because it is not ‘substantially’ from God, or metaphysically cognate to God’s essence, or a pathos of God, is it an analogy of the divine; in being the object of God’s love without any cause but the generosity of that love, creation reflects in its beauty that eternal delight that is the divine *perichoresis* and that obeys no necessity but divine love itself.<sup>305</sup>

Creation as an uncompelled revelation of God’s own life cannot be thwarted by time and its variance. Just as creation was not occasioned by anything, so too redemption is a free

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<sup>305</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 158.

act of God, revealing the love at the heart of the Trinity, not divine displeasure with the world. The promise of God's future behavior is based on God's past deeds.<sup>306</sup> So Julian's claim that "all shall be well" is not naïve eschatological optimism but grounded in the triune reality. Because God's life is triune, and so constituted by an overflowing of love, God's works reflect also this quality: "The *taxis* of [God's] salvific activity toward us is the same *taxis* that is his triune life."<sup>307</sup> That God is this way indicates for Julian how God will continue to relate to the world through Christ. God's intentions in making the world are to re-make the world, and to continue in this process of remaking.

Julian's affirmations of divine love and eschatological hope are ultimately grounded in the internal self-consistency of God as Trinity. Indeed she can hardly speak of God's saving work *without* invoking the Trinity: "And right as we were made like to the trinite in oure furst making, our maker would that we should be like to Jhesu Crist, oure savior in heven without ende, by the virtue of oure gainmaking [remaking]."<sup>308</sup> The content of our salvation for Julian rests in the consistency of God's own life and God's act toward the world. Julian's understanding of redemption, therefore, flows directly out of her vision of creation. *For Julian, redemption is a further movement of the Trinity intended to restore the world to divine love.*

For Julian seeing how God loves the world is seeing how God exists as Trinity. Julian's Trinitarianism suggests that the vision of Christ Julian entertains functions something like an icon of the Trinity - revealing at once the kind love that God enjoys, eternally. To quote Hart once more,

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<sup>306</sup> Watson and Jenkins, textual note, 252.

<sup>307</sup> Hart, *Beauty*, 159.

<sup>308</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 161.

If the economic Trinity is the immanent, such that nothing can be assumed to be *merely* economic (that is, provisional) in the order of the divine action in salvation, then the doctrine of God can never arrive at a speculative closure that would make it any less difficult to master than the story of Jesus itself.<sup>309</sup>

The vision of Jesus, it would seem, is the most fitting way to know God, and what is revealed therein is unknown elsewhere, because the “rescue mission” that God began in Christ was intended to restore to God-self what was already God’s own. The story of the life of Christ is simply that all of creation is held by God.

### Sin

That God’s kindness continues to preserve creation and that all of creation is held by God is often thought to create a logical problem with the existence of sin and evil. However, for Julian, *the existence of sin does not interrupt or impede God’s relation to the world*. Protestant theology has notoriously emphasized the condition of humanity before God due to sin. Under such a view, because humans are bound by sin, the salvation that comes in Christ addresses the sin itself, and in turn also the human condition. Julian’s derivation of her soteriology from a vision of Jesus alters this equation slightly but significantly, because it focuses on the human condition first, not on sin’s putative effects on God. For Julian, the claim that sin separates us from God is subjectively but not objectively true. To anticipate the famous parable that will be discussed further below, in the pit the servant experienced separation from the lord and a decrease in her capacities to do the lord’s will. She was never *actually* separated from God, however. What Julian’s vision of Jesus communicates is the reality that God never has abandoned God’s creation,

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<sup>309</sup> Hart, *Beauty*, 168.

because Jesus is the revelation of God's love for the world, and in him God's commitment to God's creation is visible.

Sin for Julian is a "surd"- a metaphysically vacant category. She writes, "I saw not sinne. For I beleve it hath no maner of substance, ne no part of being, ne it might not be knowen but by the paine that it is cause of."<sup>310</sup> What is at stake here for Julian is sin's relation to God. For Julian, sin is not something that demands a negative response from God. This is perhaps the most radical claim of Julian's theology. In Julian's understanding, sin simply *is*—it is part of the furniture of the world. Upon seeing the world, God is not angered by God's creation as it exists, sin included. This does not mean that God caused sin, but that creation as it exists contains sin, and that, therefore "sin is befitting." Christ himself speaks to Julian and reveals sin's place in God's creation: "Sinne is behovely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinge shalle be wel."<sup>311</sup> It follows that many of the concepts surrounding Christian discussion of sin, including taint, guilt, and blame, are missing from Julian's account. For Julian, sin to God truly is "no thing." The God that Julian sees in Jesus is disposed toward creation in love, not judgment. This does not mean that judgment and wrath are necessarily absent from God, but rather that Julian is given no insight into them because such things are beyond what we can see – and therefore know – of God in Christ.

