

## (Reformed) Protestantism<sup>†</sup>

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Many of the most well-known Protestant systematic theologies, particularly in the Reformed tradition, display (more or less) a common thematic division.<sup>1</sup> There are prolegomena: questions about the nature of theology, the relationship between faith and reason, and (sometimes treated separately) the attributes of scripture and its role in faith and practice. There is the doctrine of God: divine attributes, God's relationship to creation, etc. There is the doctrine of humanity: the nature and post-mortem survival of human persons, and the human condition, including the Fall and human sinfulness. There are parts devoted to the person and work of Christ: most especially, the incarnation and atonement. There is discussion of questions in practical theology: the organization and function of the church, morality and politics. Other matters get discussed along the way as well. Most of these topics are ones which we contributors to this volume have been asked to address in our position statements. So I take my assignment to be, in effect, the production of a miniature sketch of a partial systematic theology. Even in miniature, this is a monumental task for a mere essay, and a daunting one for someone whose formal training lies outside of

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<sup>1</sup> There are notable exceptions. I am painting with a broad brush.

theology. The remarks that follow represent my best effort to articulate such views on these topics as I currently hold—albeit briefly and incompletely. I hope that the views hang together in a reasonably systematic way; but, as this is but a first effort at accomplishing a task of this sort, I wish to emphasize the programmatic nature of what I shall be saying.

Since I am writing specifically as a representative of Protestantism (in all of its wide diversity),<sup>2</sup> it seems fitting for me to structure my essay in accord with the thematic divisions just described. I begin with prolegomena, focusing primarily on faith and reason, and doctrines about scripture. The next three sections are devoted, respectively, to the doctrine of God, doctrine of humanity (in which I include doctrines about the person and work of Christ), and practical theology.<sup>3</sup>

## **1. Prolegomena**

In this section I shall focus on the relationship between faith and reason, and on what I take to be the proper role of rational intuition, science, and scripture in the development of one's theological views. In the first part I try to explain two things: my views on the nature of faith and my understanding of the relationship between faith and evidence. In the second part I turn briefly to the

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<sup>2</sup> I do not claim that my theological views are *paradigmatically* Protestant (if views can be that), nor even that they are paradigmatically Reformed. I am simply the chosen, even if not elected, delegate from the Reformed Protestant camp; but my assignment is to report my own views rather than the party line.

<sup>3</sup> In laying out these views, I draw on other things I have written—especially, Rea 2007, 2009a & b, and Murray & Rea 2008 and 2012. Those sources contain not only further development of the views laid out in here, but also references to other works that expand along lines discussed here.

interplay of reason, science, and scripture in theological theorizing.

### *1a. Faith and Reason*

The term ‘faith’ refers sometimes to an attitude taken toward a proposition and sometimes to an attitude taken toward a person. Charlie Brown might have faith *that* Lucy will not pull the football away when he attempts to kick it, or he might have faith *in* Lucy herself. Both sorts of faith might be evaluated as rational or irrational; and both sorts might be supported or undermined by the deliverances of reason, which I shall take generally to be beliefs with propositional content. Here I shall focus mainly on propositional faith—specifically, on the sort involved in *believing something on faith, or taking something as an article of faith*. Insofar as I talk about *rationality*, it shall be epistemic rather than (say) practical rationality that I have in mind.

A useful starting point is Richard Dawkins’s cavalier characterization of faith as “belief that isn’t based on evidence”. (1996: 564) It is easy to see why one who holds this view about faith might also say (as Dawkins does) that faith is “one of the world’s great evils”. (1996: 564) Religious faith is a core motivator for much of the morally significant behavior of those who have it, and it is, in general, both bad and dangerous to allow wholly ungrounded convictions to exert such strong and pervasive influence. But, *contra* Dawkins, having religious faith need not involve this sort of recklessness. For purposes of serious discussion about the nature of faith, Dawkins’s characterization is obviously inadequate. But it is

instructive to consider why.

I doubt whether many of us would be inclined to call just any ungrounded conviction an instance of faith. The superstitious view that one ought not to open an umbrella indoors is surely a belief not based on evidence. But no one would consider it an article of faith. Likewise, insane beliefs—e.g., someone’s belief, due to serious mental illness, that her head is made of glass—are not sensibly said to be “taken on faith”. More interesting, however, is the idea implicit in Dawkins’s statement that *having evidence* for a view precludes one from believing it on faith.

Consider again Charlie Brown and Lucy. Suppose Charlie Brown learns that Lucy has completed a year of intense therapy aimed at curing her malicious football-yanking tendencies. Lucy and her therapist both assure Charlie Brown that today she will not pull away the football when he tries to kick it. She passes a lie detector test. She offers her most prized possession as surety. Charlie Brown now has a *lot* of evidence for the proposition that Lucy does not now intend to pull away the football. But, given their past history, it will still take *faith* for Charlie Brown to believe this.

Still, saying that a view is taken on faith does imply that there is something lacking in one’s evidence. It implies that one’s belief is underdetermined by the evidence—other viable alternatives are compatible with the evidence. This does not mean that faith is present everywhere we find underdetermination. Even our best scientific theories are underdetermined by the data, but it is hardly a matter

of faith to believe that the earth revolves around the sun.

