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The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition

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Book Reviews

Christopher A. Beeley

The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012

Pp. xii + 391. \$55.00.

Beeley has written a panoramic and opinionated study about early Christian controversies concerning the divine and human unity of the person of Christ. In Part One, Origen, “The Great Master,” sets up the terms and unresolved Christological dynamics that roil succeeding centuries. Part Two (“Fourth-Century Authorities”) has chapters on “Eusebius of Caesarea,” “Nicaea and Athanasius,” and the “Cappadocians and Constantinople.” Part Three (“The Construction of Orthodoxy”) treats “Augustine and the West,” “Cyril, Leo and Chalcedon (451),” and “Post-Chalcedonian Christology,” followed by an epilogue. But the bland chapter titles hardly convey the book’s ambitious goal “to draw a clearer map of patristic theological tradition” (xi).

This book contains loads of information, and examines many important texts in relation to thorny christological questions. It ranges widely and summarizes whole swaths of ancient material in close, detailed readings. I learned much in an encyclopedic sort of way. However, despite its thematic promise and wealth of data, *The Unity of Christ* was filling but ultimately unsatisfying. The author chose to read Christian theology’s formation according to Christ’s compositional unity in order to be able “to make detailed comparisons” and “to make sense of an otherwise bewildering complexity of material” (x). But the book strategizes from an abstraction: unity good, dualism bad. As John Behr has perceptively argued, abstraction disconnects theology from its proper work of unfolding concretely the drama of salvation; it blocks seekers from learning to think as the apostles learned to think; and it makes explanation stand for the thing being explained. As a result theology misplaces its pedagogic key and makes itself into “an odd mixture of metaphysics and mythology” (*The Nicene Faith* 1:1–17, here 16). Absolutizing the unity of Christ’s person as a critical principle, the book stages a competition of titans whose winners and losers emerge as either sheep (Eusebius, Gregory Nazianzen, Augustine, Cyril) or goats (Gregory of Nyssa, Diodore, and especially Athanasius), while the data dutifully line up behind them. This volume stands in an old line of scholastic study that reads doctrinal history unhistorically. Theology arises less from flesh-and-blood people enmeshed in time and culture, and more from a gladiatorial clash of metaphysical ideations.

The chapters on Eusebius and Athanasius show the book's heart and vent its heat. Beeley thinks Eusebius is underappreciated. This "most influential leader of the early fourth century" (49), "possibly the greatest biblical scholar of his generation" (78) and "a major Christological teacher" (95), is "almost universally overlooked" (55). Perhaps Eusebius does need another look. But in a blistering attack, Beeley portrays Athanasius as a faux father who covered his dualistic Christology with a fig leaf of unitive language (168–70). His "hysterical" (138) and "vitriolic" rhetoric, "a sign of his lack of a classical education," makes him "extremely tedious to read" (146). But bombast aside, *theologically* I was not convinced that those using "non-unitive" language were not merely trying to protect the integrity of Christ by using an alternative language paradigm.

The book's vast informational reach creates a great spreading tree that is easy to admire from a distance, but up close one worries about its depth of root. To take two examples, the *Logos-sarx* perspective that grounds the book's judgment on Athanasius was strongly contested in detail some time ago by Khaled Anatolios, but the Athanasius chapter reduces his work to two vacuous references. Meanwhile, the sections on Ambrose and Augustine contain much good information yet seem stunted by the unity thesis. Ambrose fits the unitive paradigm—except for the unassimilated "dualistic strains" that came from reading Athanasius. So despite "a certain uneasiness with a fully unitive Christology . . . Ambrose advances a strong, if not entirely consistent, unitive Christology" (233–35). That sounds like doublespeak. As for Augustine, his mature Christology ("as unitive as one could imagine," 240) supposedly was present "from the beginning of priestly ministry" (236). But this tidy judgment seems uninformed that well into his priesthood, Augustine's developing Christology used language that would not have passed the unitive test. Augustine finally *achieved* this by settling into a coherent theology of the cross that silenced his old, dualistic, Manichean demons. The book gives no hint of this struggle. Thus, it rather leaves the nagging impression that it *needed* Ambrose to hand on a consistently unitive Christology to Augustine, and so fashioned the narrative to fit that.

As an information storehouse, *The Unity of Christ* enriches readers with a large cache of material; but as a book it may be more used than read.

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