Julian has just indicated that her prior thought had been that sin was what prevented the felicity of the universe, but Christ himself reveals to her that the existence of sin in no way interrupts the goodness of all that is. Instead of seeing sin as a reality

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 209.

that interrupts God's designs for the world, Julian understands it as something that simply "is", and therefore as something that fits within the order of the universe in such a way as to be comprehended by God's creative and redeeming love.

Julian's claim that sin is "behovely" (befitting) seems, initially, to fail on two counts. First, it might seem that such a claim discounts the very real experience and repercussions of sin in the world. That sin is "befitting" might seem to ignore, at best, or even to malign the suffering of many. Second, to claim that sin is "befitting" might seem to undermine the biblical claim that sin is that which we must *avoid* at all costs, instead of positing it as something that simply exists, removing from human history a significant claim relative to moral responsibility.

"Behovely" for Julian, however, solves neither of these problems precisely. For Julian that sin is befitting, and yet all shall be well speaks of the reality of the divine economy. Unlike many of her medieval contemporaries, Julian does not treat sin as something that required God's attention, as a disobedient child's acts would warrant a parent's response. Sin is not a reality that interrupted God's initial intent for creation - as Denys Turner aptly notes, Julian's is not a "plan B soteriology."<sup>312</sup> Whether or not the incarnation answered a necessity—whether Christ existed primarily to address the Fall— or whether the Incarnation was a free revelation of divine love modifies how one thinks about who Jesus is. Note that whether in fact the incarnation *does* address sin is not in question here. The issue is rather whether sin was what necessitated the incarnation, making it a contingent event.

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<sup>312</sup> Turner, *Julian*, 30.



For Julian to affirm that sin is “behovely” is to begin descriptively with the universe that exists, instead of with a counterfactual (and therefore unreal) universe. That sin is “befitting” means that it exists in a world of which it is a part.<sup>313</sup> It withholds any statement regarding whether the world in which we live *ought* to be the case, or whether it might have been otherwise, because Julian will speak theologically only about what she has seen. In Denys Turner’s words, the behovely acknowledges “the particular narrative of just this sinful world.”<sup>314</sup> Julian refuses to speculate about any world other than the one in which she finds herself – and to which she has seen God’s attitude in Christ. And yet the connection between sin’s “fittingness” and the world’s future redemption is a necessary one. For Julian, it is precisely *because* “sin is befitting” that we can trust that indeed all *shall* be well. The world we inhabit is one where sin is, and therefore the Christian can trust that it is *just this particular world* that God is able to redeem.

All too often Julian’s claim that “all shall be well” is taken as a sign of naïve optimism, a pie-in-the-sky eschatology, instead of an affirmation that is thoroughly rooted in her Trinitarianism. For Julian “all shall be well” because the same God that was responsible for creating the world will also redeem it, “For right as the blessed trinite made alle thing of nought, right so the same blessed trinite shalle make wele alle that is not welle.”<sup>315</sup> Because “sin is befitting”, it in no way prevents all from being well. Julian here speaks in the future tense. She is not suggesting that all is currently well and ignoring the very real suffering and effects of sin in the world. Rather for Julian, it is self-evident that a God who is able to make a world out of nothing is also able to restore

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<sup>313</sup> Elizabeth Spearing uses this translation throughout.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>315</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 223.

that world and its inhabitants from the incapacities they face: “For he wille that we wit that the lest thing shall not be forgotten.”<sup>316</sup> That “all shall be well” recognizes the existence of sin without allowing sin to determine the shape of human redemption and life before God.

I have emphasized up to this point that for Julian seeing Jesus is seeing God, and that therefore a vision of Christ is revelatory of who God is and how God acts in the world. Importantly, however (and in line with the basic principles of Chalcedonian Christology), though seeing Jesus is seeing God, it not a vision of the divine nature. In arguing from her vision of Jesus to her claims relative to Christian theology, Julian is focusing her claims about God on the one she can see - God incarnate, in the person of Christ. For this reason, Julian speaks theologically *only* about what can be known (the person of Christ) and refuses to speculate about what cannot be known (the divine nature). This is evident in her refusal to engage with counterfactuals, but instead her persistent emphasis on the world as it exists. It is also evident in her unwillingness to speculate about whether any are included among those who are damned.