The difference lies in the degree to which the relevant alternatives are viable. It does not take faith to believe that the earth revolves around the sun because the ‘viable’ alternatives are nothing more than coherent propositions that do not fall afoul of known empirical data. Charlie Brown, on the other hand, faces more than a mere coherent alternative. There is a long history of elaborate deception and betrayal; the lie detector test and proffered assurances could be more of the same. In other words, despite the fact that there is much evidence in support of the proposition that Lucy does not intend to pull away the football, there is genuine and weighty counterevidence as well. As I see it, believing on faith is (roughly) believing in the face of genuine and weighty counterevidence, where counterevidence is taken to include not only evidence that contradicts one’s belief, but also evidence that one lacks warrant for it (e.g., because the evidence in favor is too weak, or derived from an unreliable source).<sup>4</sup>

How weighty? Can we be more precise? I think so. I don’t imagine that there is *no evidence whatsoever* against the heliocentric model of our solar system. But for most of us nowadays, disbelieving that model on the basis of whatever evidence might speak to the contrary would manifest serious epistemic malfunction. Specifically, it would manifest malfunction in one’s ability to understand, appreciate, properly weigh, and form beliefs in accord with evidence

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<sup>4</sup> I do not here intend to take a position either on whether faith might attach to other attitudes—acceptance, for example—or on whether certain uses of ‘faith’ (e.g., ‘I have faith that...’) imply a pro-attitude toward the object of faith. Thanks to Dan Howard-Snyder and Robert Audi for conversations that led to this clarification.

that one knowingly possesses. (Importantly, it would *not* manifest malfunction in one's ability to gather relevant evidence; nor would it manifest the sort of malfunction that I take to be involved in cases of self-deception, which is a matter of hiding evidence from oneself.) By contrast, Charlie Brown would not manifest such serious malfunction if he were to refrain from believing that it is safe to trust Lucy not to pull away the football. Indeed, even if it is *more rational* for Charlie Brown to trust Lucy, and even if the preponderance of evidence *justifies* or *warrants* the belief that it is safe to trust her, his refusing to believe that it is safe (or, for that matter, his positively believing that it is unsafe) still would not manifest the sort of serious epistemic malfunction just described. Likewise with other paradigm instances of propositional faith.

I propose, then, the following somewhat fuller (but still only partial) characterization of *believing on faith*. A person believes a proposition  $p$  on faith only if the following three conditions are met. First, the evidence *for*  $p$  of which she is aware is compatible with  $\text{not-}p$ . Second, believing  $p$  for whatever reason she in fact believes it does not in and of itself manifest serious cognitive malfunction or mental illness. Third, she is aware of counterevidence such that, if she were to refrain on the basis of that evidence from believing  $p$ , she would not be manifesting serious malfunction in her ability to understand, appreciate, properly weigh, and form beliefs in accord with evidence that she knowingly possesses.

One advantage of this characterization is that it is consistent with the

commonsense view that faith comes in degrees. Another advantage is that it is consistent with the view that faith is sometimes rational and sometimes not, and may or may not count as knowledge, depending on the strength of the relevant counterevidence.

A third advantage—at any rate, *I'd* call it an advantage—is that it allows for cases in which it is irrational *not* to have faith. (Such might be the case if one lacked faith in God as a result of fear or self-deception.<sup>5</sup>) Indeed, it is even consistent with the possibility that failure to believe something that one takes on faith would involve noetic malfunction. It could involve malfunction in one's ability to appreciate, understand, weigh, and form beliefs in accord with evidence, so long as the malfunction is not *serious*. Or it could involve serious malfunction of other kinds—e.g., a breakdown in one's inbuilt faculty for directly perceiving the presence of God.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, my characterization allows that believing on faith is consistent with a general policy of trying to form one's beliefs in accord with reason. The latter, I take it, is a policy of trying to believe *only what we are rationally permitted to believe* and, if beliefs come in degrees, to believe those things just to the degree to which we are permitted to believe them. This is obviously compatible with sometimes (sanely) believing what we are not rationally *required* to believe, which is roughly what I have identified as the necessary condition for taking something on faith.

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<sup>5</sup> As sometimes seems to happen; cf. Nagel 1997: 130 – 31.

<sup>6</sup> On the idea that we have such a faculty, see Plantinga 2003: 148, 170 - 77.

So reason and religious faith are not, as such, fundamentally at odds with one another. Still, I do not mean to suggest that the acquisition of religious faith is just a special case of ordinary reasoning. The Christian tradition has typically emphasized that (Christian) faith is a gift from God that comes by way of divine grace. My characterization is consistent with this view. Thus, even if having Christian faith is consistent with a general policy of trying to believe *in accord* with reason, it does not follow that reason alone might lead someone to full-blown Christian faith.

Let me close this section by saying a few words in response to the question (posed by the editors of this volume) of how I might defend my theological beliefs. I think that the best that one can hope to do by way of defending *any* belief is to examine such evidence as one takes oneself to have, and then try to present the publicly available evidence and describe the private evidence. Presenting publicly available evidence generally means displaying forensic evidence or giving an argument whose premises are supported by something like rational intuition, sensory experience, testimony, or scientific theory. Describing private evidence means describing things like memories or personal experiences that, unlike ordinary sensory experiences, cannot be produced in others by telling them where to look, listen, smell, taste, or touch. I think that all of these sorts of evidence can be marshaled in support of Christian belief.

As Alvin Plantinga (2003) and William Alston (1991) have argued (in different ways), warrant for some distinctively Christian beliefs can come from



religious experiences<sup>7</sup>—e.g., putative experiences of divine love washing over you, of God speaking to you through the scriptures, etc. As Richard Swinburne has argued (2003), for those who take claims like *there is a God* and *if there is a God, God would likely reveal Godself by way of something like an incarnation* to be reasonably probable, historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus should lead one to assign high probability to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead; and this, in turn, should lead one to assign high probability to the truth of other things that one reasonably takes Jesus to have said. For those who find their premises intuitive, traditional arguments for the existence of God (the ontological argument, cosmological argument, and design argument) also lend support to certain Christian doctrines. There is, furthermore, a vast body of testimony (about religious experiences, expert assessments of the coherence or viability of various theological propositions, answers to prayer, intuitions in support of this or that premise in an argument for the truth of some Christian doctrine, and so on) to which many of us have access as well. Finally, there is the “experience” of having all of this sort of evidence seem to hang together and make sense of one’s world—the experience, in other words, of having a large body of different kinds of evidence seem to provide cumulative support for an overall worldview, some details of which are central and thus taken to be highly likely to be true and other details of which are perhaps less central and more tentatively held. (Cf.

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<sup>7</sup> In accord with Rea 2002: 68, I shall characterize religious experience as “an apparent direct awareness of either (a) the existence, character, or behavior of a divine mind, or (b) the fact that one of one’s own mental states or a testimonial report communicated by others has been divinely inspired.”

