STR 11.2 (Fall 2020): 63–69

Interview with Daniel L. Hill of Dallas Theological Seminary

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How can believers embody the way of Christ in our contemporary context without making Jesus captive to their cultural norms?

One of the primary problems that runs Christian Christological reflection adrift is our tendency toward projection. Projection, according to Karen Kilby, is the three-step process whereby we first take a concept to explore an aspect of Christian mystery. Next, we fill out the contours of this concept using notions borrowed from our own experiences. Finally, we then present this concept to the wider world as a resource from Christian theology.[1] While Kilby's focus is primarily on Trinitarian doctrine and the concept of perichoresis, the same error emerges in our Christological reflection. In so doing, we fail to allow God to ground and determine our reflection of him, substituting idols that cohere with our preconceptions in the place where he once stood. In other words, our conceptions of Christ begin to reflect our local notions of humanity, manhood, liberation, politics, and the like. The danger here is that we risk turning Christ into a mere cipher for our own conceptions of deity and humanity. And this projection is particularly pressing as we end up evaluating the humanity of others in accordance with our preferences.[2]

Some might worry that this fear of idolatry might stagnate our Christological thinking in a quagmire of contextual relativity or lead us to seek out Kant's "view from nowhere," disregarding context altogether. However, these two concerns reflect an overreaction. Instead, we would do

[1] Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81.956 (2000): 442.

[2] For a discussion of how this Christological projection took place in the nineteenth century, see Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 76–101. It is also worth noting that white Americans were not the only ones guilty of a projectionist Christology. Portrayals of Christ as a social liberator or political revolutionary seem to follow in similar footsteps, turning Jesus into a cipher for our own ideals.

well to recognize that insofar as God has come near to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in our communion in the Spirit, he ensures that we can know him. We can therefore adopt a critical realism wherein we recognize that God has indeed made himself known to us, granting us a degree of theological confidence, while also recognizing that our conceptions of him remain limited. God accommodates his self-disclosure to the human creature in an act of supreme benevolence, even as he remains ever above and beyond these very categories.

Faithfully embodying the way of Christ demands at least three things. First, we must be aware of our tendency toward projection. This does not mean that we will hopelessly spiral into relativity, but we must recognize, as Calvin stated, that within each of us is a factory for idolatry.[3] While knowledge of God is possible and Christian theological exploration is far from hapless, we still must recognize that in the present era "we see through a glass dimly" (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). Second, we must recognize that proper reflection on the person and work of Christ requires that we traverse the tension between continuity and discontinuity. While Jesus is like us in all respects, sin excepted, there are significant ways in which his phenomenological experience differs from that of our own, both in virtue of his particularity and in virtue of his unique mission. Third, we must insist that Christ himself grounds our understanding of both true deity and true humanity.[4] As Cortez notes, "it remains true that the incarnation involves the Son becoming like us, but in doing so he is revealing the fact that humanity had been created in his image from the beginning."[5] If Jesus is indeed the image of the invisible God (Col 1:16) and we have been fashioned in his image, he must remain epistemologically and ontologically primal in our Christological reflection and in our anthropological investigations.[6] Our inquiry into what it means to be human must begin with and then consistently return to the person of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, if we are to allow Christology to shape our lives, we must think about Christ with "the communion of the saints." Since, as Vanhoozer has noted, theology itself attempts "to translate the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ" in sundry contexts, there

[3] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11.8.

[4] Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 47.

[5] Marc Cortez, "Nature, Grace, and the Christological Ground of Humanity," in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity*, ed. Fred Sanders and Oliver D. Crisp, Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 34.

[6] Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 69.

is both a universal and particular aspect of Christological reflection.[7] On the one hand, it is the one living God who has made himself known in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ for us and for our salvation and who, together with the Son, sends forth the Spirit to gather a people of his own possession. Here, the saints are united around the same theological judgments regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. Yet, at the same time, reflection on the Incarnate Son is necessarily particular as we gather together to marvel at this mystery. Treier avers, while the Christian canon fosters certain normative theological judgments, these judgments "may foster additional renderings and even additional judgments evoked by the questions of other times and places."[8] Our individual contexts may give rise to different questions and points of emphasis that must be brought into conversation with the rest of the Christian tradition. As Victor Ezigbo observes regarding African Christology, "Christology should demonstrate simultaneously its Christian identity and its relevance to the Christological questions of African Christians."[9] And as we reflect on the revelation of God in Christ together with all the saints, the possibility exists that our communal understanding of the person and work of Christ

[7] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Christology in the West: Conversations in Europe and North America," in *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, Majority World Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 12.