Julian’s attempt to reconcile what she has seen—a love of God that includes no wrath – with what she has been taught provides a constant tension throughout the Long Text, and how to reconcile “the teaching with the seeing” is certainly a significant component of how she works.<sup>317</sup> Whether or not Julian is a universalist is a question with many divergent answers.<sup>318</sup> Julian refrains from commenting directly on the issue, noting

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>317</sup> Turner, *Julian*, 103-9.

<sup>318</sup> Cf. Bauerschmidt, Jantzen.

instead the simple disagreement between what holy church teaches and what she has been shown. She will say only what she sees, which is the love of God revealed in Christ.

That God's wrath leads to judgment is a common teaching of the church of her day. Mentions of a "great deed" and a "secret" appear a few times throughout her text, which many interpreters take to be a reference to God's universal act of salvation. However, Julian's reluctance to explicitly speculate further is an example of her theological method.<sup>319</sup> What Julian knows about God is thanks to what she has seen in Christ. Whatever else is true accords with what she has seen, but is beyond her ability to know. What Julian resists throughout is any attempt to take a "God's-eye view" of sin and redemption, something she implicitly accuses the church of doing. This refusal to speculate, though perhaps frustrating, reaffirms how Julian works theologically. Julian can affirm only what she has seen, and all she has seen is Jesus.

Julian's vision of Jesus is what secures her understanding of God's work of redemption as fully consistent with God's work in creation, and also with her understanding of sin. To this extent, distinguishing between them is somewhat artificial: in redeeming creation, God is simply exercising the love by which God always sustains the world in creation. Nevertheless, redemption does have its own logic for Julian, who gives us a picture of humanity, fallen into a pit, suffering precisely because of having misunderstood God's relation to their situation. The reality that Julian sees is that God (as Creator!) loves all of fallen humanity as if there were no sin. This is the picture that we are invited to share. Contrary to so many models of "evangelism," the message of Christ Julian offers is not one rooted in the presence of sin that interrupts the divine-

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<sup>319</sup> See *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, Chapters 27, 30, 32, 34.

human relation, but of the unreality of any power that interrupts that relationship. We feel sin's effects, certainly, but sin in no way impedes God's love for us. Living into this vision, the church would have a radically different message for the world.

In addressing what redemption is, then, Julian needs to develop this alternative vision of sin, which is one of the most significant innovations of her theology. That the same movement that caused God to create the world serves to redeem the world gives a different valence to creation and redemption. That creation and salvation are one act means that for Julian, sin has a distinctly different place in relation to both. Julian understands sin as something that requires a divine response, but not as a reality that ever qualifies God's will to be the lover of the world.

Julian indeed has much to say about sin. She confesses that she has long been taught that there is judgment for sin:

For I knew be the comen teching of holy church and by my owne feling that the blame of oure sinnes continually hangeth upon us, from the first man into the time that we come uppe into heven. Then this was my merveylye, that I saw oure lorde God shewing to us no more blame that if we were as clene and as holy as angelis be in heven.<sup>320</sup>

That Julian's vision excludes any blame is a significant theological innovation, particularly for her time. Julian's articulation does not, however, erase any mention of sin or its effects. Rather her renovation is related to whether sin affects God. One might in fact read her understanding of sin as an affirmation of a traditional view of divine impassibility: sin in no way affects God, but that does not mean it does not affect us.

Among these effects are all kinds of suffering. In fact, the existence of suffering is how Julian knows of the existence of sin. She writes that she does not see sin, "ne it

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<sup>320</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 273.

might not be known but by the pain that it is cause of.”<sup>321</sup> Sin is only revealed by its effects, and it is these very effects (the pain and suffering of creation) that Christ’s suffering addresses:

And this pain, it is something, as to my sight, for a time. For it purgeth and maketh us to know ourselfe and aske mercy. And for the tender love that our good lord hath to alle that shalle be saved, he comforteth redely and sweetly, mening thus: “It is soth that sinne is cause of alle this paine, but alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thing shalle be wele.” Theyse words were shewde fulle tenderly, shewing no maner of blame to me, ne to none that shalle be safe. Than were it a gret unkindnesse of me to blame or wonder on God for my sinne, sithen he blameth not me for sinne.<sup>322</sup>

In this witty turn of phrase, Julian has stated one of her primary theological claims: “It were a great unkindnesse of me to blame or wonder on God for my sin, because he does not blame me for sin.” The effect of sin in the world is suffering, and Christ’s death addresses this suffering. However, Christ does not come to address a situation of blame or guilt that exists between God and humanity. By refusing to answer a counterfactual question of whether God might have removed the possibility of sin from the world, Julian is resisting any narration of Christ’s incarnation as nothing more than a remedy for sin.