Holley 2010)

I take myself to have evidence of all of these sorts, some of which is communicable and some of which is not. Defending my faith, then, is just a matter of trying to communicate what is communicable and (when I am “defending” it to myself) attending closely to what is not. I take it that *everyone* is in this position with respect to their basic worldview. Some of the evidence supporting it is communicable, some is not. So this is not a strange feature of Christianity or other religious faiths. Rather, it is true of every worldview, atheistic ones included. The differences in worldview among intellectual peers who are not suffering from self-deception and other such hard-to-detect failures of rationality are, I think, just to be explained in part by differences in our incommunicable evidence and also by differences in how we weigh various aspects of the vast body of communicable evidence that we have at our disposal. For this reason, it seems that at least some of the tenets of every worldview must be taken on faith.

### *1.b. Sources for Theology*

One of the major distinctives of Protestantism is the “*sola scriptura*” slogan, which has implications for how theology is to be done both individually and corporately. As I understand it, the slogan expresses at least three attributes that the Reformers held to be true of scripture: *authority*, *clarity*, and *sufficiency*.

Concerning the authority of scripture, I take the traditional position to be

that scripture is what we might call *foundationally authoritative*—i.e., more authoritative than any other source of information or advice—within the domain of all topics about which it aims to teach us something.<sup>8</sup> (For convenience, let us refer to the topics in question together as *matters of faith and practice*.<sup>9</sup>) The claim that scripture is *clear* and *sufficient* amounts, roughly, to the claim that all doctrines and prescriptions necessary for salvation can easily be derived from scripture by persons concerned about the salvation of their souls without the help of the Church or Church tradition.<sup>10</sup> Together, these claims about authority, clarity, and sufficiency provide what I take to be the core idea underlying the *sola scriptura* slogan.

I affirm *sola scriptura* as I have just glossed it. In what follows, I would like to highlight just three points in connection with it that pertain specifically to the question of how scripture, reason, and tradition ought to interact in our theologizing.

First: The doctrine carries no substantive interpretive commitments. It is consistent with the most wooden literalist approach to biblical texts; it is also consistent with rampant allegorical interpretations, and all manner of others. To this extent, it permits a great deal of theological diversity. Its import is simply to provide a loose but significant constraint on the development of theology. *Sola*

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<sup>8</sup> For discussion of what it means to say that one source is ‘more authoritative’ than another, and for fuller discussion of what it means to say that scripture is authoritative, see Rea Forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> It is a matter of interpretive dispute—and hardly a trivial one!—exactly what topics fall within this domain.

<sup>10</sup> My gloss closely follows Bavinck c2003: 477, 488. Cf. Berkhof 1992:167 – 8. Note that the clarity doctrine does not imply that it is easy to see *that* anything in particular is necessary for salvation—as if adherents of other religions are simply failing to understand scripture if they doubt (say) that faith in Christ is necessary for their own salvation.

*scriptura* implies that when we do theology, what we ultimately say must be consistent with our best judgment about what the text of scripture teaches. Proponents of *sola scriptura* cannot sensibly think “scripture teaches X, but it is more reasonable for me to believe not-X”; but they are free to use any and all tools at their disposal to determine for themselves what exactly it is that scripture teaches.

Second: I take the doctrine to be plausible only on the assumption that scripture asserts and advises only what God, as divine author, asserts and advises. Absent that assumption, it assigns far too much authority to scripture *alone*. Surely if the assumption were false there would be no reason to regard scripture as a greater authority in the domain of faith and practice than *every other* human experience or testimonial report. For those who make the assumption, however, it is no light matter to pronounce either on what scripture teaches or on what topics fall within the domain of ‘matters of faith and practice’. For the doctrine implies that once we have reached a settled judgment about what the text of scripture teaches, we have in the content of that teaching reasons for belief and action that are at least as authoritative as reasons from any other source.

Third: A consequence of my first two points is that proponents of *sola scriptura* have good reason to make careful and judicious use of all available tools for determining what the text of scripture might be saying. These tools include science, moral and other rational intuitions, the techniques of historical

biblical criticism and literary analysis, and so on. Moreover, the assumption that scripture has a divine author licenses a particular way of using these tools. We know in general that it is perfectly legitimate to interpret texts in light of what we reasonably believe about their authors. Historians of philosophy, for example, often allow their interpretations of great thinkers to be constrained by assumptions about the sorts of errors to which these thinkers may or may not be susceptible. If interpretation X implies that Aristotle was not very bright or well-informed with respect to the science of his day, that by itself is a reason not to favor interpretation X. So likewise, it seems, with a divinely authored text. If our best science tells us that the sun, moon, and stars existed long before terrestrial plant life, that fact by itself constitutes good reason—as good as the science itself—to believe that a divine author would not teach anything to the contrary. If moral intuition tells us that slavery is wrong, or that conquering armies should not seek to annihilate their enemies, or that men and women are equally suited for positions of ecclesial authority, these facts by themselves constitute good reason—as good as the intuitions involved—to believe that a divine author would not teach anything to the contrary. And these considerations will appropriately guide our interpretation of the relevant texts.

Of course, the reasons just mentioned can be defeated. It is possible, for example, to acquire evidence that scripture really does contradict some of our moral views or some of our scientific views. But the only condition under which *sola scriptura* would bind someone to revise her intuitions or scientific beliefs in

light of scripture (instead of revising her understanding of scripture in light of her intuitions or scientific beliefs) would be one in which her reasons for believing that scripture teaches something contrary to reason are evidentially stronger than the intuitions themselves.

## **2. God**

The following passage from the Belgic Confession, one of the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church, fairly accurately captures my understanding of the essential attributes of God:

Article 1: We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God—eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good. (Christian Reformed Church 1988: 78)

Fairly accurately; but not perfectly. For example, the attributes of incomprehensibility, simplicity, unchangeability, and infinity are so difficult to understand that ascribing them to God is apt to mislead without extended comment (which I shall not provide here). I think that the attributions express truths; but I do not, for example, think that divine simplicity implies that there are no distinctions to be made within the Godhead or that incomprehensibility implies that God cannot be understood or talked about except via analogy or metaphor, or that divine unchangeability implies that it is false to say that God *became*

incarnate, etc. More importantly, the quoted passage leaves out some attributions that I would want to include (most of which the Confession itself includes, at least implicitly, elsewhere in its text). For example, I would say that God is necessarily existent, essentially triune, and omniscient; God is loving and merciful, and capable of sorrow and anger; God is a perfect person,<sup>11</sup> and the creator and sustainer of the concrete contingent universe. None of these additional attributes, however, are mentioned in the quoted passage.

