

Article Review

Christopher Beeley, *The Unity of Christ*¹

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Professor Beeley has contributed a new chapter to the history of the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*. He has written a provocative book, whose argument is both revisionist and orthodox. Beeley proposes to revise the accepted christological narrative by questioning the significance and theological genius of Athanasius of Alexandria. In Beeley's judgement, Athanasius' contribution pales in comparison with such giants as Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor. Beeley finds especially in Nazianzen's Christology the most profound and consistent rendering of the unity of Christ, a golden standard for expressing *communicatio idiomatum*. According to Beeley, Gregory's achievement was only partially matched by the Christologies of Cyril of Alexandria and Leo of Rome. Gregory's Christology is the apex of the Origenist tradition, its most complete and compelling expression. A permanent contribution of Beeley's work is the restoration of Gregory the Theologian to the diptychs of contemporary Western patristic scholarship, in which Nazianzen has been overshadowed by another Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa.

The first two chapters of Beeley's work present a richly detailed and sympathetic account of some neglected elements of Origen's and Eusebius' christologies. Of particular interest is Beeley's discussion of Origen's theology of the Son as the image of the Father and of the mediatorial role of the Logos. It is also intriguing to read that 'the most influential church leader of the early fourth century was not Athanasius of Alexandria, as most accounts would have it, but the great scholar-bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine'. The reader naturally anticipates that Eusebius' influence upon the later tradition will be explored by the author in the subsequent narrative. But Beeley's focal interest lies elsewhere, namely, in the accounts of *communicatio idiomatum* in the fourth- and fifth-century christologies.

Beeley identifies two major interpretative trajectories in Christology: unitive and dualist. The unitive approach emphasises the single subject to which both typically divine and typically human characteristics of Christ are

¹ Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 408. \$55.00.

to be attributed. The dualist approach variously accentuates the distinction between human and divine aspects of Christ. Beeley identifies as dualist the christological accounts of Origen, Athanasius, Diodore of Tarsus, Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary of Poitiers, Nestorius and John of Damascus. According to Beeley, the unitive approach is most consistently articulated by Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen and, following him, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine and, less successfully, by Cyril of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor. The narrative which emerges both reinforces the narrative of the attainment of christological orthodoxy, by lifting up Nazianzen's treatment of the unity of Christ as a golden standard, and troubles the same narrative by questioning the value and soundness of Athanasius' and Cyril's christologies. To repeat, Beeley's narrative is both historically revisionist and theologically orthodox, strongly influenced by contemporary theological interest in the idea of divine suffering.

For our discussion, I would like to raise three methodological and two substantive issues (as well as one minor point) with Beeley's account.

The first methodological issue has to do with the way in which Beeley draws genetic links between the ideas of different theologians, a point also noted in a review by my colleague, Mark DelCogliano. Beeley repeatedly proceeds from the assumption that a mere fact that an influential theologian A held that *p*, and a later theologian B held that *p*, makes it very probable that B borrowed *p* from A. A couple of examples will suffice. Beeley writes, 'Athanasius affirms that Christ is indeed the image of God apart from the incarnation, as Origen and Eusebius taught and against the denials of Marcellus [of Ancyra]' (p. 147). But the point that the Son, who is the instrument of creation, is the image of God is taught in the New Testament, perhaps most directly in Colossians 1:15 (cf. 2 Cor 4:4). It seems that there is no need to invoke the authority of Origen or Eusebius in order to account for Athanasius' theology of the image of God.

The second example comes from Beeley's treatment of Cyril of Alexandria. Beeley observes that Cyril's theology 'was guided primarily by Gregory Nazianzen' (p. 258). Beeley subsequently writes that 'when [Cyril] teaches that all biblical sayings about Christ refer to the same subject, Cyril reflects a deeply Gregorian principle' (p. 264). But surely, among the early church fathers, Gregory Nazianzen did not hold a copyright on a single-subject Christology. Bold theopaschite statements are found in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, Melito of Sardis, Tertullian, Apollinaris and so on. Gregory formulated his one-subject Christology in response to the Apollinarian accusation of preaching 'two sons' and in response to the Eunomians, who argued from the passibility of the Logos to his subordinate status. The general methodological point is that we have plausible historical

grounds for believing that theologian B depends on theologian A, if both A and B held a unique point *p*, not otherwise attested in all preceding or contemporary authors. I say 'plausible historical grounds', because this criterion does not constitute a sufficient condition. Generally, what Beeley takes to be the 'Gregorian principle' or the 'Gregorian tradition' are homiletic and liturgical commonplaces. It is true, of course, that Cyril directly quotes from Gregory and more generally, Cyril is chiefly responsible for providing an early theoretical framework for the practice of appealing to patristic precedents. But it is one thing to assert that Cyril draws on Gregory's work just as he draws on the work of Athanasius and Apollinaris; it is a different matter to assert that 'Cyril was guided primarily by Gregory Nazianzen' (p. 258). Beeley himself subsequently qualifies this statement so considerably that his original point loses much of its explanatory force.

