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In Defense of Conciliar Christology

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Abstract

Pawl, Timothy. *In Defense of Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay (Oxford Studies In Analytic Theology)*. Oxford University Press. 2016. ISBN-13: 978-0198765929. 288 pages. \$120.00.

Keywords

Councils, Creeds, Christology, Philosophical Theology, Analytic Theology

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Introduction

Within the well-researched *In Defense of Conciliar Christology*, Timothy Pawl deploys the full range of his analytical training in order to demonstrate that the seemingly contradictory propositions applied to Jesus Christ in the first seven ecumenical councils of the church (“Conciliar Christology” from this point forth) are, at the very least, internally and logically consistent. Much of Pawl’s argument focuses on the “Fundamental Problem” of Conciliar Christology, viz. the co-existence of inconsistent predicates in the same subject. How can it be aptly said that Jesus of Nazareth is both passible and impassible, mutable and immutable, temporal and eternal? Answers to these questions and others of like kind dominate Pawl’s dialectic. Pawl is adamant that his goal is not to establish the truth value of these propositions objectively, but rather to demonstrate that there is no currently known objection that proves them to be logically inconsistent given a properly worded presentation. The work proves to be highly theoretical and may hover over the minds of those not trained in analytical theology/philosophy, but for the reader who perseveres through the abstract, they will walk away with helpful food for thought regarding perhaps the most contested topic in the history of monotheistic religious thought.

Summary

Pawl uses the first part of the book to examine the claims of Conciliar Christology and define key terms necessary for the discussion moving forward (i.e. hypostasis, concrete nature, abstract nature). In doing so, he introduces the reader to the classic doctrines associated with speaking of the hypostatic union such as the communication of idioms and ineffability. While both have historically been seen as properly effective ways of speaking of the synthesis of natures in the one man Jesus, Pawl thinks there are better ways forward. He postulates that there are six necessary conditions to be met to satisfy a viable metaphysical model of the incarnation according to the teachings of Conciliar Christology,¹ and outlines his hylomorphic metaphysical theory in minimalistic fashion before closing this section of the book with an eye toward “the most difficult philosophical objection to the doctrine” (p. 72).

Pawl spends the second part of his work grappling with the “Fundamental Problem” of Conciliar Christology, which he explains as perceivably violating the law of noncontradiction by predicating inconsistent candidate pairs to the one

¹ These necessary conditions are: the proper number of things must be present in Christ, Christ’s human nature must be the same as our concrete nature, it must have a soul, it must be the same type of soul as ours, the hypostatic union must remain ineffable, and the hypostatic union must leave the proper characters of both natures unaltered.

person of Jesus (p. 77). In Chapter 4, Pawl paints the Fundamental Problem as a formidable opponent by citing five popular yet ultimately unsatisfying responses to it before revealing that he believes the answer lies somewhere in rejecting the premise of Incompatible Predictions (p. 83). Pawl fleshes out this idea in Chapter 5 utilizing a discernibly apophatic approach (p. 116). Chapter 6 sees Pawl deny subject and predicate modification via “qua” clauses (a popular method for reconciling seemingly contradictory candidate pairs in Christ) as a suitable answer to the problem, citing both substance and ad hoc concerns (p. 132). This main section of the book then closes with the most stimulating chapter yet as Pawl attempts to deny the claims of incompatibility in Conciliar Christology through the use of whimsical analogies and revised truth conditions that comprise the crux of Pawl’s argument (pp. 155-59). Pawl concludes the chapter and section with eight possible objections to his theory of predication and provides responses defending his position and uniting it to classical theism in step with Conciliar Christology.

In the last section of the work, Pawl navigates other objections to Conciliar Christology and conceives of a unique metaphysical theory in order to reconcile how something that is “X” (let “X” stand for atemporal, immutable, and/or impassible, viz. Christ) could have become incarnate (p. 179). Pawl begins by providing strong evidence from the patristic witness that a hard stance on the impassibility of Jesus was near universally affirmed by the orthodox and heretic, Eastern and Western church alike (p. 185). In this vein, Pawl answers the critic who cries “Contradiction!” at the Conciliar “X” incarnation claims by asking if it is reasonable to assume that the likes of Athanasius, Cyril, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and their myriads of followers all faltered from glaring lapses in basic logical inquiry (p. 203). The answer obviously being no, Pawl theorizes that modern critics are simply reasoning in concepts not employed by the earliest thinkers resulting in a thousand year wide divide. Pawl attempts to bridge that gap with (you guessed it) another metaphysic in a now accustomed Thomistic fashion. Pawl speaks of the change (or lack thereof) required of the *relata* in instances of mixed relations and claims that in the incarnation (an obvious case of mixed relations), the divine nature can (and does) remain unaffected while the human nature undergoes real change by means of the hypostatic union and its function (p. 206). More analogies are used to familiarize the matter. This section then closes with a short response to the “Number Troubles” (viz. two natures, two minds, two wills, one person) of Conciliar Christology before a proper concluding section that identifies areas of further study to be done.²

² Including but not limited to: How was Christ’s human will free? What of Christ’s impeccability and genuine temptation experience? What was the relation of the parts in Christ after death in the descension to Hell?

