

## Response

# Response to Brian Daley and Paul Gavriluk on *The Unity of Christ*

**Keywords:** Athanasius of Alexandria, *communicatio idiomatum*, divine suffering, divination/divinification, Jesus Christ/Christology, unity of Christ.

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues for their careful attention to my work, and for the invitation to respond to their comments in the pages of the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.<sup>1</sup> It is a privilege to participate in such a conversation among friends and fellow scholars.

My purpose in writing this book was to discern the main lines of orthodox patristic tradition, as defined by the confession of Christ's unity. Like many others, I had long noticed how complicated this central body of Christian theology is. In recent years it became even clearer to me that the conventional narrative of orthodox patristic tradition was ridden with puzzles, contradictions and hidden fault lines which could be better explained if we concentrated on the basic doctrinal matters at hand, noting the actual theological similarities and differences among the leading figures. This book is the result of my efforts to provide a new map of orthodox patristic tradition.

I am glad to know that Professors Daley and Gavriluk find the book to be an exciting and even liberating new approach to patristic tradition, and a work which is both revisionist and orthodox. My colleagues have also raised a number of concerns which deserve further attention. I will address what I take to be the most significant points in their remarks, moving from fundamental conceptual matters to particular figures and questions of historical-theological method.

### The unity of Christ in patristic theology

It will be helpful first to summarise the book's organising theme, the unity of Christ in patristic thought. Orthodox patristic Christology centres on the confession that the human being Jesus Christ contains, or is, only one subject of existence, action, passion and predication, which is the divine Son or Word

<sup>1</sup> This exchange first took place at a joint session of the AAR Eastern Orthodox Study Group and the SBL Development of Early Christian Theology Unit in Baltimore in Nov. 2013. My thanks are due as well to the other panellists, Oliver Crisp, Stephen Fowl and George Hunsinger, to Mark Weedman, who organised the panel, and to Iain Torrance, who offered to publish these papers here.

of God. At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that Christ crucified and risen is himself the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Christ's divine identity, moreover, not only includes a complete human existence, in mind, soul, and body, without contradiction or competition, but Christ's divinity positively enables the integrity of his humanity.

The patristic doctrine of Christ's unity is not the product of later theological development; it arises directly from the variety of statements about Christ in the scriptures and runs from the second century to the end of the patristic era. The biblical witness to Christ includes plainly divine statements and plainly human ones, and it also contains divine statements made about the human Jesus and human statements made about the divine Son of God, a pattern of cross-predication known as the *communicatio idiomatum*. By taking these various statements as real and true descriptions of Christ, unitive theologians routinely refer them all to the divine Son of God, either in his purely divine form apart from any involvement in the economy or in his created, human form as the incarnate Lord. Accordingly, all of Jesus' acts and experiences – and especially his suffering and death – are understood to be the human acts of the divine Son of God, where the second person of the Trinity is the true subject throughout. Some theologians describe the close relationship between Christ's divinity and humanity in strong terms such as 'union', 'unity', 'mixture' and the like, or, in later centuries, as both a natural and a hypostatic union; however, such terms are not necessary to establish a unitive doctrine of Christ. Notable examples of unitive Christology are found in Irenaeus, Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory Thaumaturgus and Ambrose, and in the more developed systems of the high-patristic period produced by Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus Confessor and in some, though not all, of John of Damascus' work.

### Dualist Christology

Dualist Christology likewise operates according to a single principle, which can be found in two main forms. Christological dualism is not the belief that Christ is both divine and human, or that he has two natures: unitive theologians routinely affirm Christ's full divinity and humanity. Rather, christological dualism separates Christ's divine and human natures in such a way that the single subjectivity of Christ as the divine Son of God is lost to view, and, correspondingly, biblical references to Christ are referred to two different subjects. While unitive Christology looks basically the same in each instance, there are several ways in which one can construct a dualist Christology – somewhat like Tolstoy's comment that every happy family is happy in the same way, whereas there are many ways to be unhappy.

