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The epistemic primacy of belief in the Trinity

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An investigation of its practices has suggested that the church can endure as a coherent community only if it continually tests other beliefs for truth or falsity by seeing whether they are consistent with its trinitarian identification of God. Should this distinctive epistemic procedure be incoherent or otherwise unreasonable, then what follows is presumably not the continuing embrace of irrational practices, but their abandonment, and so a basic change in communal identity. We therefore need to determine whether the church has the epistemic right to regard its own most central beliefs as the primary criteria of truth, and if so, what confers this right. This requires a closer look at the contents of the church's trinitarian nexus of belief.

Jesus' universal primacy

Jesus undertakes his journey from Bethlehem to Golgotha, so the church believes, for the life of the world (cf. Jn. 6:51). The gift of life which Jesus undertakes to give the world is not, it seems, an event or state of affairs which comes to pass apart from or in addition to his acceptance and enactment of the mission from the Father which leads to the cross. Rather the world's deliverance from death, its redemption and reconciliation to God, coincide with the particular and unrepeatably sequence of actions and events by which the church identifies Jesus. Jesus' death does not simply symbolize or promise the world's deliverance, but actually puts death to death; Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and his gift of the Spirit do not simply symbolize or promise new life from the dead, they bring it about and impart it.¹ This means that what happens on the way

1. The language here is in part that of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, but the thought is not a uniquely Eastern one. Thus Augustine: "The immortal one took on mortality in order that

from Bethlehem to Golgotha and the Emmaus road has universal scope. If Jesus' action and passion are genuinely for the life of *the world*, then their power and significance extends to all creation. And the difference Jesus makes to the rest of reality is not superficial or transitory, but utterly basic; it is the difference between death and life, between non-being and being, for every particular thing.

It thus seems that a garden-variety belief in redemption through Jesus entails belief in Jesus' unrestricted primacy with respect to all created reality. If in virtue of his life, death, and resurrection Jesus is "for the life of the world," he must have what the New Testament calls "primacy in everything" (Col. 1:18). *That* creatures are and *what* they are must depend on Jesus himself – and so on what comes to pass between Bethlehem and the Emmaus road – if he is to be their redeemer. Only one upon whom creatures depend for their existence, qualities, and relations can give them forgiveness and new life – can make them be what they were not and not be what they were. And all creatures must be dependent upon Jesus if any creature is to be redeemed by him. Any creature outside the scope of this dependence might be capable not only of resisting Jesus' bestowal of life in his own case, but of counteracting it in others. Jesus can be the redeemer of the world, it seems, only if he is the one in whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17), and through whom "all things came into being" (Jn. 1:3; cf. 1 Cor. 8:6).²

All this may seem more than a little paradoxical, since the one on whom this argument supposes that all creation depends is himself a creature, who as such came to be at a particular moment, before which he was not, and who lived in a particular and therefore limited stretch of space and time. This appears to generate wildly incoherent claims. If all creation depends on Jesus in the manner I have described, then what came to be before Jesus was born depended for its existence on Jesus. But Jesus did not yet exist. So what existed before him depended on what did not exist. But surely nothing can depend for its existence on what does not exist, so what existed before Jesus cannot have depended on him. The New Testament claim that in the human being Jesus "all things hold together"

he might die for us, and by his death put to death our death." Sermo 23A, 3, CCL, vol. XLI, p. 322.

2. All this, it should be stressed, is said in the New Testament of the particular human being Jesus. The one through whom "all things came into being" in Jn. 1:3 is the Logos, but precisely the Logos who became flesh (Jn. 1:14); the one in whom "all things hold together" in Col. 1:17 is the same as "the firstborn from the dead" (1:18), who "has made peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20); the one Lord "through whom are all things" in 1 Cor. 8:6 is the same as the human being who died for those who now eat in the temples of Corinthian idols (see 8:11). See also note 8 below.

and through him "all things came into being" seems thoroughly self-contradictory.

Col. 1, which has helped to organize these last reflections, handles this problem by recourse to the Christian community's trinitarian identification of God, and in particular by characterizing Jesus as "the icon (εἰκὼν) of the unseen God" (1:15). In this context the Father is clearly the "unseen God" of whom Jesus is the "icon" or image. To characterize Jesus as the Father's image suggests that his human visibility depicts the Father in the world, in virtue of a resemblance or likeness to the one whose image he is. While unseen in himself, the Father enables the world to see him in another, or to see him by seeing this other. As Paul puts the point, the face of Jesus Christ is the very image of God (cf. II Cor. 4:6,4). And Jesus' human face is not a partial or transitory, and therefore perfectible or replaceable, image of the Father; rather, in the expressive phrase of Heb., Jesus "bears the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3). Without prejudice to his full humanity, so these texts propose, this human being completely shares the attributes of the God whom he calls "the Father"; if he is the Father's perfect image, then "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19; cf. 2:9 for Θεότητος).³

The New Testament's characterization of Jesus as the image of the unseen God conceptualizes, we could say, the incarnational logical structure of the narratives which identify him. These narratives attribute the actions and passions of this human being to God (such as dying on the cross), and the actions of God to this human being (such as forgiving sins). Statements which conform to this logical pattern imply that the one who dies on the cross and the one who forgives the paralytic's sins – and in whom all things hold together – are the same, in the strict sense: they must, if such statements are true, be numerically identical. By having this implication, these statements give rise to the traditional Christian doctrine of incarnation, insofar as this doctrine is concerned (perhaps chiefly concerned) to assert explicitly that "our Lord Jesus Christ" is "one and the same (ἓνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν) . . . the same one perfect in divinity and the same one perfect in humanity."⁴

3. For an analysis of the extensive modern exegetical debate on this passage from Col., see Pierre Benoit, "L'hymne christologique de Col. 1, 15–20," *Exégèse et théologie*, vol. IV (Paris: Cerf, 1982), pp. 159–203. Alois Grillmeier charts the role of the passage in the christological debates of the ancient church in *Jesus Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 1, 2nd edn (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), pp. 102–21. For a theological reflection see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II/2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1978), pp. 229–38 (ET, pp. 250–9).

