

Liberty University  
B. R. Lakin School of Religion

AN EXTERNAL EXISTENTIAL AS A THIRD FACTOR WITHIN THE INCARNATION:  
ASPECTS OF RAHNERIAN AND APOLLINARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY  
SYNTHESIZED AS A TRICHOTOMOUS CHRISTOLOGY

A Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Course  
THEO 642: Advanced Christology

by

David Pensgard

April 2007

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
A. Problem .....	1
B. Thesis .....	1
C. Strategy and Plan .....	2
II. ELEMENTS OF THE PUZZLE .....	2
A. The Ancient Puzzle Itself .....	3
B. Criteria .....	3
C. Rules .....	5
III. ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSED SOLUTION .....	5
A. Rahner's Supernatural Existential: Description, Analysis .....	6
B. Applications of an External Existential .....	10
C. The Failed Proposal of Apollinaris .....	11
D. Trichotomy .....	13
IV. NOVEL SYNTHESIS .....	14
A. Internal Coherency .....	14
B. Other Criteria for the God-Man .....	15
V. COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS PROPOSALS .....	16
VI. ANTICIPATED COUNTERARGUMENTS .....	23
VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS .....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	29

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Problem

The Incarnation of God has been a particularly difficult and long-standing puzzle for the Christian religion. Taken at face value, the claims made of God and the man Jesus in the Christian scriptures seem to contradict one another. Yet, no explicit formula for the metaphysics<sup>1</sup> of divine Incarnation has been successfully presented even while accusations of incoherence have gone unanswered for nineteen centuries. It seems that, long ago, theologians ceased to put forward positive theories. The consensus is that the Incarnation is an insoluble mystery. Millard Erickson concludes that “the paradox will probably never be eliminated in this life.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this outlook is too pessimistic. It is lamentable that many Christians have ceased their Trinitarian and Christological investigations and are currently at peace with ambiguous terminology, inescapable mystery, and ineffability.

Puzzles like this, which remain unsolved for many generations, take on a mythical quality and the perception gradually becomes one of hopelessness. And so, when their solutions are eventually found, they provide great intellectual satisfaction both for those within the tradition and for those without. This has been seen recently in the resolution of other puzzles such as Fermat’s Last Theorem in the field of mathematics and the Logical Problem of Evil in philosophy of religion.

### B. Thesis

The puzzle that is the Incarnation consists of multiple propositions that are made on behalf of God and of one particular man. A valid solution must incorporate all of the essential propositions as criteria and then coherently formulate a thoroughly explanatory scheme that answers each of these criteria.

When a set of propositions about a single entity seem to be contradictory, one must look for a third element that rationalizes them. With God and Jesus, *if* the many propositions made are

---

<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991), 513. Metaphysics is being used here in the “ontological” sense of Reginald Fuller, “The technical elaboration of [the nature of reality], the probing of their meaning.” This is not necessarily a reference to substance-based thinking.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

not either irreconcilable or permanently paradoxical (mysterious), then it seems that there must be multiple constitutive elements within both man and God. It is within this area, I believe, that a solution lies.

### **C. Strategy and Plan**

A modal-logic strategy (not to be confused with Modal Monarchianism, or Sabellianism), similar to the one employed by Alvin Plantinga in his resolution of the Logical Problem of Evil with the “free-will defense,” will be used here.<sup>3</sup> This strategy involves the presentation of a single rational solution to a problem in order to show that a final solution is not impossible, logically speaking. Accordingly, the solution will not be presented as “the answer” to the problem but merely as a logically coherent, explicit formulation. The result will be the elimination of any ascriptions of irrationality, paradox, or mystery to the Incarnation.

Beginning with a structural breakdown of the problem, as given briefly above, and the listing of the criteria for a solution, the analysis will proceed by examining the 20<sup>th</sup> Century insight of the “supernatural existential” as formulated by the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. This concept will be explained, briefly analyzed, and adapted for use. Second, Apollinarianism, a metaphysically explicit solution to the problem of the Incarnation proposed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century by Apollinaris (-ius) of Laodicea will be explained, briefly analyzed, and adapted for use. Third, a novel synthesis of the adapted forms of these proposals will be used to formulate a new metaphysical conception of the Incarnation. Lastly, each criterion will be referenced and shown to be adequately met. The paper will then continue by comparing the new formulation with past proposals to ensure that it is distinct from each and then conclude with the anticipation of counter arguments.

## **II. ELEMENTS OF THE PUZZLE**

The elements of this investigation are the puzzle itself (including the criteria and rules), the concept of an external existential, and the general approach of the Apollinarian scheme. Additionally, anthropological trichotomy will play an essential role.

---

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “The Free Will Defense,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 22-49.

## **A. The Ancient Puzzle Itself**

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, the paradox of the Incarnation was not formally recognized by the Church at large. Yet, the tradition that had been handed to the early Church made assertions that could not be easily reconciled one with another. Put simply, the tradition demanded that God was one, yet it seemed to speak of three different persons as if they were God. In addition, one of these three seems to have been a man. The issue of the identity of this man was the beginning of the exploration that led not only to the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, but also to the doctrine of the Trinity. In brief, Jesus is to be seen as fully human *and* fully divine, and God is one being in three persons.