(A) The most pronounced form of christological dualism posits two relatively self-contained figures, the divine Son of God and an independently existing human being; this is the doctrine we find in Origen, Diodore, Nestorius and the Strict Chalcedonians. These theologians refer the divine statements of scripture to the divine Son and the human statements to the human Jesus, or to his human nature. (B) Less obvious, perhaps, but no less dualist in terms of its basic structure is the notion of an internally divided Jesus, who is composed of the divine Word plus a human body, such as we find in Athanasius and Apollinarius. These theologians refer divine statements to the Word of God and human statements to the Word's human body (Athanasius), or sometimes to a hybrid of the two (Apollinarius). In both cases dualist exegesis requires that one explain away the realistic sense of the *communicatio idiomatum*: at most, the divine Son can be said to undergo a human life and death, or he may have 'associated' himself with a human body which dies; but it cannot really have been the case that the divine Son underwent a human death. The motivation for dualist exegesis can vary: one's primary motivation can be to keep God free from the contamination of human suffering and death (Origen, Athanasius and Diodore), or to avoid a perceived conflict between the Word of God and Jesus' human mind (Apollinarius and possibly Athanasius). Accordingly, dualist theologians deny even an economic sense of divine suffering, and they oppose the strong terms for unity that might be employed by unitive theologians.

Dualist Christology has raised its head at several key points in patristic tradition, both within the officially orthodox fold and outside of it: for example, in the work of Origen, Athanasius and Apollinarius; in several major texts by Gregory of Nyssa; in the Antiochene tradition of Diodore and Nestorius and the allied doctrine of Leo of Rome; and in the strict Chalcedonianism of Leontius of Byzantium and his heirs. The persistence of both streams of doctrine into the later centuries is, I believe, the main complicating factor in patristic theological tradition.

### The ontology of the Saviour

In speaking of the paradox of the incarnation, Professor Daley has drawn our attention to a further notion that distinguishes unitive and dualist christologies. Many have regarded Christ's incarnation as a deep or absolute paradox concerning how God could possibly coexist with a complete human being. Central to unitive patristic Christology is the counter-argument that there is, in fact, no competition or contradiction between Christ's divine nature and his human form, including Jesus' human mental functioning.

The incarnation does not represent an ontological conflict at all, and it is not a paradox in the strict sense, although it is certainly a wonder (*paradoxon*) of unanticipated divine activity and manifestation. Our unitive authors regularly note that the incarnation is seen as an ontological problem, however, from the standpoint of unbelief, whether philosophically motivated or in the form of dualist Christology. Key instances of this counter-argument occur in Gregory Nazianzen, certain passages in Gregory of Nyssa (e.g. *Or. cat.* 5, 9–10), Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine and Maximus Confessor. In light of this principle of ontological non-contradiction, it will be apparent that unitive doctrine is the more christologically expansive and liberating of the human creature – a point that Maximus emphasizes at length (e.g. *Pyrrh.* 349B–352A; *Opusc.* 7.80A–B) – and that it is the dualist position that represents the straitjacket of which Gavrilyuk speaks.

### Divine suffering

Professor Gavrilyuk has raised questions about my treatment of divine impassibility, divinization (*theosis*) and the conventional distinction between Antiochene and Alexandrian theologies. Modern theologians have reconsidered the impassibility of God in various ways, but my interest in this book is simply to elucidate the teaching of the fathers, about which Gavrilyuk has also written.<sup>2</sup> By way of definition, I understand passibility in patristic usage to mean being subject to, and possibly threatened by, another being or force, or being passive to the activity of another; it does not mean having feelings or caring about others, as some moderns tend to imagine it.

Gavrilyuk and I are in agreement about the classical Christian doctrine of divine impassibility – that God, qua God, does not and cannot suffer, not because God does not care about the suffering of his creatures, but because it is both conceptually and ontologically impossible. The notion of divine suffering goes against the very idea of what it means to be God, and it contradicts everything we know about God from the Bible and orthodox Christian tradition. To claim that God suffers *per se* (or suffers divinely) means that there is some other force or principle that has power over God – that there is, in effect, another god besides God – and that is something that most Jews, Christians and Muslims will vehemently want to deny.