4. DS 301 (the definition of Chalcedon). Chalcedon's repeated insistence on the logical point that the one who is perfect (that is, complete) ἐν ὅθω ἰσότητι is numerically the

In the prologue to John's Gospel the church has generally found the chief paradigm for this teaching. Jesus is there described as the Word of God become our flesh. That is: the Word "expresses the total reality of the Father" (to recall a phrase of Thomas Aquinas), and the human being Jesus is himself this Word, incarnate; therefore Jesus himself expresses the total reality of – is the perfect image of – the Father.⁵ Col. 1, we can see, reverses the subject–predicate relation of the Johannine paradigm. Whereas John takes the Logos as subject and ascribes "flesh" to him, Col. takes the crucified human being Jesus as subject and ascribes "the fullness of God" to him. These two paradigms jointly display the logical pattern which governs the developed doctrine of incarnation, and is clearly at work in the claim that in the creature Jesus, all things hold together: whatever is true of the human being Jesus of Nazareth is true of God (John) and whatever is true of God is true of the human being Jesus of Nazareth (Col.).⁶

For present purposes, the crucial outcome of these reflections on Jesus as the icon of the Father is that he shares fully in the Father's creative power. Only if this human being fully possesses the Father's divine capacity to give being in every respect is it true to say that in him, "all things hold together." But because the capacity to create is shared by the Father and Jesus (and also of course by the Spirit, about whom more in a moment), the actual work of creation, of making all things and making everything hold together, will also be shared by them. The work, like the capacity, will however be shared in a certain order. It will originate with the Father, who is the source, himself unoriginate, of the Son and the

same – τὸν αὐτὸν – as the one who is complete ἐν Θεότητι, gives the rule, as it were, for its subsequent use of the notions of person, hypostasis, and nature (see DS 302). A detailed discussion of Chalcedon's doctrine is beyond the scope of this book, but we may observe that the definition's main concern is not to make an arcane metaphysical point, but to make explicit a pattern for uttering true sentences about Jesus Christ. It thereby addresses a matter of basic Christian concern: worship of Jesus presumes that sentences uttered according to this pattern are true, otherwise such worship would be idolatry.

5. See chapter 1, note 2. This suggests that in describing Jesus as the perfect image of the Father we have located for at least one of the divine persons a feature of the sort for which the liturgy suggests we look: a characteristic not only unique to him, but non-contingent, and therefore constitutive (at least in part) of his identity. On this see chapter 9, pp. 269–71.

6. The medievals developed in considerable detail the use of logical devices to articulate Chalcedon's doctrine (see Marshall, *Christology in Conflict*, chapter 5), but this procedure stems from the sometimes self-conscious preoccupation of ancient Christian theology with what can and cannot be said christologically. See, for example, Cyril of Alexandria's 4th anathema against Nestorius: "Whoever allocates the terms contained in the gospels and apostolic writings and applied to Christ . . . to two persons or hypostases and attaches some to the man considered separately from the Word of God, some as divine to the Word of God the Father alone, shall be anathema." Lionel R. Wickham, ed. and trans., *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 30; for applications of this rule see Cyril's *Quod unus sit Christus, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, series graeca* (=PG), ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: 1857–66), vol. LXXV, 1289B–1293A; 1327B–1329D.

Spirit, and it will be received and accepted by the Son and by the Spirit. The Father and the Son will each therefore have their own distinct role in the one work of creation, as of redemption, though the roles will be inseparable.⁷

The work of the Trinity in making all things hold together in the one who is the Father's image has two aspects with particular epistemic significance. Col. 1 expresses these by saying "all things have been created (a) through him (δι' αὐτοῦ) and (b) for him (εἰς αὐτόν)" (1:16).

Saying (a) that the Father creates through Jesus suggests that as the Father eternally wills to create a temporal world, his own Word in the flesh accepts this intention and shares in its enactment – or, if it helps put down the specter of incoherence which led us to go incarnational as well as trinitarian in thinking about creation, his own Word who is to become flesh (the traditional *Verbum incarnandum*).⁸ He is himself, with the Father, the agent of creation, upon whom all creation entirely depends. More than that: to say that the Father creates through Jesus suggests that when the Father wills to create the world, he sees and knows it – indeed sees and knows all possible worlds – in and through his Word in the flesh. The Word in the flesh is, to use the traditional term, the "exemplar" for the Father of all things, real and possible. That the Father sees all things in the enfleshed Word does not mean that Jesus himself is all things, but rather that all things have their reality and particular character in virtue of their relation and ordering to him.