In this paper, we will consider only the issue of the Incarnation. Put in 21<sup>st</sup> Century terms, the following propositions are to be reconciled: Jesus is a human being in every essential way possessing all the parts, characteristics, and functions that are essential to humanity. In addition, Jesus is also divine in every essential way possessing all the parts, characteristics, and functions that are essential to divinity. These two “natures” must not mix to form a unique kind of being (beyond mere individuality), yet the unity must be sufficient to allow for the soteriological function.

Many related questions and issues must be put aside for the purposes of this examination. Exploring these issues is not the point of this paper because it is not essential to this particular puzzle. The question is whether the claims are *possibly* true. Thus, it is the coherency of the above claims that is at issue. Historicity of biblical events, the possibility of miracles, Kantian epistemology, and veridicality are not at issue here.

## **B. Criteria**

Many passages in the New and Old Testaments of the Christian Bible, explicitly and implicitly, make the claims listed above.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many passages appear to stress “the unity between [the man and the Logos] in such a way as to attribute ‘as to one’ what properly belongs

---

<sup>4</sup> Gospel references include: John 1:1-14, 51, 2:24-25, 3:13-15, 4:6-7, 5:14, 26-27, 42, 6:27, 35, 48, 61-62, 7:29, 8:16, 24, 28, 40, 58-59, 9:35, 10:15, 11:34, 12:23, 13:31, 14:6, 17:5, 18:34, 19:28; Luke 2:40, 52, 4:3, 9, 9:26; Mark 1:1, 11, 3:11, 8:38, 9:7, 14:33-36, 61-62, 15:39; Matt. 4:3-6, 14:33, 16:16, 27. Other references throughout the New Testament may also be found. See Erickson, 17-39.

either to the humanity or the divinity.”<sup>5</sup> These scriptures represent the origin and the core of the tradition that presents the puzzle to the world. In addition, the early Christian creeds will also be important sources. For our purposes, they must be converted into criteria that any valid solution must meet.<sup>6</sup> In brief, “the incarnation involves the idea of Jesus as both fully God and fully man, possessing all of the attributes of each.”<sup>7</sup>

Proceeding by categories, the God-man must be fully human. This entails human function, origin (sempiternity), fate (death of the body), and experience (existential humanity: being capable of emotion and passion as the “essential preconditions of the reality and merit of the savior’s struggle against evil.”<sup>8</sup> He must learn, grow, suffer, worry, and contemplate death.) He must be human in every way except sinfulness and in the quality and/or magnitude of his relationship to God.<sup>9</sup>

He must also be fully divine. This entails at least glory and honor (worthiness of worship), but may also entail the other divine properties (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity, etc.), as well as divine function (creator, sustainer).

He must be distinct from other human beings in very limited and particular ways while yet remaining fully human. Therefore, the solution must allow for a sufficient metaphysical distinction between the God-man and the rest of humanity or else the difference would be merely functional. Yet, he must be fully human by definition. He is also to be fully theanthropic without being a hybrid or mixture of the divine and human natures.

He must be capable of functioning as a savior. Gregory of Nazianzus has famously stated that, “What has not been assumed cannot be restored; it is what is united with God that is saved.”<sup>10</sup> Though not an obvious piece of the puzzle, the history of Christology has often been

---

<sup>5</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, revised ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> printing (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2004), 306. Here Kelly gives the position of Theodore, pupil of Diodore, in reference to Rom 9:5.

<sup>6</sup> The task of fully working through the biblical passages is important but must be assumed for the purposes of this brief work. These issues are not contentious, however, and may be examined as the reader has need in the source cited here. See Kelly.

<sup>7</sup> Erickson, 531.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, 301.

<sup>9</sup> While sinfulness is usually not considered to be essential to humanity, the issue of the potential for sin and real temptation in the God-man is a thorny issue that we need not consider here. This is because the issue does not figure into the proposal that this paper will eventually give.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

steered by soteriological efficacy. Prior to the Chalcedonian Creed, *Leo's Tome*<sup>11</sup> stated that, "Redemption required that 'one and the same mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, should be able both to die in respect of the one and not to die in respect of the other.'"<sup>12</sup> This property is what allows for a "scapegoat" function. The payment of a price that is too high to pay is thus enabled by the annihilation of one but not all constitutive elements.

Most importantly, the divine-human relationship within the God-Man must be such that neither nature is obliterated. The natures must remain distinct but perfectly united in one person. According to Cyril of Alexandria, "'The divinity and the humanity,' he pointed out, 'were utterly different in essence, and while the union excluded all division it could not eliminate that difference... each of the elements in His being 'remains and is perceived in its natural property.'"<sup>13</sup> The Statement of the Church Fathers at Chalcedon, sums up these two positions and recognized that, "As incarnate, the Word exists 'in two natures,' each complete and each retaining its distinctive properties and operation unimpaired in the [hypostatic] union."<sup>14</sup>

### C. Rules

The rules that must be followed by any successful solution are minimal. They are the rules that any critic would use in declaring the Incarnation irrational and untenable. In other words, the solution must silence criticism by "playing" according to the rules that would most likely be used in formulating criticisms. Primarily, we are speaking about the rules of rational thought, and specifically, the law of non-contradiction. Whether or not the reader believes these rules to be valid and universal is not at issue, so long as it is admitted that criticisms will always come in the form of a logical argument.