The second issue is the absence of a working definition of what counts as a 'dualist' Christology. The range of possible options is very broad, from some Gnostic authors to Athanasius' 'double account of the Savior' to the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia. For example, Theodore of Mopsuestia's Christology disallows *communicatio idiomatum* as a matter of theological principle. Athanasius' 'double account of the Savior', according to Beeley, allows cross-predication of attributes. This means that Athanasius allows for a merely 'verbal' as opposed to 'real' *communicatio idiomatum*. In contrast, Gregory of Nazianzus allows the cross-penetration of attributes, meaning that the divine subject participates in human experiences, such as suffering and death, while human nature is transformed by its union with the Logos and acquires the Logos' characteristics. While Beeley's distinction between cross-predication and cross-penetration is quite valuable, his language of 'dualist' Christology is not sufficiently precise. I would invite our author to clarify his use of this crucial term.

The third methodological issue is Beeley's use of the pair Alexandrian/Antiochene. On p. 272, Beeley correctly cautions that 'the old caricature of fourth- and fifth-century Christology as being divided between Alexandrian and Antiochene schools is no longer tenable. The streams of "orthodox" tradition ran in more than two channels.' I am very sympathetic to this caution and agree that the two schools hypothesis is unsustainable. However, Beeley frequently speaks of 'Alexandrian or Antiochene tradition', Alexandrian or Antiochene Christology, 'Antiochene provenance [of Leontius of Byzantium]' (p. 291), 'Antiochene bias' (p. 281) and so on, as if those categories represented monolithic points of view. For example, he observes that Gregory of Nyssa's account of *communicatio idiomatum* is done under the orbit of 'Antiochene Christological influences'. On p. 267, Beeley opines that 'Athanasius' view of divine suffering is remarkably close to the later

Antiochene position' (p. 267), which is to say that Athanasius denies the divine nature's involvement in suffering in the manner of Theodore of Mopsuestia and his followers. Beeley's characterisation of Athanasius' view both assumes that there is such a thing as a uniform 'Antiochene position' on divine suffering and attributes this view to an Alexandrian theologian, namely, Athanasius. Absent any methodological qualifications, we are left with both an assumption of the two schools (traditions or influences) hypothesis and its (more sound) deconstruction. I hope Professor Beeley clarifies this tension in his response.

Now I wish to turn to the issues of substance, limiting the discussion to one comment and two major points. My comment has to do with Beeley's statement on p. 343: 'Astonishingly, we still lack an adequate book-length study of Augustine's Christology'. In fact, there is such a book, it is William Babcock's 1971 dissertation 'The Christ of the Exchange: A Study in the Christology of Augustine's *Ennarationes in Psalmos*', defended at Yale under Jaroslav Pelikan. Beeley's section on *communicatio idiomatum* in Augustine's *Exposition of the Psalms* could benefit from engaging Babcock's book-length study.

My two substantive points have to do with Beeley's treatment of the notions of *theosis* and divine impassibility.

In his chapter on the Cappadocian fathers and the Council of Constantinople, Beeley observes that the term *theosis* was coined by Gregory (p. 185). A reference to Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, which discusses Gregory's neologism at length, would have been desirable.² More significant is the fact that a compound, *apotheosis* ('*theosis*' with the prefix '*apo*'), was commonplace in classical and late antique authors. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to speak of a major shift in meaning of the term (*apo*)*theosis*, rather than of a neologism *tout court*.