On the other hand, it appears that Gavrilyuk and I disagree about the patristic notion of divine suffering in Christ. Central to orthodox patristic Christology, I argue, is the proclamation that in Christ God has undergone human birth, life, death and resurrection for the salvation of the world,

<sup>2</sup> Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

and that God's real involvement in Christ's human life stands at the heart of the Christian faith. The patristic notion of divine suffering involves two important qualifications. (1) It is human or creaturely suffering that we are talking about, suffering within the realm of creation and according to its terms, or, as the Greeks like to say, in the 'economy', not divine suffering *per se*. (2) Nevertheless, the fathers believe that it is God who directly and immediately undergoes creaturely suffering in Jesus Christ, a belief which calls forth a whole range of theopaschite expressions from the second to the eighth century. Hence, Gregory Nazianzen and Cyril speak of God's 'impassible passion', and the Second Council of Constantinople (553) confesses that 'one of the Trinity was crucified' in the incarnation. The confession of God's suffering in Christ has met with opposition since at least the second century, ranging from knee-jerk reactions to philosophically informed cosmologies to dualist christological sensibilities.

### Divinization

My comments on *theosis* build on my earlier treatment of the subject, which refers extensively to Norman Russell's masterful study.<sup>3</sup> My argument that Gregory Nazianzen is the immediate and defining precedent for the emerging tradition of *theosis* in Greek Christian soteriology serves as an emendation to Russell's work, yet only by a half. Russell observes that it was Gregory who coined the term *theosis*, that the idea enters Byzantine theology through Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus Confessor, and that it did so in Gregory's terms, rather than in the language of *theopoiesis* that Athanasius and others had used beforehand. Adding to Russell's account, I have simply filled out the picture of Gregory's doctrine and its influence, noting the participatory nature of divinization and its programmatic significance in Gregory's work and highlighting the path of tradition running to Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus. Yet neither Russell nor I believe that Gregory develops his language for divinization from Greco-Roman notions of *apotheosis*,<sup>4</sup> as Gavriluk suggests. My claim that divinization plays only a minor role in Athanasius' spiritual and soteriological works (as opposed to his polemical works) likewise echoes a point already established by Russell.<sup>5</sup> That Athanasius teaches a kind of automatic divinization of Christ at the point of his

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: OUP, 2008), pp. 116–22 and *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 337, on the rare Christian uses of *apotheosis*, which do not include Gregory Nazianzen.

<sup>5</sup> Russell, *Deification*, p. 167, and Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 117, n. 5.

incarnation, rather than through Christ's passion and resurrection, has long been noted and should not be controversial;<sup>6</sup> these passages helped give rise to the later *aphthartodocetist* teaching of the sixth century. However, the great difference between Athanasius' polarized spirituality and the more integrated doctrine of the unitive theologians extends well beyond the idea of divinization or the concerns of Russell's study.

### Alexandria and Antioch

Most patristic scholars now agree that the division of vast swathes of patristic theology into opposing 'Alexandrian' and 'Antiochene' camps is no longer tenable. I believe my work may have shed new light on the situation. In brief, there does appear to be a coherent Antiochene school of thought as defined by the work of Diodore, carried forward by Nestorius (Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom being hybrid figures), and continued to a significant degree in the Chalcedonian definition and the strict Chalcedonianism of Leontius of Byzantium, who tells us that he was initially an Antiochene himself. The real cause for revision lies on the other side. What was formerly known as the Alexandrian school of theology and exegesis, defined pre-eminently by the unitive doctrine of Cyril of Alexandria, I have shown was not in fact Alexandrian in any historical sense, but should more accurately be called 'Gregorian' (of Nazianzus) or, in the context of the Arian debates, 'Eusebian' (of Caesarea), whose theology, we must recall, was *opposed* to the doctrine of Athanasius of Alexandria; and Cyril's theology is certainly not Origenist except in some rudiments of trinitarian doctrine that he took from the fourth-century fathers. What used to be called the 'Alexandrian' school of Cyril is in reality the long and broad tradition of unitive Christology.

### Athanasius' dualist Christology

I am happy to learn that my colleagues find compelling my reinterpretations of Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea. While some have judged my analysis of Athanasius's Christology to be on the mark as well,<sup>7</sup> Professors Daley and Gavrilyuk have both registered their reservations, to which I offer the following reply.