Critique

Before delving into a critique, let it be noted that I did find Pawl's work both exemplary and educational. However, there were quite a few elements of Pawl's dialectic that left much to be desired. First, though the research behind the project is worthy of merit, the grand remedy that Pawl introduces to rescue Conciliar Christology from imploding into self-contradiction ends up feeling more palliative than this reader desired. To be sure, Pawl is forthright that the purpose of the work is not to demonstrate Conciliar Christology to be true, but merely to show it not to be logically inconsistent. And that's perfectly fine. However, the solution of revised truth conditions makes it seem as if the answer lies more in word games than in historical analysis. Let us take Pawl's cheerleader analogy as an example of this. When speaking of two groups who are analyzing a certain cheerleader and their respective beliefs about propositions that apply to that cheerleader (Pawl uses "arm bent" and "arm unbent" here as the propositions), Pawl states,

It might not come to pass that the two groups of people would talk about their different understandings, or that they'd even be inclined to. In such a case, each truth condition for "arm-unbent" would have its own community employing it, and each community's understanding would be adequate for their purposes (p. 157).

This rings in the same tune as Wittgensteinian 'language-games,' which would make sense given Pawl's analytical background. While there is nothing wrong with highlighting this theory of language, using it as the solution to the "Fundamental Problem" creates an irrefutable argument in which those in the Conciliar camp can claim seemingly contradictory predications of Christ because they are sufficient for their own purposes.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear why Pawl's revised truth conditions are needed in the first place. He declines the "qua" proposition method so commonly used in this discussion on the basis that "it doesn't insulate against complementary predications being true of Christ. If the "qua" merely tells us in virtue of what it is that the thing is a certain way, then the thing's being that certain way follows" (p. 122). In the absence of a metaphysic backing the "qua" propositions, Pawl claims that this leaves the question of the metaphysical composition of Christ *simpliciter* unanswered. However, if we presuppose the hypostatic union and read the "qua" clauses as specifying the respect in which a proposition is apt of Christ (which is the way it is often read), I do not see how the statement "Christ is passible *qua* his human nature" is any different in essence than Pawl's "Christ is passible just in case *s* has a concrete nature that it is

possible for some other thing to causally affect” (190). Sure, Pawl’s model introduces a metaphysic that allows for the possible existence of other two-natured things effectively addressing the ad-hoc concerns raised against “qua” propositions. However, there is nothing that precludes the postulation of an equally viable metaphysic to support “qua” propositions, especially considering that the possibility of a two-natured thing existing is already presupposed by the Christian.

The last point of critique pertains to Pawl’s discussion of change in the relata by nature of the hypostatic union. This instance of “Mixed Relations” (viz. the incarnation), according to Pawl, “requires no change in the divine nature, but rather the human nature and the hypostatic union both begin to exist, and, given the nature of the hypostatic union and what it does, the Word is incarnate” (p. 206). He likens it to the relationship between a child and its new born sibling. Not only does the analogy drastically oversimplify the real state of affairs, but it also seems to completely ignore the fact that something has indeed changed in the nature of the older sibling: it is now in a relationship that it was not in before. To say as Pawl does that the divine nature undergoes no change in the incarnation similarly ignores the fact that the divine nature had never been hypostatically united to a human nature prior to the incarnation. How would Pawl define that if not a change? What is more, it is seemingly in the next breathe that Pawl argues in defense of dyothelitism, “I deny that the Logos, that divine personal suppositum, is not conscious of being tempted as his own experience. Would the dyothelite also have to claim that the Logos, the person, was unaware of being crucified, of preaching, of weeping, and so on as his own experiences? They *are* his (the person’s) own experiences” (p. 221). I must here ask if the atemporal Logos was always aware of being crucified, preaching, weeping, and so on as his own experiences, or if He only gained this intimate knowledge after experiencing these temporally bound events in the incarnation? If the latter, my question of how Pawl sees the divine nature as unaffected in the incarnation remains.

Despite these concerns, Pawl’s work stands out as a stellar research project in the long line of Catholic inquiry into conciliar teachings. The most impressive part of the work is how Pawl is able to construct and defend seemingly new theories about the metaphysics entailed in the incarnation while remaining safely within the bounds of orthodoxy; a feat that the very existence of the ecumenical councils shows us is not easy to achieve. This work ought to be a trusted research companion to any desiring to join in the traditional teachings of the church on the person of Jesus.