For some of these attributions, there is clear scriptural warrant. For others, however, there is not. What, then, justifies their presence in standard confessions, creeds, and other formal statements of Christian belief? A traditional but controversial answer is that the attributions not clearly derivable from other parts of scripture can nonetheless be derived from the scriptural claim that God is perfect. This answer has methodological implications that deserve further comment. I shall discuss those in the first part of this section. In the second part, I shall focus on *triunity*, the attribute that is at once the most distinctive to Christian theology and the most puzzling.

### *2.1. Perfection*

In accord with many others in the Christian tradition, I think that our grasp of perfection can serve as a reliable guide to discovering and understanding

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<sup>11</sup> The Christian tradition maintains that God exists in or as *three* persons, but it also resoundingly affirms that God is personal and that God is perfect as a personal being. Not every way of understanding the trinity can comfortably accommodate the unqualified claim that God is a person; but (as we shall see) mine can.

other divine other attributes. It is not an infallible guide, for there is no good reason to think that any of us has a perfect grasp of it. But I take it that, to the extent that we have warrant for the claim that a perfect being would have some property  $p$ , we also have warrant for the claim that God has  $p$ .

If this is right, then the claim that God is a perfect being is on somewhat different footing from claims like 'God is a father' or 'Christ is a redeemer'. The difference is that 'God is a perfect being' is to be understood strictly and literally, so as to license the following inference pattern for all substitution instances of F that render (1) true:

- (1) Perfect beings are F.
- (2) Therefore, God is F.

The same is not true of 'God is a father' or 'Christ is a redeemer', for there are generalizations true of fathers and redeemers that are not true of God or Christ. Here are two obvious ones: fathers are male; redeemers deliver captives from their captors. Even if it turns out to be true that God is in some sense male or that Christ literally delivers us from a captor, I do not think that we can validly infer these claims from the two generalizations. To put the point another way, then: *Perfect being theology*, the project of developing a theory about what God is like by consulting our intuitions about perfection, is a more promising endeavor than (say) *cosmic father theology* or *redeemer theology* or *creator theology*.

Our grasp of *perfection* also serves as a defeasible guide to interpreting scripture. Sticking with one of our same examples: Scripture tells us that God is



our heavenly father; now we face an interpretive choice. Must we make inferences that imply that God is male? To say ‘yes’ is to treat *being a father* with the methodological import that I assign to *being perfect*. To say (as some might wish to) ‘no; and, indeed, we should actively resist such inferences because a perfect being would entirely transcend gender’ is to allow our intuitions about perfection to serve as our interpretive guide.

Note, too, that in saying all of this I presuppose that at least some of our concepts apply univocally to God, and express truths about what God is in his very nature. If that presupposition were false, then one could not validly infer that *God is F* from the claim that *God is perfect and perfect beings are F*. This is, of course, strongly at odds with the views that motivate apophatic and so-called “therapeutic” approaches to theology.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.1. *Triunity*

According to the doctrine of the trinity, there is exactly one God, but three divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A bit more precisely, the doctrine includes each of the following claims:<sup>13</sup>

- (T1) There is exactly one God, the Father almighty.
- (T2) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical.
- (T3) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are consubstantial.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hector 2010 for discussion.

<sup>13</sup> This is not the only way of formulating the doctrine. But I choose this formulation because it is faithful to the creeds, suffices as well as others to raise the problem I wish to discuss, and emphasizes one central tenet of the doctrine—T3—that is all too often omitted in the contemporary literature. On the importance of T3, see Rea 2009a or, at length, Ayres 2004.

To say that two things are consubstantial is to say that they share a common nature—i.e., they are members of exactly the same kind. Saying that two or more divine beings are consubstantial, then, implies that they are *identical with respect to their divinity*—they are not divine in different ways, neither is more or less divine than the other, and if one is a God then the other is a God too.<sup>14</sup>

It would be quite an understatement to say that this is a puzzling doctrine. At first glance (and, many would say, even after a much closer look) it appears to be incoherent. There are various ways of trying to demonstrate the incoherence. The one I prefer proceeds as follows: Suppose T1 is true. Then the Father is a God. But, given what I have just said about consubstantiality, T2 and T3 say that the Son and the Spirit are *distinct from the Father* (and from one another) but *exactly the same kind of thing* as the Father. So if the Father is a God, then the Son is a God, the Spirit is a God, and each is distinct from the other two. But then it follows that there are *three* Gods, contrary to T1. So the doctrine is incoherent.

Resolving the contradiction means giving up a premise or saying that one of the inferences is invalid. I have written at length elsewhere both about what *not* to say in response to this problem (if one cares about creedal orthodoxy), and about the solution I myself favor.<sup>15</sup> Here I shall simply cut to the chase and recap my own solution, which will also serve to explicate the attribute of triunity. In short, the solution is to reject the inference from (T4) to (T5):

(T4) The Father is a God, the Son is a God, and the Spirit is a God; and

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<sup>14</sup> For purposes here I treat ‘God’ as a kind term rather than a name, obviously in keeping with its use in T1.

<sup>15</sup> See esp. Brower & Rea 2005 and Rea 2009a.

each is distinct from the other two.

(T5) Therefore: There are three Gods.

The challenge is to explain how this can sensibly be done.

The model I favor begins with the Aristotelian idea that every material object is a compound of *matter* and *form*. The form might be thought of as a complex organizational property—not a mere shape, but something much richer. For Aristotle, the form of a thing is its *nature*. Thus, on this sort of view, St. Peter would be a compound of some matter and the form *humanity*; St. Paul would be a compound of the same form but different matter. Sharing the same form is what it means for Peter and Paul to be consubstantial.