### III. ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

Rational solution of the problem seems to require multiple constitutive elements within both humanity and the divine. This is because, according to the most fundamental law of rational

---

<sup>11</sup> Chalcedon affirmed *Leo's Tome* contra Eutychianism.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 321. Kelly intermittently quotes from Cyril of Alexandria. Chalcedon affirmed Cyril contra Nestorianism.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 341. It is acknowledged here, that the Fathers at Chalcedon meant by "hypostatic union" a union of two different natures within one person.

thought, no proposition can be both true and false at the same time and in the same way. The list of propositions above would necessarily be contradictory if there was not some variation, ambiguity, or distinction in their predicates. One must also take note that the predicates of the above criteria are persons. Thus, some or all of these persons must be multivariate.

### **A. Rahner's Supernatural Existential: Description, Analysis**

The first element of the proposal involves an insight of Karl Rahner into the metaphysical makeup of man that is truly *inspiring*. In this rare case, this is not merely a figure of speech because Rahner has formulated a particular kind of God-human link that brings aspects of the divine into the sphere of human being. His term for this linking element is “supernatural existential.”

**Definition:** Introduced in 1950, the “supernatural existential” is the central feature of Karl Rahner’s theology and acts as the “anthropological intersection of God’s purposes and our situation.”<sup>15</sup> It is the condition (*Befindlichkeit*) that is required for the reception of divine grace. It is not merely the recognition of a need for a divine element, but a capacity to receive it.<sup>16</sup>

The supernatural existential is a mediating position between “intrinsicism” and “extrinsicism.” Both being Rahnerian terms, extrinsicism declares that divine revelation is in contradiction to human nature and is problematic for traditional, transcendent theology, while intrinsicism holds that divine revelation is captive to human nature which Rahner sees to be problematic for “contemporary modernist and liberal theologies.” Additionally, an “existential,” a term Rahner borrowed from Heidegger, is any characteristic or capacity that defines humanity.<sup>17</sup>

It has worked against Rahner, however, that his conception has been found by many to be a bit inconsistent. As Karen Kilby concludes, his formulation “fluctuates” between his first presentation of it in the 1950 article “Orientierung” in which he defines “nature” to be merely

---

<sup>15</sup> R. R. Reno, *The Ordinary Transformed: Karl Rahner and the Christian Vision of Transcendence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

<sup>16</sup> George Vass, *The Mystery of Man and the Foundations of a Theological System: Understanding Karl Rahner Volume 2* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1985), 65.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 244.



what we find in all members of a class, and the fourth chapter of his book, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, in which he gives a somewhat different and much more thorough explanation of the ontological divinity of the revelation received by an already-prepared humanity.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it must be assumed that the supernatural existential is not part of a sufficiently unified conception but is part of a larger system that was never worked into a satisfactorily self-consistent theology. Nonetheless, Rahner's entire theology is not required and criticisms that reference his system's inconsistencies are not applicable. The only elements that are required by this paper are sufficiently coherent to allow us to proceed.

Despite his existential affinity, Rahner has made possible a unique trichotomous diagram of the constitutive parts of the human being. His conception, though not explicitly trichotomous, allows the human being to be divided into three distinct parts: a body and two quite different supernatural elements, the soul and the spirit. Yet, this alone is not an original concept. The intriguing and relevant aspect of this metaphysical diagram is the assertion that one of the three parts of a human being can be external in a specific sense. Put simply, part of the human being may be another person, a divine person. It should be clear that this gives us an essential first tool in solving the puzzle of the Incarnation because we have recognized a means of solving its most fundamental problem. That is, multiple constitutive elements *within* the human being.

Rahner's transcendental methodology is similar to Immanuel Kant's, as well as to the phenomenological method of Heidegger,<sup>19</sup> (others could be mentioned as well, e.g., Maréchal, and Hegel<sup>20</sup>). As the contemporary originator of existential thinking, Heidegger is not given to working in terms of substance. Thus, it seems that Rahner is here giving a point of translation between the traditional and the existential. It seems that the supernatural existential is a *nearly* ontological expression for what has long been viewed merely as a relationship. It can be seen as an event that acts like a component, but it can also be seen as the synthesized aspect of a two-way relationship, a point of overlap. In any case, Rahner claims that this universal way of

---

<sup>18</sup> Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Anton Losinger, *The Anthropological Turn: The Human Orientation of the Theology of Karl Rahner*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York, Fordham University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 128.

experiencing life as a human is equivalent to a “constitutive element” for humanity.<sup>21</sup> Human beings actually “find the terminal point of their transcendence within themselves.”<sup>22</sup> God’s self-communication “expresses in words the subject as such, and therefore the subject in the depths of his subjectivity, and hence in the depths of his transcendental experience.”<sup>23</sup>