Scholars have long noted the puzzling character of Athanasius' Christology, the tumultuous nature of his episcopate, and his sometimes-belligerent character. As noted above, I have argued that Athanasius is a dualist theologian of the second type (B). In Athanasius' view, Christ is composed of distinct

<sup>6</sup> The idea runs throughout *De Incarnatione*: see §§8, 10, 20–1, 31, 43–4.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Mark DelCogliano (*BMCR* 2013.07.09) and Lionel Wickham (*JTS* 64/2 (2013), pp. 718–21).

divine and human elements, the Word of God plus a human body containing an emotional soul but not a human mind. Athanasius consistently practises two-subject exegesis, in which all human statements refer to Christ's 'flesh' or 'body', and all divine statements refer to the Word of God. Athanasius systematically denies that the biblical *communicatio idiomatum* has anything more than a verbal or indirect meaning, and he works very hard to avoid the suggestion that the Word was touched in any way by the taint of human suffering. Professor Daley is therefore correct that Athanasius is not 'radically dualist', meaning the first type (A), as Origen and the Antiochenes were, yet Athanasius is dualist according to the second type. The confusion among these terms as I presented them in the book is understandable given the received categories of interpretation, in which Apollinarius is not normally considered a dualist. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity to clarify my meaning here.

Yet, aside from the designation 'dualist', I gather that my argument that Athanasius' Christology is Apollinarian is itself troubling. If that is the case, then it may help to note that Athanasius has been interpreted in this way by a wide range of modern scholars. In the 1960s and 1970s Aloys Grillmeier concurred with the judgement of earlier German, French and English scholars that Athanasius' Christ does not possess a human mind or soul. The alarming nature of this judgement has elicited several attempts to rescue the Alexandrian bishop from heretical associations,<sup>8</sup> yet the situation cannot be so easily swept under the rug. As Frances Young recently concluded, 'The weight of the evidence supports those who argue that Athanasius did not think that Christ had a human soul; his was a Word-flesh Christology, and he was Apollinarian before Apollinarius.'<sup>9</sup> To this judgement we can add the observation of several recent scholars that Athanasius was not as central

<sup>8</sup> The most recent major study being Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 70–4. Anatolios' attempt to justify Athanasius' scheme by calling it a functional or epistemological approach that is different from the analytical concern of Grillmeier and others merely begs the question: both positions, and the full range of christological issues that arise from the biblical *communicatio idiomatum*, are equally functional, epistemological and analytical (i.e. dogmatic).

<sup>9</sup> Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background*, 2nd edn, with Andrew Teal (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), p. 63. One finds the same conclusion in Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1: *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden (London: Mowbrays, 1965), p. 312; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. edn (London: Harper Collins, 1978), 287–8; R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), pp. 447–8; and David Brakke, 'Athanasius', in Philip F. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1122–3.

to fourth-century orthodoxy as we have long been taught to assume.<sup>10</sup> The idiosyncratic nature of Athanasius' work is perhaps most visible when the stark contrast that he posits between God's divine being and creaturely nothingness is compared with the unitive theologians' insistence that there is no such ontological contrast between God and his creatures.

### Historical-theological method

Finally, I will address the questions of method that Gavrilyuk has raised. In this book I have attempted to bring more accurate historical-theological judgement to a field that is often riddled with tacit assumptions and a very long history of unquestioned categories and conclusions. Just as scholars now broadly agree that there was no grand Arian conspiracy running through the fourth century, as Marcellus and Athanasius taught us to believe, so too I am offering a similar set of revisions to our understanding of patristic christological tradition. The examples of Athanasius and Cyril that Gavrilyuk has offered will serve to illustrate the point.