Now imagine a case in which some matter has two forms. Suppose, for example, that *being a statue* and *being a pillar* are forms; and suppose an artistic building contractor fashions a lump of marble that exemplifies both. The contractor has made a statue. She has also made a pillar. Furthermore, the two compounds are genuinely distinct: e.g., the pillar could survive erosion that would obliterate the statue. But surely we don't want to say that two material objects—a statue and a pillar—occupy exactly the same place at the same time. What then might we say about this situation?

What Aristotle would have said is that the statue and the pillar are the *same material object*, but not the *same thing*, or even the *same compound*. This sounds odd. How can *two things* or *two compounds* count as *one material object*? Answer: All there is to being a material object is being some matter that

exemplifies at least one form. So we count one material object wherever we find some matter that exemplifies at least one form. To say that the statue and the pillar are *the same material object*, then, is to say no more or less than that the two things share all of the same matter in common.

If this view is correct, then the following will be true: The statue is a material object, the pillar is a material object, the statue is distinct from the pillar but each is the same material object as the other; so exactly one material object (not two) fills the region occupied by the statue.

Now let us return to the trinity. God is not material, of course; but we might still suppose that each divine person has constituents that play the same *roles* that matter and form play in material objects.<sup>16</sup> If we do, then we can say about the divine persons something like what we said about the statue and the pillar. Suppose that the divine nature plays the role of matter in the divine persons; and suppose that three separate properties (let's just label them 'F', 'S', and 'H') play the role of form. Then we can say that all there is to being "a God" is being a compound of the (one and only) divine nature and some person-making property (like 'F'). Furthermore, to say that Father, Son, and Spirit are the *same God* is just to say that Father, Son, and Spirit share the same "matter"—i.e., the same divine nature. Father, Son, and Spirit are, on this view, genuinely distinct *compounds* and genuinely distinct *persons*; but, precisely by virtue of sharing the

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, I think some of the most important theologians who hammered out the Niceno-Constantinopolitan formulation of the doctrine of the trinity *did* think of God in this way. Cf. Rea 2009 for discussion and references.

same divine nature, they count as one and the same God.<sup>17</sup>

If all of this is right, then (as in the statue/pillar example) we can say the following about the divine persons: The Father is a God, the Son is a God, and the Holy Spirit is a God, but each is the same God as the others; so, since there are no other Gods, there is exactly one God. The inference from T4 to T5 is therefore blocked. Furthermore, we can say without qualification that God is a person, because on any way of resolving the ambiguity of ‘God’, ‘God is a person’ comes out true. We can even say unqualifiedly that *God is triune*, so long as we understand triunity as the attribute (possessed by each divine person) of sharing one’s “matter” with exactly two other divine persons.

### **3. Humanity and the Human Condition**

We come now to doctrines concerning human nature and the human condition. On the subject of human nature, I shall focus on three questions: what are we?, what is our *telos*?, and what is the chief obstacle to human flourishing? This last question marks a natural transition to subject of the human condition, under which heading I plan mainly to focus on Christian teaching about God’s plan for rectifying the human condition—i.e., the doctrines of incarnation and atonement.

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<sup>17</sup> Why do Peter and Paul not count as two persons but *one human being*? Because, unlike the divine nature, human nature does not play the role of matter.

### 3.1. Human Nature

What are we? According to the Christian scriptures and the most well-known creeds and confessions of the major strands of Christianity, we are rational creatures created in the image of God; we are moral agents who are subject to praise and blame for at least some of our acts; and we are capable of being resurrected (that is, restored to bodily life) after the death of our physical bodies and of living forever in the presence of God. These claims, all of which I accept, seem to me to constitute the core of Christian teaching about what we are.

The *imago dei* doctrine provides a defeasible guide to further ways of fleshing out our views about human nature. Importantly, however, neither that doctrine nor anything else in Christianity pushes us toward the view that we are ultimately destined to live as *disembodied* beings. Contrary to what seems to be the prevailing view in the popular imagination, the Christian concept of the afterlife is not one that involves life as a ghost or disembodied soul. Instead, the hope expressed in the scriptures and the creeds is for bodily resurrection and physical life in God's new creation.

Similarly, I do not think that the *imago dei* doctrine, Christian doctrines about the afterlife, or anything else central to Christianity clearly commits one to a position on the question that most contemporary philosophers of religion would take us to be asking with the words, "What are we?"—namely, the question of whether we are immaterial souls, soul-body composites, wholly material beings,

or something else. In the places where talk of souls shows up explicitly in scripture or conciliar pronouncements, it is generally easy to construe such talk neutrally or perhaps metaphorically as pertaining to *minds*, and thus to refrain from reading into the text a commitment to immaterial (human) souls.

As it happens, I lean strongly toward the view that human beings have immaterial souls and either *are* the souls they have or are somehow composites of body and soul. The main reason for this is that I am already committed to believing in at least one immaterial mind—the mind of God—and the hypothesis that all minds are immaterial seems to me to be simpler and no less plausible than the hypothesis that some minds are material and some are immaterial. I acknowledge the impressive array of facts about how mental phenomena correlate with and depend upon neurological and other physical phenomena. I acknowledge, too, that these facts provide very good reason to accept materialism for those whose philosophical and theological commitments do not push in the other direction. But I do not think that dualism is *refuted* by the evidence we have from science. So, for the reason just given, I lean toward the view that persons have immaterial souls. But I do not think that much of import hangs on this belief.

This section on human nature is also a natural place to comment on human freedom and its relationship to divine providence. Are we free? If so, are we free in a way that precludes divine foreknowledge or divine predestination? I mention these questions only to set them aside. Scripture affirms, and so I believe on

faith, that we are morally responsible, that God is sovereign and knows our future, that those who will live eternally in the presence of God have been somehow “chosen before the foundation of the world” for this destiny, and that the very faith by which we are saved comes to believers by divine grace as a free gift from God. (Cf. Ephesians 1 & 2) But how all of this interacts with human freedom is, to my mind, a complete mystery. Furthermore, I take it to be not so much a mystery peculiar to Christianity (as, say, the precise nature of the atonement might be), but one that arises out of the simple fact that freedom itself is ill-understood, and perhaps intractably so.