Though existential, this “component” of humanity is not possessed by the human being itself.<sup>24</sup> Instead, it is passively received and not under human control. As a result, it is said to be non-natural, other, or “supernatural.” Yet, it relates directly to what is most important, resolution/restoration within the “fundamental structure of *Da Sein*... it is the consummation of what is most intimate and essential to us.”<sup>25</sup> Not only is it a point of ascent from below, in the existential Heideggerian sense, but it is somehow “rooted in what descends ‘from above.’”<sup>26</sup> That is, we reach upwards, from below, but find that our reaching was enabled (*potentia oboedientialis*) and that there is a hand reaching down from above (the supernatural existential). Thus, there is both a “self-communication of God” as well as an inherent, though divinely enabled, “self-transcendence” of human beings. Nonetheless, the effort from below ultimately fails except where the two actually meet completely, that is, only in the Incarnation.<sup>27</sup>

**Criticisms against the Supernatural Existential:** Rahner has rejected the criticism of ontologism, the idea that humanity, by nature, inherently possesses knowledge of God. Moreover, this has been seen as a less-than-careful criticism. Rahner defended himself against this claim by showing his *potentia oboedientialis*, a conception closely related to the supernatural existential, to be potential not actual, a form of receptive capacity.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Reno, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Grenz and Olson, 245.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 126.

<sup>24</sup> Rahner’s term for the innate capacity of humanity to receive revelation is “*potentia oboedientialis*”. By contrast, the “supernatural existential” is revelation that is passively received. For details, see Grenz & Olson, p.245-247.

<sup>25</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner’s Eschatology* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1988), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Losinger, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Badcock, “Karl Rahner, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 144.

<sup>28</sup> Grenz and Olson, 243.

Rahner also objected to the criticism that his conception led to a radical immanentism as is found in Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich. Instead, he argued, his system allowed for the supernatural existential to remain passive from the human perspective while being potentially active from the divine perspective.<sup>29</sup>

David A. Pailin, in his refutation of various transcendental arguments for God, including Rahner's, has argued that there is no reason to believe that anything at all is required to "ground the human confidence in the significance of being."<sup>30</sup> Yet, Rahner's arguments were not intended to be used to establish the existence of God. They were intended to be a quasi-metaphysical basis for the relationships his system required.

**Analysis:** Grenz and Olson are critical that the supernatural existential cannot be established biblically or philosophically.<sup>31</sup> It must be noted that, in addition, neither can it be confirmed empirically that human beings have any supernatural components whatsoever, let alone two regardless of their nature. Recognize, nonetheless, that this is not required for this proposal to succeed. This is because we are looking *only* for a single, rational formulation that answers all criteria; we are *not* looking for a real, complete, or verifiable solution. The goal is not to solve the problem outright but merely to establish that the God-man concept is not *necessarily* incoherent. Without a full appreciation of the goal of this paper, one will be forced into thinking that the task is too great and that insufficient argument has been provided to match the claims being made. Perhaps Rahner's anthropology is too ambiguous to resolve the transcendence/immanence problem in Christian theology, but it may still prove useful in a limited and specific application to the mystery of the Incarnation.

Clearly, the supernatural existential is unique, diverging both from any conception of pantheistic immanence<sup>32</sup> as well as from the traditional divine transcendence. It is a mediating position. It suggests that the transcendent Other who is outside of our being in a radical way, is *potentially* and *partially* inside in another sense. Obviously, in addition to being somewhat

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>30</sup> David A. Pailin, *The Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning Theological Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 199-200.

<sup>31</sup> Grenz and Olson, 246.

<sup>32</sup> Pailin, 134.

ambiguous in its presentation, the concept is complex and difficult to grasp, yet its *basic* elements may be reduced and employed in the strategy of this paper as a generic, external existential that is, in many senses, non-Rahnerian.

Fit within a trichotomous scheme, an external existential fulfills the role of “spirit.” Thus, in addition to the human body and human soul (regardless of its constitution), we have a third element, different in nature and relationship from the other two elements. Just as the soul is often thought to be non-natural and unique in its workings, so too, the external existential is to be viewed as unique. It is different not only from the body, but also in relation to the soul. While one may conceive of the body as a “thing” with spatial and temporal extension, one may hardly do the same with the soul. Yet, by comparison to an external existential, the soul seems, conceptually, to be much more “substantial.” Thus, even as we depart qualitatively from the quantitative aspect of the ontological perspective, we retain some sense of it. While we recognize that, “for Rahner what is crucial ... is that the affirmation is purely *theological*, and has no relation to the Aristotelian doctrine of substance,”<sup>33</sup> we also must recognize that, with Rahner, the supernatural existential is fundamental to human existence and, therefore, is an essential, though non-physical *and* non-objectifiable element of what a human being is. It is proposed as being *between* “thing” and “relationship.”

### **B. Applications of an External Existential**

The above, modified, conception of a human person is the variation, ambiguity, or distinction that is needed to resolve the puzzle of the Incarnation. Thus, an appropriate metaphysic of personality, involving an external existential, will allow for a coherent (verbal) diagram of the divine-human relationship in the God-man. That is, a trichotomy that incorporates an external existential as a third constitutive element may provide the aspect of permissible variation that is required to make sense of the two claims that would, otherwise, be contradictory. However, the external existential and trichotomy are *not* the only elements this solution will employ. As will be shown, additional proposals must be added to ensure that all of the criteria are met.

---

<sup>33</sup> Reno, 117. Emphasis in original.