The universe that Julian describes is one where sin is “befitting,” simply because it exists. The incarnation addresses the sin of the world and its effects without positing blame. God in Christ addresses the world *as it exists* without holding humanity responsible for a sinless (and therefore unreal or counterfactual) world.

### Redemption

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<sup>321</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 211.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.* Immediately after this quotation Julian speaks of a “high, marvelous previte hid in God.”

The incarnation for Julian does address sin and its effects, but it does so in a distinct way. Julian introduces a parable of a lord and a servant to explain how she understands what kind of “mission” Christ was sent on by God. This parable is one of the main additions to *Revelations* in the Long Text, and it is Julian’s attempt to narrate how she understands the relation of creation and redemption in Christ. By her use of a servant who represents both Christ and Adam, Julian attempts to address how we are both restored by the coming of Christ, and invited into a new kind of life.

In the parable, which appears in Chapter 51 of the Long Text, Julian sees a lord who “sitteth solempnely in rest and in pees”, and a servant who “stondeth before his lorde reverently, redy to do his lords wille.”<sup>323</sup> Clearly Julian is indicating here the kind of relation that exists between the first and second persons of the Trinity - a communion of love which “knows only peace.”<sup>324</sup> The lord sends the servant “into a certaine place to do his will”, and the servant responds with great energy and desire to do his will. Already at the outset, what we are given is a lord and a servant whose love is the factor that motivates any movement outwards. In Julian’s narration, there is no external event that demands the lord’s attention, disrupts his relation with the son, or impedes the relation between the lord and the servant. The mission, we are told later, is for the son to retrieve a treasure in the earth that the lord loved. Julian’s parable rearticulates the relation between sin and the Incarnation without resorting to categories of blame and judgment, and also without minimizing the grave effects of sin.

#### Lord and the Servant I: Adam

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>324</sup> Turner, *Julian*, 93.

Julian interprets the parable in two different ways, first by reading the servant as Adam, and then by understanding the servant as Christ. By reading the servant as Adam, Julian is able to offer her own explanation of Adam's fall and therefore expound her understanding of all human sin. Instead of depicting Adam's sin as a volitional choosing against God, Julian reads the "fall" in a very different light. For Julian, the failure of human creatures to do God's will arises not out of a bad will, or out of a desire for something other than God, but simply out of the reality that humans sometimes fail in their desire to do good. It is a "missing the mark" (*hamartia*) that indicates only an unintentional lack of strength in the archer, not an intentional bad aim or misdirection.

The "good wille" of both the lord and the servant are emphasized in this parable. Though she uses feudal language, it is important to note that "the lorde" is not described in terms reflective of the fourteenth century feudal economy. Julian's depiction is of a lord who is "curteyse" (with the double meaning of kind, kin, or family) and looks at his servant "full lovely and swetly."<sup>325</sup> The lord treats his servant as kin, with the accompanying resonances of generosity and good will.<sup>326</sup> This is important because the lord represents God, and love and kindness are fundamental to Julian's conception of God's disposition toward the world.

The servant, who when he is first encountered is standing "before his lorde reverently, redy to do his lordes wille,"<sup>327</sup> possesses an eagerness to please the lord. This eagerness is what occasions the servant's "fall":

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<sup>325</sup> *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 273.

<sup>326</sup> Julian frequently refers to the divine good will towards Creation. The "kinning" of God is a theme often found in mystical writings:

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

The lorde loketh upon his servant full lovely and swetly, and mekely he sendeth him into a certaine place to do his will. The servant not onely he goeth, but sodenly he sterteth and runneth in gret hast for love to do his lordes wille. And anon he falleth in a slade, and taketh ful gret sore.<sup>328</sup>

Once the servant has fallen, he is so injured that he is unable to get up from the pit. He cannot even “turne his face to loke uppe on his loving lorde, which was to him full nere, in whom is full comfort.”<sup>329</sup> Again, sin here is a lack of capacity, not an intentional misdirection. The servant’s injuries keep him in a place of misery, unable to get up. He suffers seven torments in the slough, which encompass physical suffering but also include a blinding of his mind and his reason so that “almost he had forgeten his owne love.”<sup>330</sup> Sin clearly incapacitates the servant - he is no longer able to move towards God and choose the good. But it also affects his passions, causing him to forget the love that inaugurated his journey at the beginning.