What is our *telos*? The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of Man?” and gives the answer: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” This captures the heart of Christian teaching about the human *telos*. It implies that we cannot flourish outside of a relationship with God, that the purpose for which we are created is wholly oriented toward God, that we are capable of living forever, and that our purpose includes eternal *enjoyment* of God.

But Christianity also teaches that human beings are not capable on their own of coming anywhere close to realizing their *telos*. They need divine help, owing to a further (contingent) fact about human nature. In short, human nature has become corrupted. This corruption is supposed to be something we are born with, a result somehow of the first human sin, and a condition that makes it very likely—most would say *inevitable*—that we fall into further sin. These claims



constitute the main part of the doctrine of original sin.<sup>18</sup> The other part, more controversial, is the doctrine of original guilt, which implies that the corruption of our nature is sufficient, even in the absence of voluntary sin in our earthly lives, to preclude us ultimately from eternal life with God.<sup>19</sup>

Both parts of this doctrine are puzzling; both parts are theologically important. Why should the first human sin (assuming there was such a thing) result in *universal* corruption? Why should corruption present in us *from birth* pose an obstacle to our relationship with God *even in the absence of voluntary sin* on our part? There are no easy answers to these questions.<sup>20</sup> But neither is it easy simply to abandon the doctrine. Original sin (taken to include original guilt) is supposed to explain two facts about the human condition. First, sin is universal. Everyone is disposed to sin, and everyone who lives long enough to commit voluntary sin does so. Second, everyone needs salvation. The supposition that there was a *first sin* that damaged human nature explains the universality of sin without implying that God created us in a damaged condition, or that it is sheer coincidence that we are all damaged. The supposition that it is *human nature* that got damaged, and damaged in such a way as to separate us from God, explains why *absolutely everyone* needs salvation.

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<sup>18</sup> Or “ancestral sin” in Eastern Christianity; but my characterization more closely follows Western lines of thought.

<sup>19</sup> In the confessions of the Reformed tradition, the doctrine of original guilt is normally taken to include the claim that we are *guilty* for the corruption of our nature, or that God *blames* us for it. It is also commonly said that God is *angry* with us for it. I do not reject these statements outright, but I think that they are apt to mislead; and I think that the ‘divine wrath’ claims are particularly unfortunate in this regard. Since I cannot possibly hope to do them justice in the short space allotted here, I simply set them aside.

<sup>20</sup> But see Rea 2007 for extended discussion of alternatives.

I think that the two facts just mentioned can be accepted independently of the doctrine of original sin, simply on the strength of the scriptural evidence that supports them. I also think that the doctrine itself can be reasonably accepted as an article of faith, even in the absence of answers to the challenging questions mentioned above. Still, it would be nice to have at least some idea of how the first sin might have resulted in the consequences that the doctrine affirms.<sup>21</sup> I do not have a full theory to offer; but I can take some initial steps in that direction.

Suppose that it is part of the human design plan for us to exist in a kind of emotional and psychological union with God (analogous to but deeper even than the sort of union that takes place between close friends or spouses). Under “normal” circumstances, we would experience this union in rudimentary form from the first moment of our existence as psychological beings, and it would grow stronger and deeper throughout our lives. Furthermore, it is absolutely necessary for proper moral and psychological development. Being apart from this relationship is like being at the bottom of the sea without a pressurized suit: we become damaged, distorted, and subject to further moral and psychological deterioration for as long as we are without it. Suppose that the first human person(s) came into the world already united with God in the requisite way, but that one consequence of the first sin was that God partially withdrew God’s presence from creation, so that the union for which we were designed was no

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<sup>21</sup> We might also ask how belief in a “first sin” or an “historical Adam” could be reconciled with evolutionary theory. This is a matter of interesting and active controversy right now, and several proposals strike me as promising; but I shall pursue this issue further here.

longer readily available—it could be had only dimly in this life and only with special divine help and as a result of actively seeking God.

This is a story according to which the first sin does indeed result in universal corruption. Although there is clearly a sense in which human nature remains the same after the withdrawal of God's presence, there is also clearly a sense in which it does not. Being human after the Fall is a fundamentally different thing from being human prior to the Fall. Post-Fall human beings find themselves in a world lacking something they desperately need in order to achieve their *telos*, and they are corrupted and moving toward further ruin from the first moment of life. On the supposition that living in a world bereft of the divine presence results in damage so utterly devastating as to pervade our entire psyche, it is even appropriate to say (with Calvin) that one result of the Fall is the *total depravity* of the human race.

The story just given explains the universality of sin. Sin is universal because humans can avoid sin only by being fully in the presence of God, and the first sin resulted in the partial withdrawal of God's presence. It also provides the resources to explain why God's plan of salvation is relevant to everyone. Standard Christian soteriology maintains that the work of Christ makes us fit for God's presence and contributes to our sanctification. We might suppose, then, that even infants who die without voluntarily sinning require (as a result of their being conceived and born in the conditions just described) divine help to become fit for the presence of God, without which help they would remain damaged in

their afterlife and would experience precisely the sort of moral deterioration and ruin that characterize natural human life.

### 3.2. *The Human Condition*

The human condition, then, is fundamentally a condition of sin and misery. The idea is not that we are constantly *committing* sin and *feeling* miserable, never experiencing pleasure, never displaying virtues, always displaying vices, and so on. Rather, the idea is this: First, our lives are characterized by sin, in that we are unable without divine assistance to order our desires in the right way, and doing the right thing involves moral struggle against strong and pervasive self-oriented inclinations. Second, this situation is one in which we are “objectively miserable”, not happy in the Aristotelian sense, failing to flourish, and subject as a result to feeling miserable far more often than we should expect in a world created by a loving God.