The complementary phrase from Col. 1 brings this out: (b) "all things have been created for him." As he wills to create the world, the Father

7. On this see the discussion in chapter 9, pp. 251–8.

8. It seems, however, to make no substantive difference whether one speaks of the Word incarnate (*Verbum incarnatum*) or the Word "to be incarnate" (*Verbum incarnandum*), since from God's point of view – which is the one that counts in the present case – the Word is always incarnate. Like divine acts generally, the Father's sending of the Son into human flesh, the Son's acceptance of this mission, and the Spirit's creation of the humanity of Mary's first child by uniting that humanity to the eternal Son – everything which makes up the incarnation from God's side – is always actual in and for God. The created terms of this act of incarnation – the humanity of Jesus and its union with the Word – are temporal; they come to be at a particular time. One therefore need not resort to talk of the *Verbum incarnandum* for fear of paradoxical or incoherent consequences which might follow from speaking of creation through the *Verbum incarnatum*; for the creating God the two come to the same thing. On this see, e.g., Thomas Aquinas on the missions of the divine persons: "Divine action (*operatio*) can be considered in two ways: either from the side of the agent, with respect to whom it is eternal, or from the side of the effect of the action, with respect to which it can be temporal. But God's action is not a medium between himself and his effect, rather his action is in him and is his entire substance; therefore his action is by its very essence eternal, but the effect is temporal." *Scriptum super Sententias* 1, 14, 1, 1, ad 3 (ed. R. P. Mandonnet and M. F. Moos, 4 vols. [Paris: Lethielleux, 1929–47]) (hereafter *In Sent.*).

orders each thing, and all things together, around his own Word in the flesh; the Father wills a world which fits, in its totality, with Jesus Christ. The fitness is twofold; it embraces both the origin and the destiny, the beginning and the end, of all things. That is: the Father wills a world in which all particular things and their various properties and relations "hold together" in Jesus, and all particular things reach the goal the Father wills only on account of Jesus' cross and resurrection – in the event, despite their own refusal of the goal and consequent captivity to evil, so that their attainment of the final goal is not only creation, but reconciliation and redemption. And the Son in turn glorifies the Father by accepting and enacting the particular role the Father appoints in the creation and redemption of the world the Father wills.⁹

Only by the outpouring of the Spirit, however, will all things actually reach the goal that the Father and the Son, each in his own particular way, establishes for them. That goal, briefly put, is for all things to share as fully as each is capable in the infinite beauty, goodness, and truth of the divine being and life, which the Father rejoices eternally to share in its totality with his Son and his Spirit, and which they together rejoice to receive from him. The Father creates a world which expresses, and thereby resembles, him by conforming all things to his incarnate Word – to the one who alone fully expresses his own total reality. The Father creates a world which not only resembles him, but radically desires him and succeeds in attaining him, because he makes that world by his Spirit.

The Spirit's distinctive role in the triune God's act of making "all things hold together" is perhaps clearest with regard to the destiny of creatures. It belongs chiefly to the Spirit to give all things their proper share in the divine life. Let loose on "all flesh" (Acts 2:17) at Pentecost by the risen and exalted Christ (cf. Acts 2:33), the Spirit enlivens and moves

9. On this see, e.g., Barth's treatment of creation as a work of the triune God in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1 (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932–67 [for the complete work]): "In view of this one, his Son, who would become a human being and the bearer of human sin, God loved humanity from eternity, before he created it, and with humanity the whole world – in and in spite of its complete lowliness, non-divinity, and indeed anti-divinity. And he created it precisely because he loved it in his own Son, who stood eternally before his eyes as the one rejected and slain on account of its sin" (pp. 53–4; [ET, pp. 50–1]). The suggestion that the Father envisions the world (indeed any world) through and for the particular human being Jesus of Nazareth raises, to be sure, a host of difficult questions about the relation between creation, sin, and redemption which cannot be treated in detail here. Col., at any rate, is quite clear about the basic claim which raises the problems: the one through whom and for whom "all things have been created," and in whom "all things hold together" (1:16, 17), is the crucified Jesus, viz., the very same one (αὐτός) "through whom [God] was pleased to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20).

every creature in the way suitable to it so that, joined to the Father's crucified and risen *εἰκὼν*, all may enjoy the good which the Father intends for them. The Spirit is thus the agent who immediately brings it about that all things receive the life of God by holding together in Christ, and is in that sense the principal agent who moves them to their final goal.¹⁰ So while willing that there be a world at all which holds together through union with his Word in the flesh belongs chiefly to the Father, and willing to be the flesh to which all things are ordered belongs chiefly to the Word, the realization of this will in creatures belongs chiefly to the Spirit.¹¹

But the Spirit's distinctive role in creation, like that of the Son, pertains to the origin as well as the destiny of all things. Pentecost is the definitive enactment of the Spirit's mission to join all things to the incarnate Son, but that mission is already anticipated and prepared, so the church's trinitarian exegesis has regularly proposed, from the beginning of creation: it is the same Holy Spirit who moves over, and then gives form to, the formless chaos of Gen. 1:2, who is breathed into the first human beings to give them life (Gen. 2:7) – and who is then withdrawn from them on account of sin (cf. Gen. 3:19).¹²

The Spirit, this suggests, is a secondary exemplar, as well as the chief agent, of the movement of creatures into the life of God. The love of the Father and the Son for one another seems bound up with the person of the Spirit in a distinctive way (though precisely how this is so remains a matter of theological dispute).¹³ The Father loves the Son Jesus, in eternity and in time, precisely by giving him the gift of the Spirit – the one gift equal to and so worthy of both the giver and the receiver – to repose in and on him; the Son loves the Father precisely by gratefully receiving and rejoicing in this gift, and (in time) by sharing the gift with the world. Father and Son are thus eternally united or joined with one another in

10. As Aquinas argues: "In [created] things, the motion which is from God seems to be attributed properly to the Holy Spirit." *Summa Contra Gentiles* iv, 20 (no. 3571).