The metaphor of the pit does solid work for Julian. It allows her to present something that the servant undergoes without offering it as something that the servant *chooses*. The servant’s fall is the result of his haste to do God’s will, so perhaps a reflection of immaturity, but it is not motivated by a desire to choose against God. Also, the metaphor of the pit makes it clear that the servant needs help to remove him from the condition he is in, that he is in need of external aid. Indeed, the servant might, once fallen, choose against God. But Julian’s primary argument here (because the servant represents Adam) is that Adam’s fall is not a moment of blame for humanity, which in turn “infected” all of humanity with guilt and blame.

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 275

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.



After Adam has fallen in the pit, the lord's disposition toward the servant has not changed. The lord continues to regard the servant "full mekly and mildely, with gret rewth and pitte"; but also has a surprising inward joy due to the servant's fall. This joy is brought about by the knowledge of "the wurshipful restoring and noble that he will and shall bring his servant to by his plentuous grace."<sup>331</sup> *Because* the servant suffered an injury out of his love for the lord, the lord seeks to compensate him for the injury and distress and even to reward the servant for his good will. The servant's fall is not seen as an occasion for blame or punishment. On the contrary, the fall provides an occasion for the lord to reward the servant's good will. It is the conditions that the servant encounters in the world that causes his fall, and therefore blame does not fit into Julian's account. Because the pit existed, it is almost assumed that the servant would fall. But the conditions are already in place for this fall to be addressed.

Julian receives this revelation as an "inwarde gostely shewing of the lordes mening":

I saw that it behoveth nedes to be, standing his gret goodnes and his owne wurshippe, that his deerworthy servant, which he loved so moch, shulde be hyely and bliseefully rewarded withoute end, above that he shulde have be if he had not fallen. Yea, and so ferworth that his falling and alle his wo that he hath taken thereby shalle be turned into hye, overpassing wurshippe and endlesse blesse.<sup>332</sup>

The servant's misery was due to his inability to see the lord's purpose, which was undiminished by the servant's fall.<sup>333</sup> The servant's suffering due to his fall, therefore, is

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.,275,277.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.,279.

not occasioned only by the fall itself but by his false belief that the lord's love for him might have been diminished.

In this first telling of the parable, Julian is trying to move her readers to reconsider their position before God. All the servant who has fallen can see is the slough; he cannot even turn his head to the lord. He is unable, therefore, to see the disposition of the lord towards him *after his fall*: “for neither he seeth clerly his loving lorde, which is to him full meke and milde, nore he seeth truly what himselfe is in the sight of his loving lord.”<sup>334</sup> Because Julian was granted a heightened perspective in her vision, she is seeking to communicate to her readers how God truly considers fallen humanity.

Even after the first servant has fallen, Julian sees that God is still committed to humanity, and to redeeming this particular space on earth:

therefore oure kinde fader wolde adight him non other place but to sit upon the erth, abiding mankinde which is medled with erth, till what time by his grace his deerworthy sonne has brought againe his citte into the nobil fairhede with his harde traveyle.<sup>335</sup>

God waits, therefore, for Christ to enter the world and redeem it. Julian narrates this second servant and his mission in a parallel telling of the parable that follows.

#### Lord and the Servant II: Christ as the Second Adam

Julian has stated in her reading of Genesis 2 that sin does not anger God. In fact, God actually desires to reward humanity because of sin, because it indicates a “good will” towards God—an obedience to follow God's desire to live in the world.<sup>336</sup> God in the

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>336</sup> The idea of a “good will” recurs throughout Julian's parables. A few chapters after the lord and the servant she indicates that everyone possesses a dipartite will: “a godly wille that never assented to sinne, me never shall” in addition to the will which does sin. (*Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 293). This conception helps Julian affirm how God

first parable states that “eternal bliss” will result from Adam’s fall. To understand how this can possibly be the case, we must turn to the second reading of the lord and the servant parable, where Julian reads Genesis 2 through the lens of 1 Corinthians 15, understanding Christ as the “Second Adam.”