Beeley subsequently claims that 'Gregory's notion of divinization became the main foundation for the later Byzantine understanding of salvation through Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor' (p. 185). Beeley's valorisation of his main intellectual hero – Nazianzen – comes at a very high price for the church father whom our author scorns, namely, Athanasius. Regarding the Alexandrian father, Beeley states: 'Athanasius thus presents us with a fairly unique example of what many modern readers have assumed most of the Greek fathers held, namely, divinization and salvation (of a sort) at the point of incarnation rather than in the passion and resurrection' (p. 137). Beeley goes so far as to claim that in Athanasius divinisation

² According to TLG, the term *theosis* is attested twice in Ephraem the Syrian's (?) *Precationes ad dei matrem* 2 and 4. The text is most probably spurious. The work makes for an interesting comparison with Gregory Nazianzen's *Sermo in sanctum baptisma* (PG 36: 381).

amounted to de-humanisation, inasmuch as it meant the freeing of humanity from the limitations of suffering and death. A quick look at Norman Russell's magisterial study would establish that Gregory is not the main foundation of the doctrine of deification, but only one important patristic authority on the subject; that the Athanasian contention that the union of divine and human natures in the incarnation is the foundation of deification is shared both by earlier authors, such as Irenaeus, as well as by most later Byzantine authors, including Maximus the Confessor. With Russell, I am not prepared to make a distinction between Athanasius' and Gregory's treatment of deification as sharply as Beeley does. Surely, for both theologians, deification meant immortality, which is not an overcoming of humanity, but rather a restoration of true humanity, which is precisely the central point of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*.

This naturally leads me to the second problem, namely, Beeley's treatment of the idea of divine impassibility and the issue of divine involvement in suffering. Beeley ascribes to Gregory Nazianzen a conceptual breakthrough in this arena. In fact, Beeley sees Gregory as a strong champion of divine suffering (p. 296: 'Maximus . . . is explicitly denying the divine suffering that Gregory had so strongly championed'). In support, Beeley quotes an important statement from Gregory's 45th Oration: 'We needed an incarnate God, a God put to death, so that we might live, and we were put to death with him' (p. 193). Gregory also speaks of Christians being 'saved by the sufferings of the impassible one' (Or. 30.1). I agree that these are profound statements, but these statements are neither self-explanatory, nor in any way unique to Gregory Nazianzen. Two centuries before him, Melito of Sardis proclaimed: '(It was for man's sake that): the judge was judged and the invisible was seen³ and the impassible suffered, and the immortal died, and the heavenly one was buried'.⁴ Since Melito's time such statements became a common stock of paschal sermons and even made it into the liturgical tradition. So, for example, in the anaphora of *The Apostolic Constitutions* VIII we read: 'He was delivered to Pilate the governor and the judge was judged and the Savior was condemned; the impassible was nailed to the cross; the immortal by nature died; the life-giver was buried in order to free from passions and release from death those for whose sake he came; in order to break the bonds of the devil and deliver humankind from his deceit.' The echo of Melito (or a later theologian writing in the same mode) is clear in this fourth-century anaphora. Michael Slusser's Oxford dissertation titled 'Theopaschite Expressions in Second-Century Christianity as Reflected in the Writings of Justin, Melito, Celsus and Irenaeus', another conspicuous

³ Fr. 13 adds 'and the immeasurable was measured'.

⁴ New fr. ii. 13. 135 adds 'in the earth'.

omission from Beeley's bibliography, treats the matter comprehensively. More generally, Beeley's work shows only partial engagement with the relevant scholarly literature addressing patristic accounts of divine impassibility and participation in human suffering.

Although Beeley is not very explicit about this, it seems that for him a realist rendering of *communicatio idiomatum* implies the abandonment of divine impassibility in favour of theopaschitism. But if suffering can be predicated directly to the divine nature, or directly to the pre-incarnate Logos (outside of the framework of the incarnation) then the paradox of the impassible God suffering, the paradox that Beeley values in Nazianzen's theology, would be dissolved. If the divine nature is possible then it cannot communicate the property of being impassible, threatening the very idea of *communicatio idiomatum* that Beeley wishes to uphold throughout the book.

Perhaps it is a theological achievement of some of the later patristic authors, such as Leontius of Byzantium and Maximus the Confessor, that their christologies cannot be straitjacketed into the scheme of 'unitive' or 'dualist' Christology, the framework in which Beeley seeks to understand them. In fact, after the Council of Ephesus, any self-reflective theologian had to struggle both with the question of how Christ could be thought to be one and how he could be thought to be two. While it is thought-provoking and original, this study raises more questions than it solves. But this is to be expected from any perpetually contested issue, including most especially the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*.

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