There is a soteriological issue pertaining to the application of the external existential that might come to mind at this point. However, the intention for this paper is to be interesting to members of all faiths and philosophies. Thus, it will not venture into any proposed metaphysical distinctions between soteriological classes in humanity. While it is recognized that this issue is both relevant to this topic and the metaphysics of predestination, as well as being important to the exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism debate, it is not essential to this paper's proposal. Due to this and the controversial nature of the topic, unlike Rahner himself, I refrain from speculating.<sup>34</sup> Minimally, however, it should be mentioned that Rahner's supernatural existential might be restricted to those with rational thought, thus excluding the very young and the mentally impaired.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it must be noted here, that the somewhat different version of the concept employed here within a trichotomy, might possibly escape this problem.

### **C. The Failed Proposal of Apollinaris**

"Heresy" is a dogmatic term. Yet, this was the label applied to Apollinarianism in 381 at the Council at Constantinople. The accusation will hold little meaning where the authority to issue the condemnation is not recognized. Nonetheless, this analysis may still hold interest for everyone because there is an option to view the puzzle merely as a *logical game* the importance of which is seen in its effect on the cultures of the world. As we ask, "Is it really possible to offer a logical resolution to this ancient puzzle?" we must take, minimally, the perspective of a curious philosopher. In this spirit, "heresy" translates to "failed attempt." It is nothing more than a proposal that fails to answer all the criteria. The theological and religious implications are an important but separate matter.

Apollinarianism was the first great Christological heresy. It surfaced just after and in reaction to the council of Nicaea that had committed the Church to the "uncompromising divinity" of Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup> Though Athanasius is considered the epitome of orthodoxy in Christological concerns due to his dominant and successful role at Nicaea, he is also known as an

---

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Louis Roberts, *The Achievement of Karl Rahner* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 135.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Francis Esler, *The Early Christian World*, vol. I by Esler, (London: Routledge, 2000), 596.

“Apollinarian before Apollinarius.”<sup>37</sup> As a friend of Athanasius, Apollinarius “was simply thinking through the implications of Athanasius’ approach to Christology.”<sup>38</sup> It seems that Athanasius had never claimed that Christ did have a human soul but instead affirmed merely that, in distinction from the prophets, wherein God *entered into* a man, in the Incarnation, God *became* a man.<sup>39</sup> The question remained of how this was accomplished and what was entailed. In brief, Apollinarius reached the key formulation of what is now known as a “Word-Flesh” Christology. It was the first subtle attempt to solve the problem of the Incarnation beyond the crude attempts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century that either denied the humanity or else the divinity of Jesus outright. These solutions had been equivalent to skirting the problem rather than solving it. Much credit and respect, therefore, ought to be given to Apollinarius in either creating or refining the first legitimate attempt to solve the problem.

Word-Flesh Christologies are descriptively named. Within this conception, the eternal Word, or Logos, took the place of the human soul (*nous*) in the man Jesus. It seeks to secure a “true” Incarnation instead of a mere connection between the two natures in one person.<sup>40</sup> Rather than joining with a complete human within a dichotomous scheme (human body-human soul), the Logos replaces an essential human element (human body-divine Logos).

Apollinarius arrived at this solution for a variety of reasons, which included a desire to oppose the Antiochene school and the Nestorian tendency in light of the new conclusions of Nicene orthodoxy,<sup>41</sup> to satisfy the requirements of Aristotelian metaphysics within his analytical scheme,<sup>42</sup> and to satisfy a soteriological need. This last reason, being perhaps the most surprising, is found in his own words, “If with the Godhead which is itself mind, there was in Christ also a human mind, the first purpose of the Incarnation which is the overthrow of sin is

---

<sup>37</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 171.

<sup>38</sup> Esler, 594.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 594.

<sup>40</sup> Olson, 207.

<sup>41</sup> Charles E. Raven, *Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 177.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

not accomplished by Him.”<sup>43</sup> He reasoned that, if Jesus had any human components, like a soul or a will, he could have sinned.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, soteriological concerns earned him the label heretic (at least in Rome). This came as a great surprise to the East, which regarded Apollinaris as, largely, correct except for a small faction in Antioch. Yet, by discarding Tertullian’s formula of one person and two natures, he had made enemies of the West and threatened to remove what their soteriology required.<sup>45</sup> As Gregory of Nazianzus, Apollinaris’ foremost critic, famously stated, “What has not been assumed cannot be restored; it is what is united with God that is saved.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, by removing an essential element of humanity, the human soul, Apollinaris had also removed a soteriologically essential link between God and man in the Christ. This was the ground for the accusation of heresy against Apollinaris. He was accused of effectively eliminating Jesus’ true humanity by divesting him of a real human soul.

Clearly, this view is incapable of answering all of the criteria listed above. As a result, it is a failed attempt to solve the problem.

#### **D. Trichotomy**

Several biblical passages give the impression of a trichotomy.<sup>47</sup> Yet, it is the consensus among Christian theologians that this concept is not the best interpretation of these ambiguous or tangential references nor does any other field of study appear to require the concept. It is not currently a topic of strenuous debate or concern.