[8] Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 97. It may be helpful here to differentiate between concepts and judgments. As David Yeago notes, "We cannot concretely perform an act of judgement without employing some particular, contingent verbal and conceptual resources; judgement-making is an operation performed with words and concepts. At the same time, however, the same judgement can be rendered in a variety of conceptual terms, all of which may be informative about a particular judgement's force and implications" (David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3:2 [1994]: 158; see also Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition*, Current Issues in Theology [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 48–50). Hector observes that the same theological judgments can be rendered in multiple conceptual frameworks, but these concepts still need to be traceable back to the incarnation of Christ (*Theology without Metaphysics*, 48). Additionally, Treier holds forth the possibility that traditional judgments can be extended and additional judgments may be developed as the Christian tradition engages new contexts (*Virtue and the Voice of God*, 97).

[9] Victor I. Ezigbo, "Jesus as God's Communicative and Hermeneutical Act: African Christians on the Person and Significance of Jesus Christ," in *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, Majority World Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 37.

might be enhanced.

How is the Christian's response to Christ in praise, at least in part, a reflection of their context?

It is perhaps surprising to no one that Christians direct their praise to the God who has loved them and saved them. The *Phos Hilaron* exclaims "you are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of life, and to be glorified through all the worlds."[10] But what shape does the praise of the giver of life take throughout "all the worlds"? If Christian praise is a response to the revelation of God in Christ, is it uniform or pluriform? And if it is the latter, what tethers Christian worship together? It is my estimation that while Christian praise is rooted in the singular act of divine self-disclosure in the person and work of Jesus Christ, insofar as Christians respond to this revelation at different times and in different spaces, it is also necessarily contextual.

On the one hand, we must recognize that there is a universal aspect to Christian praise, one that grounds and unites it around the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul writes, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people" (Titus 2:11). It is this singular event of the appearance of God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ that Christians acknowledge, indicate, confess, and adore.[11] There is, after all, one cornerstone upon which the worshipping community is constructed, one Spirit who inspires their praise, one Savior who makes such worship acceptable to God, and one God and Father "who is over all in all and through all" (Eph 4:6). As Chan notes, worship "is the people's *common* response to [God's word], their acceptance of the Word, church constitutes them as the covenant people."[12] Christian praise and worship then is both communal and universal. It is the covenant community's response to God, a response that is grounded in a divine act of self-disclosure and carried up by the Son and the Spirit to the Father.[13]

[10] The *Phos Hilaron* is one of the oldest recorded Christian hymns, written in Koine Greek.

[11] John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 29.

[12] Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 41.

[13] Nicholas Wolterstorff gives a helpful definition of what is intended by the term "worship." He defines worship as "a particular mode of Godward acknowledgement of God's unsurpassable greatness. Specifically, it is that mode of such acknowledgement whose attitudinal stance toward God is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration" (*The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*

However, while there is a universal ground upon which Christian praise is centered, one that transcends space, time, and context, there is also a *particular* aspect to Christian worship. Not only does God bring salvation to all people, but he also actualizes this redemption *in spacetime*.[14] Worship is particular in that it reflects on God's acts of deliverance as he demonstrates his lovingkindness to his people. Examples in Scripture abound. Whether it is in the song of Miriam as she exalts in God's triumph at the Red Sea or the apostles' praise after their release from prison, we respond to God from particular points in time and express gratitude for the ways in which he chooses to reveal his unending faithfulness. Christian worship, then, is in part a reflection on our context and how the God of the heavens has stooped low to meet with us. As Wainwright observes, this means that praise will vary in both content—including confession of sin, prayer for forgiveness, invocation for divine help, etc.—and form.[15] Christians in the West may be less inclined to offer praise to God for his triumph over the demonic, while Christians in the Global South may be more inclined to rejoice in the fact that the powers of darkness have indeed been defeated at the cross of Christ. Similarly, African American spirituals reflect an acute awareness of the enslaved's need for the God of Daniel to deliver them as well. To be sure, God is worthy of worship and praise as the good God who is our creator and redeemer. However, it is good and fitting for the saints to also focus on the particular ways that God's goodness has been made known to them.

[Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015], 26). However, as James B. Torrance has noted, we must be careful to remember that all Christian worship is carried to the Father by the Son and Spirit. Christian worship is "the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father" (*Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996], 20). In other words, our understanding of Christian worship cannot be disassociated with the twofold mission of the Father and the Son.

[14] As Webster notes, spacetime itself is significant because it is the "arena" in which God communicates and manifests his saving presence to his people. See John Webster, "The Immensity and Ubiquity of God," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, 2nd ed., T&T Clark Cornerstones (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 87–108.

[15] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 199.

Jesus calls his followers to love God and love our others (Matt 22:37–39). What is a historical example of Christ's words being neglected and how might the formative nature of Christology have been accomplished in that situation?

Unfortunately, the history of the Christian church is replete with instances in which Christians have failed to love, honor, and worship those fashioned after the image of God in Christ.[16] As Laura Winner recounts, Christians have not only failed to exhibit godly love, they have often turned Christian practices such as prayer or the Lord's Supper into tools of abuse.[17] If it is indeed the case that the humanity of Christ is archetypal for all human creatures, then violence against other image bearers is not merely an ethical failing. It is also a repudiation of the one in whose image we have been fashioned. To put the matter bluntly, in failing to love those created according to the image of God, we have in effect declared our abhorrence for the archetype after whom they are fashioned.

The examples are almost too numerous to count. Between 1882 and 1903, over 2,000 African Americans were lynched in the United States. James Cone recalls how lynching was a spectator sport for many Americans, both Christian and non-Christian, as they would gather to watch the murder of black men and women, purchasing pieces of the victims mutilated flesh or postcards to commemorate the event.[18] Wendell Berry notes that slavery itself was an institution predicated upon violence: "If there was any kindness in slavery it was dependent on the docility of the slaves; any slave who was *unwilling* to be a slave broke through the myth of paternalism and benevolence, and brought down on himself the violence inherent in the system."[19] The raping of black flesh on plantations was so

[16] The wording here is intentional. As Kilner notes, the Scriptures do not seem to indicate that human creatures "possess" the image or "are" the image of God, but rather are created "in" and "according to" God's image. See John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 88–105.

[17] Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 19–94.

[18] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 9. For a larger discussion of the history of lynching and its contemporary affects, see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002).

[19] Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 6.

prevalent, that it was used as an apologetic against the institution of slavery.[20] And again, it is worth noting that slavery, and by extension violent practices intrinsic to the institution of slavery, was an institution practiced and defended by Christian and non-Christian alike.[21]

The Christian church's participation in acts of racial and ethnic violence reflects a failure to live in accordance with the logics of Christology. So what would faithful performance have entailed in these situations? Thankfully, we do not have to look far to find out. As David Ruggles observes, Christians could have ceased abrogating the seventh commandment and recognized slavery as an environment that inculcated human vice.[22] Some Christians participated in either apologetic critiques of slavery while others served as stops along the Underground Railroad, risking their lives and social standing in order to help liberate those in bondage. Recognizing that their allegiance is always to Christ and not to Caesar, another Christological claim, many Christians were unwilling to accept the institution of slavery and fought to bring it to an end.

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[20] Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 66–67.

[21] On the debate surrounding slavery in American Christianity, see Noll, *Civil War*. For discussions on Christian involvement in slavery, see Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 98–148; Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South: A History*, reprint ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 51–92; Peter Y. Choi, *George Whitefield: Evangelist for God And Empire*, *The Historian*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 127–68.

[22] David Ruggles, *The Abrogation of the Seventh Commandment by the American Churches (1835)*, in *Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 478–93.