The second telling of the lord and the servant differs from the first notably in the relationship of “sending” indicated between the lord and the servant. Whereas Adam was clearly sent by the lord to do the lord’s work (“mekely he sendeth him into a certaine place to do his will”)<sup>337</sup>, Christ as the Second Adam intuitively feels the need to go and do the lord’s work:

And inward: in him was shewed a ground of love, which love he had to the lorde that was even like to the love that the lord had to him.

The wisdom of the servant sawe inwardly that ther was one thing to do which shuld be wurshippe to the lord. And the servant for love, having no regarde to himselfe nor to nothing that might fall of him, hastily deed sterte and runne at the sending of his lorde to do that thing which was his wille and his wurshippe.<sup>338</sup>

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considers humanity as “good” even with the existence of sin in the world. Judith Martin Soskice makes a connection here with Augustine, who also claimed the existence of a lower and higher part of our being, though for him these are often physically bounded (lower being the physical being, and the higher being spiritual). See Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 148-150. Sandra McIntire gives a gendered reading of Julian’s response to the prevalent Augustinian notion of “Adam’s Fall”, and notes the absence of Eve in Julian’s retelling of this biblical story. Though certainly Julian is answering Augustine in this retelling, in my opinion her emphasis on the universality of Adam would seem to preclude a treatment of Eve, insofar as the particularity introduced by a discussion of gender would work against the universality of her theological claims. McIntire’s treatment of Julian’s discussion of the lord and the servant overlooks this universalizing aspect of Julian’s methodology. See Sandra McIntire, ed., *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Company, 1998), 3-33.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 281.

Both relationships between the lord and the servant are characterized by love, but in the second Christ as the servant possessed a love identical to God (“which love he had to the lorde that was even like to the love that the lord had to”), and knew without being told what would honor the lord. Both of these details are affirmations by Julian of the Trinitarian nature of the divine life.

The work that Christ was sent to do is also more explicitly described than the task assigned to Adam. Whereas Adam was simply sent on a mission in the first telling, Christ’s mission is characterized by a recovery. Julian indicates that Christ had to enter the earth because “ther was a tresoure in the erth which the lorde loved...a mete which is lovesom and plesing to the lorde.”<sup>339</sup> This treasure was the only thing the lord lacked, and Christ therefore was needed to recover it for the lord. Julian indicates that Christ was necessary to bring this offering to God: “[the tresoure in the erth] was not alle to his wurship till his servant hath thus nobly dighte it and brought it before him in himselfe present. And without the lorde was right noight but wildernesse..”<sup>340</sup> The treasure in the earth which the lord loved could not be offered to God by humanity, because the treasure *is* humanity.<sup>341</sup>

In Julian’s retelling of the story of Christ’s sufferings, Christ takes on the character of a gardener to gain a treasure for God:

And then I understode that he shuld do the grettest labour and the hardest traveyle that is: he shuld be a gardener: delve and dike and swinke and swete and turne the erth up and down, and seke the depnesse, and water the plantes in time. And in this he shulde continue his traveyle, and make

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>341</sup> For Julian this serves as another indication of transcendence- God “sits in heaven” because that is God’s proper place- and becoming human is not proper to the divine *nature*.

swete flodes to runne, and nobile and plentuous fruite to spring which he shulde bring before the lorde and serve him therwith to his liking.<sup>342</sup>

Christ's sufferings on the cross are here described in an agricultural metaphor. Because God desired "mete which is lovesom and plesing to the lorde,"<sup>343</sup> Christ had to *grow* that food. So his sufferings on the cross are characterized as preparing the ground: "delve and dike and swinke and swete and turne."<sup>344</sup> In this agricultural depiction, Julian has offered a metaphor whereby the sufferings of Christ do ultimately please God; not because suffering appeases divine wrath, but because Christ's sufferings are characterized as toil which will bear fruit that can be offered to God.