11. The Word's willing to be flesh is shared with the Father and the Spirit, not, of course, the being flesh itself. The former can therefore be appropriated to him, while the latter, as unique or proper to him, cannot.

12. For a sketch of the classic exegesis, see Boris Bobrinskoy, *Le Mystère de la Trinité: Cours de théologie orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), pp. 21–70.

13. Viz., as to whether the mutual love of the Father and the Son in the Spirit requires, or even permits, the affirmation that the Spirit eternally proceeds *ex Patre Filioque*. For some reflection on how traditional East–West disputes about the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit might embody a disagreement which makes no difference there is any need to resolve, see Bruce D. Marshall, "Action and Person: Do Palamas and Aquinas Agree about the Spirit?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 39/4 (1995), pp. 379–408. For a different argument to a similar conclusion from the Orthodox side, see Serge Bulgakov, *Le Paraclet*, trans. Constantin Andronikof (Paris: Cerf, 1946), pp. 87–143.

and through the Holy Spirit as a person distinct from both, though the love which unites them, as it springs only from fullness and not from lack, does not have the distinctive note of desire. That creatures succeed in attaining the God who perfectly expresses himself in Jesus Christ results from the gift of this Spirit; that they, made from nothing and so lacking all, cannot help desiring union with this God, whether or not he ever wills to pour out his Spirit so that they may attain him, results from their creation in the image of this same Spirit. Anything which is, however remotely, *like* the Spirit to whom it eternally belongs to unite the Father and the Son in love, will naturally seek its own share in that love.¹⁴

Epistemic right as christological coherence

What then of deciding about truth? We undertook this exploration of the church's trinitarian identification of God in the hope of answering the question by what right the church takes the beliefs which make up that identification as primary when it decides about truth. What does the content of these beliefs suggest about their epistemic status?

Identification of Jesus as epistemic trump

As he is identified by the church's canonical narrative, the particular person Jesus of Nazareth holds all things together, with regard to both

14. These last remarks are suggested by medieval Western views of the Spirit as not only agent but exemplar of the love of creatures for the Father in the Son. Thus, e.g., Bonaventure, commenting on John 17:22: "In prayer the Lord asks that his disciples be united, not by nature, but by love (*dilectionis*), in conformity to the highest unity. Now the members of Christ are united by mutual love (*amorem*). Therefore in the divine there is an exemplar of this," namely "the third person, who proceeds in the manner of mutual love (*caritatis*)." *In 1 Sent.* 10, 1, 3, a (*Opera Selecta* 1, p. 160a). With regard to all creation, and linked to the exemplarity of the Son: "All creatures come forth from God by thought and will. But in the divine we have to suppose, prior to the production of creatures, the eternal emanation of the Word, in whom the Father laid out all things that were to be done. For the same reason, therefore, it was necessary that a person emanate in whom he willed and gave all things" (*In 1 Sent.* 10, 1, 1, d; *Opera Selecta* 1, p. 156a). While not always thought of as having Bonaventure's interest in exemplarism, Aquinas makes a similar argument (though without the suggestion that knowledge and will in God not only explicate, but demonstrate, the trinitarian processions). "Assuming, according to our faith, the procession of the divine persons in a unity of essence (which no argument can be found to prove), the coming forth of the persons, which is perfect, will be the pattern (*rationem*) and cause of the coming forth of creatures . . . Thus the coming forth of the creature, insofar as it stems from the generosity of the divine will, may be traced back to one principle, which is as it were the pattern (*quasi ratio*) of this entire generous conferral . . . and this is the Holy Spirit" that is, "a person . . . in the divine who comes forth in the mode of love" (*In 1 Sent.* 10, 1, c; see *In 1 Sent.*, prologus: "Just as a waterway is diverted from a river, so is the temporal procession of creatures from the eternal procession of persons."). On these texts see Gilles Emery, *La Trinité créatrice* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1995).

their creation and their redemption. Only that can be whose existence and attributes fit with his; even that in creation which comes to oppose him must be wholly capable of being redeemed by him. This fitness between Jesus and other creatures is an asymmetrical rather than a mutual relationship. The being of other creatures is not simply compatible with his own, but as a whole causally dependent upon him; he is not simply the exemplar but the agent of creation – together, of course, with the Father and the Spirit, each in his own way.

This suggests that when it comes to the epistemic relation between beliefs – when it comes to deciding what is true – the identification of Jesus which relies on the church’s canonical narrative must have primacy. When we ascend from the content of the church’s central beliefs to the question of their epistemic status, these beliefs seem to require that we accept the following conditional: if identifying descriptions of Jesus in the church’s canonical narrative are held true, then the sentences by which we identify and describe other things must, if we are to hold *them* true, at least be compatible with (that is, not contradict) the sentences by which we identify and describe Jesus. This consistency relationship too is asymmetrical; holding true the beliefs by which the church identifies Jesus requires deciding about the truth of other beliefs by seeing whether they are at least consistent with the narrative identification of Jesus, and not deciding about the truth of that narrative identification by seeing whether the beliefs which make it up are consistent with others. The narratives which identify Jesus are epistemic trump; if it comes to conflict between these narratives and any other sentences proposed for belief, the narratives win.