There are several reasons why it makes more sense to compare Athanasius' image doctrine with that of Origen, Eusebius and Marcellus, rather than merely to attribute it to his reading of the New Testament alone. First, by the start of Athanasius' career Origen had long been the main source of image Christology in Alexandrian tradition and in other eastern Mediterranean churches, including the doctrine of Athanasius' immediate predecessor, Alexander. Second, both Alexander and Eusebius of Caesarea (and their associates) made Origen's image doctrine a key element in their own christological programmes, which then set the terms for Athanasius' polemical context. Third, Athanasius' onetime associate Marcellus held a very different view of Christ's character as God's image, namely that he is God's image only in the economy, but not eternally. Accordingly, the meaning of the biblical notion of Christ as image in Colossians 1:15 and elsewhere was a matter of debate in the very controversies in which Athanasius was embroiled. From everything that we know about Athanasius' actual context and his commitments as a theologian, it is therefore inconceivable that Athanasius was operating *sola scriptura* on such a basic christological point. The burden of sound historical theology is to bring out such connections.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Michel René Barnes, 'One Nature, One Power: Consensus Doctrine in Pro-Nicene Polemic', *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997), pp. 205–23 (220). See also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), which demonstrates that pro-Nicene theology arose from different and often disconnected quarters in the fourth century, rather than from a unified Athanasian front.



As for my argument that Cyril's Christology is informed primarily by Gregory Nazianzen, and that Cyril's use of Athanasius complicates the resulting product, I first presented my findings in a lengthy article in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* on the urging of two senior scholars of Cyril.<sup>11</sup> Prior to my analysis, contemporary scholars agreed that Athanasius and Gregory were far and away the two strongest influences on Cyril's work.<sup>12</sup> By making a detailed study of the question (to my knowledge, the only such study in modern scholarship), I discovered that the key points of Cyril's Christology – in terms of the structure of Christ's person, Cyril's choice of terms, the theological principles involved, Cyril's single-subject hermeneutical method and his approach to divine suffering – all rely on Gregory far more than they do on Athanasius, who differs considerably from Gregory on most of these points, despite the fact that Cyril had clearly read and used Athanasius' work before the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy.<sup>13</sup> To suppose that Cyril might have assembled his fairly advanced technical Christology from disparate sources that are masked by the larger patterns of Cyril's work simply ignores the evidence of the texts.

Finally, in briefer scope: my conclusion that Chalcedon was by and large an Antiochene victory decorated with Cyrilline phrases is again based on a close analysis of the definition within its actual theological context, and on the evidence of the council's acts, which are not normally considered at all in modern attempts to reappropriate the council's theology. (The exclusion of the Egyptian delegation from the council's doctrinal proceedings, for example, and the report that Nestorius was happy with the outcome, should tell us something.) I do not claim that Arius was an Origenist, which is the textbook caricature of the situation, but that his opponent, Bishop Alexander,

<sup>11</sup> 'Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory Nazianzen: Tradition and Complexity in Patristic Christology', *J ECS* 17/3 (2009), pp. 381–419.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. John A. McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> Gavriilyuk points as well to Mark DelCogliano's questioning of my argument for Gregory's influence on Cyril (BMCR 2013.07.09). As evidence against my conclusion DelCogliano observes that Cyril quotes Athanasius, *Ar.* 3.29 (Athanasius' statement of hermeneutical method) in his letter to the monks of Egypt at the beginning of the Nestorian controversy (*Ep.* 1.4). But this citation does not support DelCogliano's counter-argument. Cyril quotes this passage from Athanasius' third *Oration* not as a hermeneutical resource, as DelCogliano argues, but in support of the confession of the Theotokos; moreover, when Cyril goes on to make a case for hermeneutical procedure in the following sections of the letter, the biblical examples that he gives do not follow Athanasius' argument anywhere in the *Orations against the Arians*. Following the strict procedure that DelCogliano, Gavriilyuk and I agree is essential to sound historical theology, Cyril does indeed appear to have been influenced primarily by Gregory.

was. My interpretation of Arius as a particular sort of traditional Alexandrian theologian follows that of Rowan Williams and, more recently, Winrich Löhr. I argue not that Marcellus was unitive in his christology, but that he was supremely dualist. And the idea that the Nicene Creed of 325 functioned chiefly as a polemical device is, I believe, now the standard view.

I am aware that my conclusions will reinforce certain received orthodoxies and upset others. I hope that by remapping the stream of unitive patristic tradition on the basis of close historical-theological analysis I will have clarified both the nature and the location of christological orthodoxy in the patristic period, to the rudimentary extent that a book of this length can accomplish. There are indeed more figures and events to examine in light of the conclusions I have reached. It is a pleasure to respond to my colleagues' compliments and criticisms, and I look forward to the next stage of the conversation.

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