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REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Light of Tabor: Toward a Monistic Christology

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David Bentley Hart's new foray into Christology repeats, only with minor alterations, the content of his Stanton Lectures, delivered at the University of Cambridge (2024), and which he claims, with some reserve, as his last book of 'continuous theological reflection' (xii). The book aims to unfurl, in the arena of Christology, a recurring motif of his recent work: to wit, that from the vantage of final causality, 'the act of being truly human and the act of being truly God are one and same act', and that, in the end, they are 'only modally distinguished from one another' (86). Among recent works, it is most companionate with his metaphysical essay *You are Gods*, where he lays out his broadly monistic approach to nature and supernature, even as it also underlies *Tradition and Apocalypse* and *All Things are Full of Gods*.

The book title itself, *The Light of Tabor*, is a figuration of metaphysical 'transparency', namely, that Christ as the manifestation of divine *pleroma* is 'the perfect coincidence' and 'indistinction' of God and human nature (87), in whom is contained 'a revelation of the whole structure of reality' (77). The subtitle, moreover, portends that any coherent metaphysics must resolve in 'a primordial ground or structure of logical and ontological nonre-pugnancy' (p. 78), that is, if it aims for judgements generalisable to reality as a whole.

Hart situates his account within the two-nature Christology of Chalcedon. He is sensitive to the imprecision and pliancy of doctrinal language, however, and the way this quality led to an oscillation within theological reflection on the natures of Christ, a tension that runs up to the present day. This oscillation is framed by a restive circulation between myth and metaphysics in the Christian tradition, in which there is an 'effort to shift the *hermeneutical* balance from myth to metaphysics without losing the *narrative* balance between myth and history'. Here, there is an attempt to sustain, on the one side, 'the loftiness of

the metaphysics against the degrading gravity of the myth', and on the other, 'an effort to preserve the radiant particularity of the myth against the corrosive universality of the metaphysics' (21–22).

In one of the most insightful parts of the book, Hart frames this oscillation between re-and-demythologizing trends as traceable to a metaphysical novelty in the Nicæan compact. On the one side, according to the cosmological picture of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean, God and creatures existed within a graded order of reality that was, more or less, unified. The High God, as well as humans, animals and a cascading range of intermediary, aeonian beings, were all included in 'the *one* order of nature', in which *ho theos* 'enjoyed a hazily liminal supremacy, at once containing the totality within himself yet himself falling within its immanent compass' (6). He unpacks this insight with examples from the New Testament, and especially Pauline cosmology (12–17; 21–28; 'Appendix I', 91–96; 'Appendix III', 107–119). On the other hand, particularly in the wake of Origen (28–32) and Nicæa (9–11), there was a growing sense that the 'doctrinal narrative irresistibly demanded a new speculative grammar' (7), since 'the post-Nicene synthesis required ever clearer and stricter delineations between the divine and created' (9).

Elsewhere in his essay, 'The Hidden and the Manifest: Metaphysics after Nicæa' (*The Hidden and the Manifest* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017], 137–164), Hart describes this doctrinal achievement, and its various acceptations, as offering a 'new metaphysics' in which 'the ontic' and 'the ontological' were distinguished—probably for the first time. It is this infinitely qualitative distinction, this 'novel and rigorous metaphysics of transcendence' that made conceivable the idea of 'the infinite God who is ... present in the finite by an absolute immediacy of act', an 'ever more inward act within each finite act' (8). Or

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to arabesque on this theme: What is truly radical in some theology after Origen and Athanasius, among others, is that it is the transcendent simplicity of the divine which grounds an unrestricted communication of the divine from the Father to the Son through the Spirit. It is a taxis foundational for the patristic account of incarnation as expressing, in a fitting way, the eternal act of communication in the life of the Trinity. It is this communicability that is denied by Arius, who in many ways cut a rather conservative figure. In Hart's reading, however, it is this post-Nicene metaphysics which ultimately created the dialectic of myth and metaphysics referred to above and which would have consequences for Christology: If divine nature is infinitely distinct from created nature, then how are they reconciled in the one hypostasis of Christ? It is this problem which will bedevil Christological reflection, up until the present day.

In the following chapters, Hart sets up something of a triangulation. In a series of case studies, Hart compares two recent works in Christology, namely, of Rowan Williams and Jordan Daniel Wood (34–55). Both accounts are indebted to a patristic Christology and are attempting—in different ways—to address the question of the two natures. These examples are then compared to Sergii Bulgakov (58–73), who addresses these problems more satisfactorily—so Hart contends. Broadly speaking, the issue he senses in both accounts is that they set up a too 'symmetrical' relation between the divine and human natures. Williams seems to allow the spectre of a pure human nature that could achieve its end without deification, while Wood dialectically precludes any 'connatural' relating of the natures (54–55).