That the meaning of the narratives which identify Jesus implies their epistemic primacy may perhaps most clearly be seen by considering the obvious alternative.¹⁵ It might be held that when conflict with other beliefs arises, then beliefs expressed by holding these narratives true lose the epistemic confrontation.¹⁶ This epistemic decentralization of the narratives which identify Jesus might be maintained as a general principle, or it might be proposed *ad hoc*; the range of sentences with respect to

15. The implication is, more precisely, that if the narratives are held true, they must be held to be epistemically primary, and if they are true, they must be epistemically primary.

16. There might of course be cases where the consistency of this or that belief with the canonical narrative was undecidable by us, at least in our present state of ability to work out the logical relations among our beliefs. This would have no bearing on the epistemic primacy of central Christian beliefs, since the rule which defines this primacy is that conflicts must always be decided in favor of the Christian beliefs, not that we can always tell when there are conflicts.

which the narratives were epistemically subordinate might be wide or narrow. Either way, when beliefs constitutive of the narrative identification of Jesus are held false, it becomes impossible to believe that in Jesus so identified, all things hold together. To regard as false chief elements in the New Testament’s identification of Jesus is to hold that there is no one who meets or satisfies that description.¹⁷ And if there is no one who answers to the New Testament’s identifying description of Jesus, then all things cannot hold together in him, since nothing can hold together in that which is not. More precisely: to hold false sentences indispensable to the New Testament’s identification of Jesus because holding them true would create conflict with some other beliefs is to suppose that states of affairs obtain which are incompatible in some way with Jesus’ existence and the attributes unique to him. The status of “that which holds all things together” might or might not be ascribed to such states of affairs; in either case, the canonically identified person Jesus would not be the one who holds all things together. If he is, then the nexus of belief by which the church identifies him cannot lose epistemic conflicts with other beliefs.¹⁸

So if all things hold together in Jesus, crucified and risen, then at the epistemic level it seems that all true beliefs must hold together in – be logically consistent with – the narratives which identify him, and the triune God with him. He must have “primacy in everything,” including decisions about truth.

Unrestricted epistemic primacy

As this line of argument already suggests, the epistemic primacy of the church’s narrative identification of Jesus, and with him of the triune God, must be unrestricted; it must range across all possible beliefs. There can be no type or area of belief which is exempt from the requirement that it be at least consistent with the body of beliefs which identify the crucified and risen Jesus. That is: no matter what the contents of our various

17. This holds good regardless of how one specifies what these chief elements are. The present claim is *not*, therefore, that everything in the New Testament, or in the Gospels, is equally important to the identification of Jesus. That the narratives of the passion and resurrection are among the principal elements, as here supposed, is relatively non-controversial.

18. The same point can be put in terms of Tarski–Davidson definitions of truth for sentences. If all things in fact hold together in Jesus Christ, then the right branch of any T-sentence whose *left* branch could possibly be true must state truth conditions for the sentence on its left which are compatible with the truth conditions (also as stated by T-sentences) of the narratives which identify Jesus and the triune God.

beliefs, no matter how remote the meaning of many sentences we hold true may be from that of the church's canonical narrative, those sentences must still be tested for truth against the church's most central beliefs. If we hold true the canonical identification of Jesus, then we cannot decide about the truth of our philosophy, our politics, or even our science without seeing whether those beliefs are consistent with, and to that extent subject to correction by, the beliefs which identify Jesus.

This is, once again, required by the content of the beliefs themselves. Suppose we hold beliefs, or at least accept the possibility of beliefs, which do not have to be tested for their consistency with the narrative identification of Jesus. We then build into our epistemic structure the possibility that there are objects, events, or states of affairs, whether past, present, or future, which in one way or another do not fit with Jesus Christ crucified and risen, which are incompatible with his existence and attributes, and so with creation and redemption through him. He will therefore not "have the primacy" with respect to those things; they will not "hold together" in him; rather, on account of them, he will lack the features ascribed to him in the canonical narrative. Thus if *all* things, not just some things, hold together in Jesus, then it seems that all beliefs, not just some beliefs, must fall within the epistemic range of the beliefs which identify him.

Believing the gospel (that is, the narratives which identify Jesus and the triune God), therefore, necessarily commits believers to a comprehensive view of the world centered epistemically on the gospel narrative itself. On such a view there will be no regions of belief and practice which can isolate themselves from the epistemic reach of the gospel. But conversely having such a comprehensive view also means that Christians will not be able to isolate the gospel from the rest of their beliefs, to be held true for whatever restricted purposes, pious or otherwise, Christians may want to use it. On the contrary, believing the gospel at all means that Christians must always venture forth, prepared to engage as best they can all life and reality – to interpret and assess whatever alien or novel beliefs they may encounter – in light of the narratives which identify Jesus.¹⁹

Taking the narrative identification of Jesus and the Trinity as *primary* in decisions about truth, and that without restriction, is not at all the same thing as taking the beliefs which make up that identification as the *sole* criteria of truth. Nor does the unrestricted epistemic primacy of this