Trichotomy, it is said, is a concept that comes out of the need, within Platonic thought, to bridge the gap between the material and the formal. Additionally, it is a concept that was rejected at one time by the Church mainly due to its association with the heresy of Apollinaris.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the association with Platonic thought is not necessary, as Berkouwer has noticed, and when it is removed, the criticism becomes groundless.<sup>49</sup> And so, *if* the concept may be useful in eliminating

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>44</sup> Olson, 207.

<sup>45</sup> Raven, 234-240.

<sup>46</sup> Kelly, 294.

<sup>47</sup> Heb. 4:12, I Thes. 5:23, Deut. 6:5, I Cor. 15:45, and perhaps Rom. 8:10, Eph. 2:1 and Gen. 2:17

<sup>48</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 208-209.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 207-233

the ascription of irrationality to the Incarnation, then perhaps its critics will be content to allow it to be considered as a possibility.

#### IV. NOVEL SYNTHESIS

Though not completely divulged above, the solution proposed in this paper has already been given in fragmentary fashion. Nonetheless, important elements are yet missing as well as an explicit formulation in one section.

The internalization of “the Other” is allowed by an external existential.<sup>50</sup> This provides a way to eliminate the problematic aspect of the Apollinarian conception of the Incarnation. Put crudely, humanity may incorporate a third quasi-element, an external existential that is divine.

Yet, the nature of this divine element must also be seen as variable in order to allow for a distinction between “normal” humanity and the humanity of the Incarnation. It is proposed here that the usual trichotomous scheme correctly provides the third person of the Trinity as the third, divine quasi-element. Conversely, with Jesus, in a move similar to the one made by Apollinaris, instead of having the third person of the Trinity as the external existential, perhaps it would be more fruitful to incorporate the second person (Son, Word/Logos) at this point. In this view, the Logos is the third element of a trichotomous God-man. Let us call this formulation a VTE Christology (Variable Third Element).

##### A. Internal Coherency

Because trichotomy is an internally consistent conception, and because it is not necessarily at odds with known empirical, historical, or scriptural data, *and* because it is not incompatible with any of the criteria for the puzzle of the Incarnation, it is a legitimate area of speculation. The notion of the supernatural existential, though linked through Rahner to a contentious theological system, can be reworked into a generic external existential at which point it becomes a *possibly* correct concept, modally speaking. In other words, there is nothing incoherent about the notion of an external existential. Thus, it is likewise vindicated as a legitimate area of speculation. So, the subordinate ingredients to this new “recipe” are viable.

---

<sup>50</sup> I.e., it is already a feature of humanity and may be a prerequisite for philosophy and theology. See Michael Purcell, *Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner & Levinas* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998), 25, 30.



And finally, when these viable elements are synthesized in this way, they form a logically *possible* construction. This person-person overlap by means of a trichotomous makeup thus has great potential for presenting a logical and explicit solution to the puzzle of the Incarnation.

### **B. Other Criteria for the God-Man**

As noted above, however, internal consistency is just one essential criterion among many. Proceeding in the order they were listed previously, we find first that the proposed formulation produces an individual with a human body, a human soul, and a link with God. This is a conception of the God-man that is fully human in every essential way including the following: appearance, function, sempiternal origin, mortality of the body, and existential humanity, which includes the experience of learning, growing, suffering, worrying, and even contemplating death.

The resulting human being is also divine in an appropriate way. He is the humanity that the Logos assumed. As the embodiment of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, he would be worthy of worship, honor, and glory. He would also possess the other divine properties within his divine constitutive element (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity, etc.). Also within the divine element, the God-man could be considered creator and sustainer. Yet, there must be a sense in which the Logos remains eternal and not fully “contained” (temporally and spatially localized) in the person of the God-man. As will be shown below, this matches the position taken in reformed Christology (*finitum non capax infiniti*).

The VTE Christology also provides a sufficient metaphysical distinction between the God-man and “normal” humanity. Yet, this distinction does not preclude a human appellation. The variation is in the divine element not in the human nature as a whole. If human nature essentially entails a human body with its physical experiences, a human soul with its distinct nature, and a divine existential, then differences in the individual identity of any of these three does not alter the classification of the whole. This is what allows for the hypostatic union. This is the essential feature that creates an interpenetrating union without mixing. This specific, trichotomous formulation coherently describes a theanthropic being that is not a hybrid.

The VTE Christ may work as a mediator/savior in any orthodox soteriological system. This is because no change has been proposed that affects the relationships between any of the

relevant parties (God as Judge, humanity as judged, and theanthropic mediator). These ancient, thoroughly-worked-out relationships have merely been given a metaphysical basis. In answer to Gregory of Nazianzus, all essential human characteristics have been assumed and have been united with God within VTE Christology. Additionally, answering *Leo's Tome*, a VTE mediator is able to die with respect to the human body but not in respect to the divinity.

Finally, neither the human nature nor the divine is obliterated in the union. There is, instead, a cooperative overlap, as it were, within the bounds of the person. There is also true unification *within* the person. In answer to Chalcedon, the resulting person truly exists in two natures, each complete and retaining its distinctive properties and operation unimpaired in the union. The only difference is in the presence of a basis for these claims. There is no logical contradiction because there are now different senses in which the otherwise contradictory criteria can be true. Yet, this difference in sense does not affect the requirements of any orthodox doctrine. One must note, also, that the kenosis of the VTE Christ would involve no subtraction of divine attributes. Instead, the divine nature has added human nature, which is a situation that may be seen as a condescension and humiliation—kenosis by addition.