The Christian gospel, however—the *good news*—is that this tale of sin and misery is not the whole story about the human condition. The rest of the story is that, despite our sin and despite how things may look, God still loves us, desires union with us and wants us to flourish, and has therefore intervened dramatically in human history in order to save us from our condition. The essential details of this propitious intervention, *sans* explanatory comments, are as follows. The second person of the trinity became human and lived among us as the man, Jesus of Nazareth. He lived a perfectly sinless life, and fulfilled the human *telos*,

showing us in the process both what God the Father is like and what human beings were meant to be like. During his life on earth, he worked miracles—healing the sick, walking on water, feeding his followers, raising the dead, and much else besides. At the end he suffered unjust persecution, torture, and death at the hands of his contemporaries, after which he rose bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven. All of this, but perhaps especially his suffering, death, and resurrection, somehow deliver us from the power of sin and death and contribute to reconciling the whole world to God. Moreover, after Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit came to dwell within individual believers and to help them realize the sort of union with God that they were intended to have.

I believe this story, as I have told it, in its entirety; and I believe that the miracles reported therein literally occurred. I believe all of this in part because I take the New Testament authors to be reliable reporters of the events in Jesus' life. But, of course, there is much in the story that merits extended discussion.

First, how shall we understand the claim that the second person of the trinity became human? As with the doctrine of the trinity, the Christian tradition does not offer a full-blown theory of the incarnation but simply imposes boundaries on our theorizing. Whatever else we say about the incarnation, a fully orthodox theory (i.e., one that respects the pronouncements of the ecumenical creeds) must at least say this: In becoming human, the second person of the trinity retained his divine nature, so that the incarnate Christ is *one person* with *two natures* rather than (say) one person with a single hybrid nature, or two persons in one body,

each with his own nature; and, whatever else it involved, taking on human nature at least meant coming to have a rational soul, or mind, and a physical human body, and having two wills, human and divine.

From this basic core, the doctrine may be fleshed out in various ways. Often the fleshing out is done in response to puzzles that highlight tensions between Jesus' manifest humanity and his alleged divinity. For example, the Bible says that Jesus grew in wisdom. It also says that he was tempted to sin. But a divine being would always know and take the wisest course of action and so could not *grow* in wisdom; and, being perfectly good, a divine being would never want to do sinful things and so could hardly be tempted to do so.

Since orthodoxy already requires positing something *like* two minds in the incarnate Christ, my own response to these puzzles is to flesh out the doctrine along the lines of Thomas Morris's "two-minds" view (Morris 1986). On this view, the divine mind of Christ displays all of the perfections that we expect of divinity, but the human mind of Christ suffers some of the deficiencies that afflict humanity and that Jesus himself manifests. Admittedly, positing two minds suggests that we are also positing two *persons*, contrary to orthodoxy. But we can resist this suggestion by maintaining that the divine mind functions in the psychology of Jesus in the way that a "subconscious" mind is supposed to function according to certain (probably false) theories about human psychology.<sup>22</sup> According to such theories, one's first person perspective, self-awareness, and conscious life, are

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<sup>22</sup> The falsity of these theories does not matter. What matters for the model is just the *possibility* that two minds to be related in this way in one person.

associated with her conscious mind; but a lot of further mental content, including beliefs, desires, and even acts of will, reside in and occasionally well up from the subconscious. So likewise, we might suppose, with the two minds of Christ. The subconscious divine mind can provide access to all of the knowledge, power, moral strength, and so on that a divine being is supposed to possess. But it can leave the human mind ignorant of certain facts, and allow it to experience temptation or weakness. Since there is only one first-person perspective in Jesus on this model, there is no danger of its committing us to the claim that there are two persons in the incarnate Christ; but there is still quite obviously room for saying that Christ has a human soul (in addition to the divine mind) and a human will (in addition to the divine will).

Second, what shall we say about how the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus contribute to rectifying the human condition? Our condition, again, is one of sin and misery, brought on by a primordial change in the relationship between God and creation. Whereas God's presence in the world and to human beings was once vivid and readily available, now it is hidden and available only with difficulty. But scripture tells us that the work of Christ has changed all of this for the better. As a result of Christ's work, God's presence and assistance is now more readily available. We who embrace Christ's work on our behalf are no longer at odds with God in any deep way; we therefore have access to the divine help we need in order to avoid sin and reach our *telos*. Although we cannot fully achieve our *telos* in this life, we are assured that our lives will continue after our

physical death and that we will in the afterlife be able to reach it. The New Testament employs a variety of terms (in addition to *salvation*) to describe what the work of Jesus accomplished on our behalf: e.g., *justification*, *redemption* or *ransom*, *reconciliation* with God, *deliverance* from sin, *re-creation* or *rebirth*, the offering of an *atoning sacrifice*, *abundant life*, and *eternal life*. But, I take it, the very simple message is that somehow, through Christ, the human condition has been rectified so that we are now able ultimately to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

But how exactly does it all work? Which of the aforementioned terms are to be taken literally, and which are mere metaphors? Different decisions on these matters push one in radically different theoretical directions. Taking the *justification* and *atoning sacrifice* language quite literally and treating *ransom* language as more metaphorical, for example, tends to push theologians in the direction of a penal-substitutionary model: Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice to God the Father, wherein Jesus bore in his body and soul exactly the penalty that we ourselves deserved in order to satisfy the wrath of God. Taking the redemption and ransom language more literally, on the other hand, pushes in the direction of a *Christus victor* model, in which concerns about *justification* are (at least) de-emphasized and Jesus' death is seen as a literal *transaction* of some sort which delivers us from genuine bondage to the Devil, or to the power of sin, or to some other kind of evil other-worldly force.



The view that the legal/penal imagery deserves pride of place, and that the *justification* of sinners is first and foremost what was accomplished by Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, has sometimes been referred to as the "Protestant Orthodoxy." (Cf. Aulen c1930) I do not deny this view. But, at this stage in my thinking about the matter, neither can I defend it. For it is not clear to me that there is sufficient scriptural data for elevating *any* of these images over the others for theory-building purposes. Furthermore, it seems that one available theoretical option is to say simply this: The main soteriological message of the New Testament is that the work of Christ accomplished, in some sense, *all* of these things for us. It made us justified in the eyes of God; it delivered us from the power of sin, evil, and death and resulted in their utter defeat and humiliation; and it brought us new life, eternal and abundant, and made us into new creations. But as to how and why and in exactly what sense all of these things happened, perhaps we cannot say without offering a model that ultimately lapses into metaphor, leaves out important truths, or otherwise misleads.