19. On this see chapter 6.

nexus of belief require this sort of implausible epistemic exclusivity. Many, indeed the great majority, of our decisions about what is true cannot be made by appeal to the church's central beliefs alone, but require that we advert to other relevant beliefs. Consistency with the narratives which identify Jesus is the condition *sine qua non* which all other beliefs must meet in order to be true, but this condition will rarely be sufficient to decide about the truth of philosophical, political, natural scientific, or other beliefs, or to settle disputes between competing claims in those areas. Thus the unrestricted epistemic primacy of the church's central beliefs can be stated only negatively: no sentences which are *inconsistent* with these beliefs can be true (including any other beliefs – such as logical laws – to which we may advert epistemically), but consistency with the church's central beliefs does not normally guarantee, all by itself, that other beliefs are true.²⁰

It is important to observe that one can, at least in principle, fail to maintain the unrestricted epistemic primacy of the gospel narrative without regarding any elements of the narrative as false. Holding aspects of the narrative false is, of course, the clearest way of denying its epistemic primacy. But the fact that one holds the narrative true need not indicate anything more than that one has a consistent system of belief. In any consistent belief structure even those members which have the lowest epistemic status will win conflicts with beliefs which are inconsistent with them. By itself, a consistent belief system says nothing about the epistemic priorities of those who hold the beliefs.

Epistemic primacy is by contrast a normative relationship, such that for any beliefs A and B, A is epistemically primary with respect to B if and only if, should inconsistency arise between A and B, A is held true, and B rejected or modified. When taken as A, the narratives which identify Jesus and the triune God will be epistemically primary without restriction just in case B could be any other possible belief. To ascribe unrestricted epistemic primacy to the gospel narrative is thus not simply to hold, as a matter of fact, no beliefs which are inconsistent with it, but to be prepared to reject any possible belief which is inconsistent with it.

Of course questions about one's epistemic priorities normally come up only when conflict arises among beliefs one is pretty deeply committed to

20. This formulation guarantees that unrestricted epistemic primacy belongs *exclusively* to the narrative identification of Jesus; saying that *all* other beliefs must be consistent with these ensures at a stroke both that these are unrestrictedly primary and that the rest are not.

holding true. Faced with conflict, one might attempt to maintain a consistent system of belief which included the chief elements in the church's narrative identification of Jesus, but at the same time reversed the epistemic priorities implied by the narrative. Resolving epistemic conflict in this fashion is the aim of the dependence thesis in theology. Some reflection later in this chapter on the belief that Jesus is risen will suggest how difficult this turns out to be in practice.

Epistemic primacy and highest truth

If we hold true the narratives which identify Jesus and the Trinity, we are committed by the content of those narratives to regarding them as epistemically primary across the board. This implies that a community which has the beliefs expressed by holding these narratives true must regard that body of beliefs as what could be called the *highest* truth – not only the highest available truth, but the highest truth there can be. To say that central Christian beliefs have unrestricted epistemic primacy means that any possible belief which contradicts them must be false. Ascribing genuinely *unrestricted* primacy to these particular beliefs, moreover, preempts the application of the category; no other beliefs will be able to enjoy this logical status. From this it follows that no true belief can contradict the narratives which identify Jesus and the Trinity. If these narratives are believed, therefore, those who hold them true cannot consistently suppose that they could possibly turn out to be false. And this is just what it means to say, at least when it comes to deciding about truth, that a set of beliefs is the highest truth.

That the narratives which identify Jesus and the Trinity have to function, if held true at all, as the highest truth helps give a clearer picture of the idea that epistemic justification is finally christological and (thereby) trinitarian coherence. On this view, the totality of beliefs which human beings might hold can be seen as forming an open field, ordered around a christological and trinitarian center. This center is also, as it were, a peak or summit from which the whole field can be surveyed, though of course its distant parts will be seen less clearly from the center than those close by. Every part of the field is contiguous with every other part, since nothing can belong to the field – can count as a sentence or belief – unless we can assign to it a meaning or content, which links it in manifold ways to the rest of the field. There are thus no regions inaccessible from the rest of the field, no boundaries which the intrepid and interested explorer cannot cross. The distance between sentences and beliefs in this logical

space follows upon their difference or similarity of meaning and content; those sentences are closer to one another whose meanings are more alike, more intimately connected.

In this open field of possible sentences or beliefs, no belief which fails of consistency with the christological center can be counted as true. Consistency is of course the most minimal kind of coherence among beliefs, but for just that reason it enables us to define the unlimited epistemic reach of the narratives which identify Jesus in a precise and informative way. Since no two inconsistent sentences can both be true, regardless of what the sentences mean, consistency with these narratives can be required of all sentences as a test of truth, and we have readily available interpretive and inferential procedures for figuring out whether the test has been met in most cases. Ascertaining whether this minimal sort of coherence with the canonical narrative obtains will leave the truth of a great many beliefs undecided, but it will already configure the field of belief in quite definite ways, by eliminating lots of beliefs which lack consistency with those which are centrally Christian.