Of the two cases, Hart appears more sympathetic to Williams's approach. But he worries, despite William's lucid treatment of the asymmetry of natures, that he ends up balancing things too much, so that there is a genuine question of the creature's 'real relation' to the creator (39). Hart is less than satisfied with his reliance on Austin Farrer's account of the infinite and finite (39; 41–42) as well as his accord with John Calvin's claim that human nature could have, in theory, achieved its end without the incarnation (42–44). It is this point which Hart rejects, since for him to be a finite spirit is to infinitely intend a 'supernatural' consummation in the divine. Regarding Wood's 'Neo-Chalcedonian' option, Hart takes issue with his Maximian-inspired claim that the natures are 'intrinsically irreconcilable' and that they 'share nothing essential or natural whatsoever' (45). Hart questions the soundness of this reading of Maximus, and particularly the weight given to a perichoresis of the natures, which Wood reads somewhat dialectically (49–50). In Wood's account, Christ's *hypostasis* is 'a purely *dynamic* reality' indifferent to the respective natures, leading to a 'pronounced preference for dialectic over analogy' (45). This preference in turn leads to an inadequate treatment of 'ontological analogy or participation', so that creation is conceived as existing 'externally' to the deity (46). Hart insists both on an 'infinite incommensurability between divine and human nature' and their connatural relating through analogy and participation. It implies a maintenance of an 'analogous commonality', even as it denies a 'univocal' one (48, 50). For Hart, the personhood of Christ, in this neo-Chalcedonian frame, is an 'ontological portmanteau' (53), a unity that is 'wholly *unnatural*' (52). By contrast, for Hart, the principles of hypostasis and nature are 'the two indissoluble sides of a single

metaphysical principle', as both 'ontic actualization' and 'ontological axiom or structure' (53).

Hart's treatment of Bulgakov is an explicit counterpoint to these approaches. Unfurling the density of Bulgakov's metaphysics is beyond the space here allotted, but in Hart's reading, it goes roughly as follows: For Bulgakov, the structure of reality involves a necessary correlation of subject and predicate through an existential copula. Here, the hidden *in-itself* becomes manifest in the *for-itself* through a mediating *in-and-for itself* (60–62). The trinitarian analogy of this structure is unfolded by Hart, insofar as the Father constitutes the hidden ground or sourcing of divine life, the Son its manifestation and the Spirit the indissoluble relation of hiddenness and manifestation (62–70). It appears in Christ through the incarnation, in whom the 'hypostasible' personhood of the Godhead is manifest, thus revealing 'a primordial indistinction' of natures (70). Divine personhood is a transcendental reality, in which the natures are always already unified (79–81).

Thus, human nature is nothing other than an ontic concretion of the divinely infinite, so that human nature in Christ is simply a finite manifestation of the unsearchable profundity of its divine source (81–82). This argument naturally relates to Bulgakov's sophiology whereby all personhood, created or uncreated, already partakes of 'the same divine-human hypostasibility', so that in 'the one nature of Christ', there is revealed 'the wholly *natural* expression of both divinity and humanity' (71). All of this lends itself to the monistic Christology which Hart is advocating for. There is simply nothing in creation which is 'exterior to the divine' (79), since that is what the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* teaches. Any modal distinction between divine and human natures belongs within 'a more original unity' (80). Both nature and supernature are nothing more than 'two perfectly simple participations in the simplicity of the divine' (81). Every created person is an expression of the hypostasibility of the divine Person, the trinitarian 'I am', in which every spirit reflects both an infinite longing and infinite rest—within its analogical interval. Christ thus incarnates that 'perfect realization of the human as the divine "I am" that is every spirit's origin and end—the perfect adherence of everything human to its own inmost and essential identity' (90).

There is much to reflect on, as usual, in Hart's Christological essay. It expresses, once again, something of a late efflorescence of that retrieval of 'the supernatural', begun in the 20th century, and demonstrating again the richness and radicality of its insights. There are things to quibble with here. For one thing, I am sure that 'Neo-Chalcedonians' will have their rejoinders. But regarding Rowan Williams, I would say that whatever the imbalances of his Christology, his metaphysical picture, as seen in *The Edge of Words* and elsewhere, is one of a non-dual relationality, of an identity-in-difference that finds its fontal source in the circulation of the trinitarian persons. Hart certainly knows that: What is communicated in the Trinity is not a preestablished identity brought into contact with difference, but that—from the paternal source—there is always already a communication of the Father's desire for the Son. This communication, however, is not simply a mirroring process, but one in which the Father *desires the desire of the other*, so that what is communicated is the person-in-relation, not a divine 'individual' that exists prior

to relation. He thus argues there is no essence that stands ‘behind’ the relationality of the persons. It is a view repeated in several essays across his career—including his writings on Bulgakov. The communication of Divine Sophia, as that unity-in-difference that grounds creation, is thus pretty close to what Williams is doing. Moreover, his acceptance of the Cusan principle of *non aliud* strengthens the contention that he does not ultimately consider divine and human natures as symmetrically ‘opposed’. Nonetheless, one can query if he is sufficiently consistent on this point.

Overall, I believe there is a confirmation in Hart’s book that a rigorous application of Christian orthodoxy can lead to genuinely surprising and daring terrains of thought—as Bulgakov amply demonstrates. Here, dogma is not a parsimonious restriction on speculation, but a grammar for ordering an assemblage of tensive concepts—a charged ambience which, every so often, explodes with radical insight.

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