## V. COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS PROPOSALS

In the past, straightforward theories such as these have been declared heretical. In the history of the Christian Church, very few *positive* propositions have been accepted beyond those made by the Scriptures themselves. In realization that VTE Christology is an assertive proposal, it is recognized that the burden of proof looms very large indeed. The first step is to distinguish this theory of the Incarnation from past theories labeled either as heresies or failed formulations. Additionally, Christologies that are not explicit, preferring the *via negativa*, may be shown to be compatible with VTE.

**Apollinarianism:** No specific descriptions of Apollinarianism also apply to VTE. The proposed Christology does not create a fusion of Jesus' flesh with the Godhead "into a single life and hypostasis."<sup>51</sup> VTE Christology remains distinct in various relevant ways. Many distinctions have already been mentioned. In brief, Apollinaris proposed that the Logos replaced the human

---

<sup>51</sup> Kelly, 294.

soul in an essentially dichotomous scheme. By contrast, VTE Christology does not replace any *human* element with a divine element but, instead, replaces one divine element with another. Thus, it should be obvious that VTE does not threaten humanity in the God-man. Where Apollinaris denied “any active human intellect and will in Jesus Christ,”<sup>52</sup> VTE allows for both.

Additionally, some might see Apollinarianism as a variant of the trichotomous scheme already so that VTE is not seen as new. It is true that Apollinaris viewed Jesus as having a “lower animal soul” in addition to the Logos, which replaced his “higher rational mind.” It should be obvious that this lower and higher “soul” notion matches neither the Rahnerian anthropology nor the generic anthropology derived from it. The similarity is superficial because the lower animal soul is more easily fit with the functions of the body than with a third, or fourth, supernatural element. Instead, Apollinaris developed his scheme first within a dichotomist conception and then worked it into a pseudo-trichotomy.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the idea of two fully-supernatural elements, in the contemporary sense of the terms, was foreign to Apollinaris.

**Nestorianism:** With Nestorianism the distinction is less clear, yet the difference is not so subtle as to make descriptions appear contrived. Nestorianism, improperly attributed to Nestorius, came out of the Antiochene school of the Eastern Church prior to the Third General (Ecumenical) Council.<sup>54</sup> This school had a strong tendency to distinguish the two natures within the God-man. Out of this grew an extreme position, clearly diverging from the criteria listed above, wherein the divine and human were actually two separate persons both somehow living within Jesus’ body.<sup>55</sup> This position was rejected by the Council in 431.

Does VTE actually formulate two distinct personalities within the God-man? No. This is because our definition of human being both contains a person within its constitution and also creates a person *as* the constitution. That is, *one* person contains three disparate aspects, here, by definition. Since the soul and the body are not persons by themselves, and because the divine element, though a person in its own right, is a constitutive element in the person of the

---

<sup>52</sup> Olson, 206.

<sup>53</sup> Berkouwer, 209.

<sup>54</sup> Kelly, 327.

<sup>55</sup> Erickson, 62-63.

Incarnation, the resulting person does not *contain* two persons despite the fact that the Logos retains an eternal existence outside of the person of the God-man.

Empirically, because we are human, we have real, first-hand data indicating that the inclusion of a divine external existential does *not* lead to a “schizo-phrenia” (divided mind). Thus, if the notion of an external existential is potentially real (i.e., coherent and not incompatible with known data), then we have enough information to reach this minimal conclusion: Jesus *could* be a trichotomous God-man with the Logos as the third element without being two separate persons.

Another closely-related problem arises at this point. If the third person of the Trinity, as the external existential of normal human beings, does not lead to a simultaneous divinity and humanity in the average human person, why would it do so for Jesus? Here, the defense of VTE is weak, but still remains logically possible. The difference would be in the identity of the third element. Because the third and second persons of the Trinity are distinct in role (as the Christian Scriptures report), it is possible that the beings formed by the respective trichotomous unions would be metaphysically distinct. In addition, the potential for distinction in role is even greater than the metaphysical distinction itself.

Furthermore, another argument may be put forward weakly. Perhaps, again in crude fashion, God’s Word requires singularity whereas God’s Spirit permits plurality. If the role of the Spirit of God is to desire and receive the Word of God, then the situation reduces essentially to transmission and reception—one point of transmission allows for multiple points of reception. Where God’s Word must be one, his recipients could be many.

Concerning the non-divinity of normal human beings, one need only retreat into the amorphous *imago dei* (image of God). To some extent, in the Christian tradition, the current and/or eventual divinity (lower case “d”) of man is a defensible concept. At the very least, some humans are described in the Bible as “children of God” or “heirs with Christ” or even the “bride of Christ” corporately. One must not assume that such conceptions predispose the theologian to immanentistic or pantheistic (or panentheistic) conclusions. Nor is this conception to be equated with theosis. Many very conservative theologians, such as Millard Erickson, hold to the

immanence of God in the universe as well as in the human being in some sense.<sup>56</sup> This link creates divinity only by association. It is a derivative divinity, and while it is true that this is a highly qualified sense, it presents a direction in which a more robust solution may eventually be found. It may be concluded, at least, that the nature of the divine third element is the cause for this ontological distinction in the two kinds of human beings under consideration.