Coherence of course comes in many varieties. If the minimal kind of coherence among beliefs is consistency, the maximum is identity. A set of sentences are consistent when its members are all possibly true; the sentences in the set are identical, for present purposes, when they all mean the same thing. So we normally assume that “Grass is green” and “Schnee ist weiß,” while they mean quite different things, are consistent with one another (they can both be true), and yield compatible beliefs; we normally assume that “Grass is green” and “Gras ist grün” mean the same thing, and that those who hold these sentences true have the same belief. A sentence proposed for belief which meant the same thing as one of the sentences which make up the church's narrative about Jesus and the Trinity would thus have the maximal sort of coherence with those beliefs to which unrestricted epistemic primacy belongs.

If consistency with the beliefs which are epistemically primary is necessary for any other belief to be regarded as true, it would seem that identity (of meaning) with the primary beliefs would have to be regarded as guaranteeing truth. Almost as strong a form of coherence as identity of meaning is necessary implication; logically necessary inference from those beliefs which are epistemically primary would likewise seem to guarantee truth to whatever sentences were inferred. A weaker form of coherence, but still stronger than consistency, is what the medievals called *convenientia*. One belief coheres with another *ex convenientia* when

the one makes it particularly fitting or appropriate, but not necessary, to believe the other. So belief in the incarnation, for example, fits in an especially beautiful way with belief in the infinite and selfless goodness of God, but (insofar as the incarnation is also believed to be a contingent act of divine freedom) it is not a necessary implication of God's goodness; the truth of belief in God's goodness does not by itself, therefore, guarantee the truth of belief in God's incarnation.²¹

Instead of continuing this general taxonomy of christological coherence, this and subsequent chapters will attend to particular cases. These general remarks indicate, however, that when it comes to the varieties of christological coherence, scope and decisiveness vary inversely. The more narrow the range of beliefs across which a particular type of coherence with the church's central narrative can function as a relevant test of truth, the more coherence tends to guarantee truth. Conversely, the wider the range across which the test applies, the more it tends simply to permit truth rather than support or guarantee it. Taken by itself, consistency with the christological and trinitarian center does not guarantee truth, but it does, crucially, guarantee falsity to those beliefs which lack it, and that on the widest possible scale. It alone applies as a relevant test to all possible beliefs; its scope is unlimited, and so it alone can serve to define the epistemic primacy of the church's central narrative.

The Father's epistemic role

By what right, then, does the Christian community finally take its narrative identification of Jesus as epistemically primary across the board, and so as the highest truth? The answer proposed by the content of the narratives, read in their full trinitarian depth, is that Jesus is the icon of the Father. This human being perfectly expresses the Father in the world – not all by himself, in isolation from everything else, but by being the one in whom all other things hold together.

When the Father envisions this and any world which he might actually will to create, and when he wills that this world in fact be and be redeemed, he orders it in its totality around his Word in the flesh.²² It is

21. For the scholastics themselves, it was normally states of affairs which were *conveniens*, rather than beliefs about them (the incarnation of God, rather than the belief that God is incarnate). For examples regarding the case at hand, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, 1, 1; Bonaventure, *In III Sent.* 1, 2, 1 (who speaks of *congruitas* rather than *convenientia*).

22. As Eph. 1 also suggests: the mystery of the Father's will now made known in Christ (v. 9) is his resolve (v. 9b) "before the foundation of the world" (v. 4) to gather up all things in heaven and on earth under Christ as their one head (v. 10). See the comments of Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, 6th edn (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1968), pp. 63–6.

entirely natural for the Father to order the world in this way. As the Father's own Word become our flesh, who alone makes the human journey from Bethlehem to Golgotha and the Emmaus road, Jesus is the Father's very image, the one who perfectly expresses the total reality of the Father. What the crucified and risen Jesus expresses naturally includes the Father's mind and will, which he shares not simply by qualitative but by numerical identity.²³ Indeed, as the Father's Word and image incarnate, Jesus Christ is the Father's way of uttering or expressing the very Trinity of divine persons, as well as every creature the Trinity creates.²⁴ As a result the whole ordering of creation will have to fit with – hold together in relation to – what happens in the crib at Bethlehem, on the cross of Golgotha, and with the disciples on the Emmaus road. Any ordering of creation as a whole which did not fit with the features by which the church identifies this particular person would on that account fail to fit with the Father's own mind and will (since it would be incompatible with what perfectly expresses that mind and will); on any such ordering the Father would, *per impossibile*, be at war with himself.

The upshot of these trinitarian considerations is that we have reached the end of the epistemic road. The Father's knowledge is definitive. This means more than that his knowledge cannot be mistaken. The Father is, together with his Word and Spirit who come forth from him, the source of all things in their entirety, and so of their order and relation. As such the Father (and therefore the triune God) cannot be thought of as waiting, the way we must, for things to exist in order to know them. His very knowledge of them must be productive of their existence and attributes (presuming, of course, that he knows that they exist; their existence itself must, on the same assumption that the triune God is the source of all things, be wholly dependent on his will). The Father is the final measure of all things; nothing can be other than as he orders it, other than it is in his mind and will.²⁵

23. The enfleshed Word expresses the will of the Father in two different senses: (i) he fully shares that capacity to act which belongs to the Father's divinity, and is communicated to him by eternal generation, and (ii) he freely accepts the Father's eternal but contingent decision that he in fact be enfleshed, viz., that he be Jesus of Nazareth.