By conceiving the sufferings of Christ as agricultural labor intended to offer the fruit of all humanity to God, Julian has offered a new metaphor for the "atonement", one far removed from economic scales or substitutionary motifs. Rather for Julian, it seems that what was necessitated was the Incarnation, the entrance of Christ into the world as servant, in order that an offering might be made to God. This offering does not resemble the animal sacrifice of the Hebrew Bible, where the life of a pure animal was taken for the purpose of ritual sacrifice. Rather the offering that Julian refers to in the second parable of the lord and the servant bears deep resonances to the "firstfruits" offering Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15. In that passage, Paul identifies Christ as the Second Adam and thus as the first-fruits of creation offered to God. In this depiction, Christ is working with his body to till the land because he knows his sufferings will lead to a harvest that

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 281,283. Many feminist theologians have noted the maternal language used in this description of Christ's sufferings (toiling, sweating, delving deep, etc.), however, it is equally relevant to a discussion of agricultural labor, particularly since Julian indicates that Christ was acting as a gardener.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 283.

will please God, a harvest “that was grounded within the lorde in mervelous depnesse of endlesse love.”<sup>345</sup> It is a harvest begun in Christ as the promise of the eventual harvest of humanity. By rethinking redemption through the parable of the lord and the servant, Julian has pointed her readers back to God’s acts in creation, emphasizing the fundamental consistency of God’s act in light of her initial vision of Christ, who reveals God in God’s triune fullness.

### Conclusion

This dissertation began as a simple thought experiment— what if Christian theology were to root its claims about God in the person of Christ? For many within the Christian community, Jesus has always been the center of Christian faith and piety. Hymn-texts celebrate that “fountain filled with blood / drawn from Emmanuel’s veins”, and declare “what a friend we have in Jesus!” And yet, there is often stunningly little content to such piety. That Jesus is God is readily affirmed, but what this affirmation actually indicates *about* God is too-often left unexplored.

Furthermore, the affirmation that Jesus is God can be approached as a puzzle to be solved, or even more seriously as a problem to be dispensed with. The puzzle is seen to reside in the relation of Christ’s two natures and their seeming incompatibility. As Marilyn McCord Adams writes, “it is impossible for any substance individual to have two substance-kind natures *essentially*, for that would involve its being constituted as the very thing it is twice-over!”<sup>346</sup> Of course, as Adams shortly will explore, Aristotelian metaphysics is not the only avenue through which to explore Christ’s two natures. And

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<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>346</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 111.

yet the seeming incompatibility between a being both human and divine is often seen to remain. That the “human” and “divine” realities do not exist on the same metaphysical plane is one way to understand Christ’s participation in both.<sup>347</sup> And yet, even if this puzzle is resolved (or merely accepted), Christ’s death poses a moral problem for some. In allowing (or even requiring) the death of God’s own son, some theologians rightly question the goodness of God, suggesting that God is guilty of terrible violence in the death of Christ.<sup>348</sup>

It is clear that, as Mark Noll wryly notes, the affirmation of “Jesus as Lord” is both the source of coherence and chaos for evangelical Christians.<sup>349</sup> Evangelical piety has often relied on an earnest, good-hearted commitment to Jesus Christ as its basic point of entry. And yet, what the basis is for this very basic commitment remains unclear. This project has attempted to sketch the boundaries of a theological vision that is rooted in the person of Jesus. To do so, I began in Chapter 1 by exploring the implications of divine transcendence and God’s unknowability for Christian speech about God. Because God is not a being in this world, and because God cannot be seen, the Christian tradition has long insisted that God-talk reflect the truth that God remains known always only in part. And yet, most Christian theology resides not only in the realm of the apophatic. In fact, one can understand conciliar developments as attempts to speak Christianly about God while simultaneously retaining a proper understanding of God’s transcendence. In

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<sup>347</sup> Kathy Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 1-57.

<sup>348</sup> For an articulation of this critique see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>349</sup> Mark Noll, “The Chaotic Coherence of *Sola Scriptura*” (presentation, Protestantism? Reflections in Advance of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, 1517-2017, Wenham, MA, November 14-16 2013).

Chapter 2, I examined the development of Christological doctrine in particular to discern how Christ's two natures became a site of theological affirmation without descending into philosophical nonsense. Though this overview certainly exists (and in better form!) in other places, it is necessary for my project because it secures how Christians can say that Jesus is God, and affirm that the divine *who* can be seen in Jesus while yet retaining an affirmation of God as *totaliter aliter*. That this understanding developed over centuries reminds us of the careful thought and difficulty involved in its development.

In Chapter 3, I take the Iconoclastic controversy as a source for thinking theologically about how God can be seen. This disagreement and the erudite theologians involved in it has too seldom been considered a conversation that is concerned *precisely* with Christology, not only with the liturgical use of images. If Jesus is God, then God can be seen and venerated in actual, physical matter. A delicate understanding of hypostatic union is required to make this claim. And yet, if such an argument is secured, then Christian worship and thought is bolstered by seeing God enmattered.