#### **4. Life and Practice**

As the previous section makes clear, I think that we human beings come into the world morally and spiritually damaged, and I think that we tend to go on to damage and be damaged by one another in ways that produce all manner of corruption and psychological dysfunction. Much of this I take to be readily evident

to any competent observer of humanity, regardless of religious commitments. But I have to admit that the fundamental truth of this teaching is nowhere more evident to me than within my own life and soul. When I look within, the Christian story about the human condition rings deeply true; and the Christian story about how we might be saved from this condition comes as powerfully good news. The good news, in turn, is, to the extent that it can rationally be believed, a story to orient one's life around—a story that one ought to struggle hard to understand, to communicate (respectfully, lovingly) to others, and to model one's behavior around. As I have indicated throughout this essay, I do believe the story; and after many years of hard and critical thinking about it, and many years of learning from others wiser and smarter than me who have also thought hard and critically about it, I remain convinced that the story can be and is rationally believed by a great many people. All of this has implications for my views about morality, politics, and my professional life.

In morality, my views about the human condition lead me to a deep skepticism about the prospects for successful ethical theory-building. Profoundly corrupt people ought not to have high hopes for reaching the full and unvarnished truth about morality and the good life. I am not a moral anti-realist, and I do think that we have a lot of moral knowledge. Scripture is one source of such knowledge; but there are also plenty of obvious, objective facts about what is obligatory, non-obligatory, permissible, or impermissible. It is quite obvious, for example, that, in the course of a routine trip to the supermarket, it would be

absolutely wrong to go on a shooting spree, to set up a tryst with a married friend, to steal a car, and so on. But basic moral knowledge is one thing; moral theory building and reasoning about “hard cases” are wholly another.

Plato’s Socrates sometimes conveys the impression that one cannot be truly virtuous without being in possession of a philosophical theory about the nature of virtue, or goodness. From a Christian point of view, however, living well (morally and otherwise) does not depend so much on philosophical understanding as on life in the Church. Scripture enjoins us to cultivate the “fruits of the spirit”—love, peace, patience, and so on—and to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds”, which is largely supposed to be a matter of learning to love God and neighbor in a way that emulates Christ. There is no indication that *theorizing* about these things will help us much in our efforts to accomplish them. Rather, we are enjoined to accomplish these things by having regular fellowship with other believers, confessing our sins to one another and praying for one another, diligently studying scripture together, and submitting ourselves to one another in various ways—partly in order to cultivate humility and treat one another kindly, but also for the sake of receiving help in the Christian life. The liturgies of the Church, the sacraments and the Church calendar, and the spiritual disciplines are all likewise directed toward the end of helping individual believers to take their place in a body that is working corporately in an effort to manifest Christ and to bring healing and the good news of the gospel to a broken world. Moral theory is, at best, a secondary or tertiary aid.

In addition to capturing something important about the relation between Christian faith and the moral life, this last idea of working corporately to manifest Christ and bring healing to a broken world seems also to capture something important about the relation between Christian faith and politics. But from the fact that Christians as such ought to be involved *somehow* in this sort of corporate work not much seems to follow about exactly what form that involvement ought to take. (Much can be derived from a developed eschatology; and differences in views on that topic help to explain dramatic differences in the political involvement of various Christian groups. But my own eschatological views are undeveloped and wholly tentative at best.)

What should I as a Christian think about (say) public policies pertaining to abortion, or climate change, or factory farming, or industrial pollution, or the welfare system? How can I, together with the rest of the Church, respond to these concerns in a way that “manifests Christ and brings healing to a broken world”? The fact that we are called to love our neighbors means, I think, that we must *care* about such questions and try to reach answers in a timely manner to the ones that are most salient in our circumstances. Otherwise we will likely fail to manifest appropriate concern for our neighbors. But *how* one answers these questions will depend not only on truths of the Christian faith, but also on one’s assessments of relevant empirical data and authoritative testimony, negotiable philosophical presuppositions, and independent value judgments and value prioritizations, all of which might vary among equally intelligent, mature, and

reasonable Christians. Thus, I doubt that we can reliably reach general principles that tell us how Christians as such ought to think about and respond to the political issues we face. So my political views and involvement tend to bear only loose and indirect connections with the particulars of my faith.

Lastly, the relationship between my faith and my professional life: I said earlier that I think that the basic doctrines of Christianity constitute something that one ought to orient one's life around, communicate to others, struggle to understand, and so on. I suspect that this thought gives the primary reason why I became a professional philosopher. Although I have plenty of research interests outside of the philosophy of religion, the impetus to take up a profession where I could spend a lot of time thinking and teaching about the topics on which I've written and taught is primarily just the idea that doing so constitutes the best way for *me* (given my particular skills and interests) to orient my life around my faith, to struggle to understand it, to communicate it to others, and the like.

There is another way, too, in which my faith and my professional life interact. One of the most important job skills of an analytic philosopher is strongly correlated with whatever skill is involved in successfully rationalizing bad behavior, deceiving oneself, putting a positive spin on bad circumstances, and so on. Also, there are certain modes of behavior—ways of being ambitious, or arrogant, or disrespectful to others, for example—that seem much easier to fall into in professions (like philosophy) where reputation, and having one's own reputation elevated over the reputations of people with whom one works, is often

correlated with promotions, job security, pay raises, and the like. To this extent, I find that being a philosopher (or being an academic generally) poses certain obstacles, or challenges, to my own moral and spiritual development as a Christian. Accordingly, I see a variety of ways in which being a Christian can, or should, enable one to achieve a degree of critical distance from certain kinds of widespread but dysfunctional norms and values in the profession. This is, of course, not to say that being a Christian is the only way of achieving such distance; but it is, or should be, a way of doing so.

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