24. As Thomas Aquinas suggests: "The whole Trinity is spoken in the Word, and every creature as well" (*Summa theologiae* I, 34, 1, ad 3). See Anselm, *De Processione Spiritus Sancti* 11: "One who sees the Son sees the Holy Spirit, just as he sees the Father." F. S. Schmitt, ed., *S. Anselmi Opera Omnia* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1946–61), vol. II, p. 208, 23–4.

25. Or: nothing can be incompatible with the Father's mind and will, since all things are just because he (and with him the Son and Spirit) knows and wills them. This obviously brings to mind conceptual problems about evil which I cannot pursue in detail here. It may simply be observed that the argument here about epistemic primacy coheres with two

Thus if we believe things to be other than they are, and are ordered, in the Father's mind and will (other than the Father believes them to be, we would say, if the Father had beliefs), our belief cannot be true. In the Father's mind and will, all things are ordered to Jesus, crucified and risen. Consequently to hold any belief inconsistent with the narrative identification of Jesus is to believe things to be other than they are in the Father's mind and will. And any such belief must be false. In sum: if the Father expresses his own total reality by ordering all things around the crucified and risen Jesus – if Jesus is the Father's icon – then we will have the epistemic right to hold only those beliefs which are ordered around (at minimum, are consistent with) the beliefs which identify Jesus. Beyond the Father's knowledge no further or more basic justification for the unrestricted primacy of the church's central beliefs could reasonably be sought, or given, since none can be conceived.

That all things hold together in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is the work not only of Jesus and the Father, but of the Spirit in whom they are united in love, and whom they pour out upon all flesh. As exemplar the Spirit orients all things to the Father's icon as their chief desire, and as agent the Spirit chiefly brings about the realization of this desire. This suggests that the epistemic habits which define Christian identity are skills only the Spirit can teach us. Ordering all of our beliefs around the gospel of Christ requires a massive reversal of our settled epistemic habits and inclinations, of our usual ways of deciding what is true. Only the Holy Spirit is up to the epistemic effort involved. The Spirit alone can teach us to recognize in the narratively identified Jesus the Father's own icon, and to interpret and assess all of our beliefs accordingly. To the way the Spirit carries out his distinctive epistemic role we will return in detail in a later chapter.

But we already have the outline of an answer to our question about epistemic justification. The Christian community decides what is true by learning from the Spirit to read the narratives which identify Jesus in

traditional solutions to these conceptual problems. (1) To say that nothing can be inconsistent with the Father's knowledge and will is not to say that the Father wills evil, nor that he fails to know it (since in knowing it he would produce it) but that evil is not, strictly speaking, part of creation; it is the privation of goodness and therefore being, and so not what the Father wills, which *eo ipso* comes to be. (2) There is a sense in which, given this privative metaphysical status, evil "fits" with creation in that nothing which suffers it will fail to be redeemed; the ordering here claimed of the origin and destiny of all things around Jesus would only prove incoherent if there was evil inherently beyond the scope of redemption, evil not destined, however mysteriously, to be made good, and in that way to disappear.

their full trinitarian depth, and so to recognize the crucified and risen Jesus as the perfect icon of the Father; the church finds in the New Testament depiction of this distinctive relationship between Jesus and the Father the ultimate warrant for taking the trinitarian narratives as epistemically primary across the board. When it comes to epistemic right, this is the force of saying, "Jesus Christ is the truth."

Precedents

Here there is no room to explore some of the deep precedents in the tradition for this epistemic outlook. We may simply indicate that theologians agree on it who are often thought to have utterly divergent epistemic commitments. Along lines we have sought to make explicit Thomas Aquinas, for example, argues that "The chief matter in the teaching of the Christian faith is the salvation accomplished by the cross of Christ," which is foolishness to the world "since it includes something which seems impossible according to human wisdom, namely that God dies (*Deus moriatur*), and that the omnipotent becomes subject to the power of the violent."²⁶ This requires that Christians and Christian theology keep their epistemic priorities straight – as Aquinas concretely and colorfully puts it, "Whatever is not in agreement with Christ is to be spewed out . . . because he is God."²⁷ But Luther's approach to matters epistemic, while motivated by concerns quite unlike Thomas's and expressed in a very different way, is, as I have argued elsewhere, basically the same in substance.²⁸

The epistemic picture developed here is also drawn with remarkable clarity and economy by Anselm, in a text from the *De concordia*. Anselm here speaks simply of consistency with scripture rather than specifically with the narratives identifying Jesus, and the concepts I have used are not entirely Anselm's own. But little of the foregoing argument is not stated or implied in his remark; indeed one key feature of Anselm's picture – the epistemic relation between the church's central beliefs and what seems supported by "evident reason" – we have yet to treat in detail. His words can stand as an apt summary of the argument so far.

26. In *I Cor.* 1, 3 (nos. 45, 47). *S. Thomae Aquinatis super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*, vol. 1, 8th edn, ed. R. Cai, O.P. (Turin: Marietti, 1953).

27. In *Col.* 2, 2 (nos. 95–6). *S. Thomae Aquinatis super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*, vol. II. In a more familiar idiom: "It does not belong to sacred doctrine to prove the principles of the other sciences, but only to judge them: for whatever is found in other sciences which contradicts the truth of this science is totally to be rejected as false, according to II Cor. 10:[5]" (*Summa theologiae* 1, 1, 6, ad 2).

28. See my "Faith and Reason Reconsidered: Aquinas and Luther on Deciding What is True," *The Thomist* 63/1 (1999), pp. 1–48.