Christian theology, then, starts here as a point of departure for thinking about who God is. Once it is clear how we can affirm that God is seen in Jesus, we can move to develop a doctrine of God Christologically. What in particular is revealed when we see Jesus? What results is not merely a reflection on the life of Christ - the "what would Jesus do" simplistic simulacrum of low-church piety - but a strategy and a resource for regaining theological ground, rooted in an examination of what Jesus has in fact done!

In Chapters 4 and 5, I look to Julian of Norwich is a rich place to mine this treasure because she locates her theology in her *actual* visions of Jesus, and from these visions she makes claims about God. Julian's vision of Jesus organizes (and tempers)



what Christians can say about God. Instead of offering to those outside the church a message of divine wrath and exclusion, Julian sees Jesus' pierced body and sees a place for all of humanity to dwell. In Christ, God knew the suffering of the world, and made a way through Christ's suffering so that all of humanity could be contained in his wounds. Such a vision holds together all that is made with Julian's final affirmation that "love was his mening."<sup>350</sup> Such an affirmation, too, without dispensing with the significance of sin, beckons primarily to the goodness of God. It refuses judgment of one's fellow Christian, and in fact refuses to speculate entirely! Instead, it focuses what can be said about God on what can be seen in Jesus.

I am convinced that a theology based on seeing Jesus, though not without its potential traps, might offer Christians a way to interpret what God is like, and thus what the content of Christian doctrine is, for the content of Christian doctrine after all is not a principle but a person, the person of God who was *fully* present as Jesus (Colossians 2:9). Julian's theology makes significant steps in the direction of positing a doctrine of God Christologically in her re-articulation of Trinity, creation, sin, and redemption, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

My dogged insistence on a "visual theology" likely seems at times reductionistic, or even simplistic. It also might seem to spell particular problems for those who are drawn to a postmodern engagement with theological questions. The postmodern turn emphasizes the located-ness of meaning, and resists the universalizing impulses of modernity, including the emphasis on the universality of reason and meaning.

Postmodernity insists that meaning-making is situated and local, and that metanarratives

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 379.

should be replaced with “little narratives” comprised of local knowledge and individual experience.<sup>351</sup> There is much discussion surrounding the compatibility of Christian theology with postmodern thought forms, stressing as they do the “constitutionally open” elements of meaning.<sup>352</sup> There might therefore also be a concern related to the compatibility of “visual theology” with postmodern theory, as I claim that a visual theology roots theological knowing in the very particular person of Jesus.

Though at first glance it might seem that a “visual theology” seeks to foreclose the radical openness of meaning, the opposite is actually the case. Seeing Jesus does not secure the boundaries of theology, but actually enlarges them. Because Jesus is the Word made flesh, what is seen in him is both knowable (the divine person), and unknowable (as the divine nature). Therefore, “seeing Jesus” does *not* presuppose comprehension, because the divine nature remains always in excess. The gains of a “visual theology” are the ability to make sure claims about God that are rooted in Christ while acknowledging the fundamental unknowability of the divine nature. As David Tracy writes, “Christian theology, at its best is the voice of the Other through all those others who have tasted... the Infinity disclosed in the kenotic reality of Jesus Christ.”<sup>353</sup> This infinity is what Julian writes of when she sees Jesus.

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<sup>351</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the condition of postmodernity: a report on knowledge (of God)” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>352</sup> Vanhoozer, 18. For more examples of this discussion, see Graham Ward, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

<sup>353</sup> David Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” *Theology Today* 51 (1995), 114.

Therefore, a visual theology is in my mind the best way to maintain a view towards God's transcendence while yet maintaining that Christ truly reveals the depths of God's love and care for "all that is made." It also includes within it an insistence on focusing our theological attention on just this particular world, on the world that we have, in all of its brokenness and sorrow. A visual theology insists that outbreaks of disease, that the spread of violence and wars in the world, that the despair of the human heart is not an open question for God. A visual theology answers the question of how we might think about God coming to redeem our particular corner of this fallen world, with the insistence that in Christ, indeed, he has. A visual theology insists that we lift up our eyes with Simeon, and remember that in Christ "my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples; a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30). For Simeon, as for us, the assurance of this salvation comes with the revelation of God in Christ. In this way, the Gospel of John's invitation again reminds us of the invitation to the Christian life- all we must do is come and see, and the seeing begins the renovation.

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