**Monophysitism:** Apollinarianism is a subset of Monophysitism in an exemplary sense as “the mother of all monophysites.”<sup>57</sup> However, there is a feature of the larger category that must also be addressed. Are the divine and human natures blended into a single, unique kind of nature in VTE? Due to the special features of the external existential component, this is not a valid criticism, though it may seem to be valid at first glance. According to the proposed view, human nature is *already* a “blend” or a composition of some sort. Therefore, the difference is in the ingredients list not in the whole nature. At this point, another metaphysical field of study becomes the focus. What is the relationship between the individual and the parts that comprise it? How does identity change with the transplantation of parts? With these questions in mind, we might conclude that human “nature” is in some sense like Theseus’ ship, which had its planks replaced one at a time so that, after several years, the captain realized that none of the original planks remained, yet it was still the ship he knew.<sup>58</sup> It should be concluded that, with this breakdown of individuals into parts, the identity of the whole is not necessarily compromised by a difference of one part if that part performs an adequately similar role or function in two individuals.

As an example, we can suggest a man, John, who has a human body, a human soul, and a divine existential. He is human. But Adam, another typical human being, also has a human body, and a human soul, and a divine existential. Yet, Adam has a different body than John *and* a different soul! Nonetheless, they are both human. But, when we consider the God-man, the difference that is under consideration is the divine element. On what basis would one decide that

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 527.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary On the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York, Oxford University Press (US), 1993), 127.

<sup>58</sup> Roderick Chisholm, “Identity Through Time,” in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, ed. Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 174.

the status of the divine component *must* be of one sort versus another if the individual is to be considered human? Clearly, we have no basis for eliminating this alternate composition from the set that includes all humans. Therefore, whether or not one would classify VTE as a form of Monophysitism, it is not a form that fails to meet the criteria for the Incarnation listed above because it would be a form that includes all of humanity.

**Reformed Christology:** Taking up the topic of dichotomy and trichotomy in humanity, the Reformed theologian G. C. Berkouwer notes that trichotomy was rejected outright by his predecessor Herman Bavinck, but he notes that the grounds upon which the Reformed tradition, as well as the entire Christian church since the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, have done so is without just cause. He does not go so far as to affirm it himself, but goes on to defend dichotomy in a materialistic age.<sup>59</sup>

With regard to Christology, Reformed thought has taken a path, in its implications, that is quite similar to what is here termed VTE Christology. Nonetheless, there is much to distinguish one from the other. The main area of distinction is in the explicit and positive character of VTE as compared to the Reformed position, which remains quite implicit metaphysically. In fact, after contemplating the main points of this new theory of the Incarnation, one reads the texts on Reformed Christology as if the authors were on the edge of a cliff; they flirt with a conclusion that they never seem to grasp. Even so, it seems that implicit claims are less likely to be discovered as heretical than explicit claims. This has led to many theological positions that speak negatively rather than positively. Thus, if the reader will allow, it seems that if the Reformed position on the Incarnation were to be worked into a formal and metaphysically explicit conception, it would look very much like VTE.

As with many other forms of Christian theology, Reformed theology allows for the unity of God to include diversity in some undescribed way.<sup>60</sup> The same diversity-within-unity concept is also seen in humanity, having been made in the image of God, as well as in the Incarnation. Yet, this diversity is not to be seen as a separation in either. The whole human bears the image of

---

<sup>59</sup> Berkouwer, 207-233.

<sup>60</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 300-301. Originally published in 1895.

God.<sup>61</sup> Not only is there diversity and unity in the Incarnation, but the divine Logos is seen as existing both within the flesh and also partially remaining outside of it (*finitum non capax infiniti*). In addition, the human element is dependent upon the deity for its existence. Yet, without a rigorous explanation as to how this could be, there is no mixing or merging of the two natures.<sup>62</sup> There is no explicit formulation in Reformed thought that explains why or how these propositions should be believed. VTE not only provides a formulation that is explicit, but provides a basis for the relationships that Reformed Christology has given.

Furthermore, Reformed theology rejects the neo-platonic, mystical fusion of the human soul with the Divine as the ultimate end for humanity that has been formulated in Roman Catholic Theology.<sup>63</sup> Yet, if this fusion is already at least partially in effect and bound up with the very ontology of the human, as Rahner's supernatural existential would suggest, then VTE is potentially useful in resolving this tension between the two traditions. That is, the union is already part of what humanity is. Moreover, if humanity incorporates divinity, in this sense, as part of the *imago Dei*, then the Reformed contention that its Christology may also avoid the Nestorian pitfall can now be represented explicitly. In fact, it is quite informative that both the Reformed and VTE Christologies succeed in avoiding Nestorianism by "holding that the union of the two natures is embedded in the unity of the person of Christ."<sup>64</sup> Again, "The two natures are indeed inseparably united with each other in the one person, but without surrendering the fact that they are not identical."<sup>65</sup> And again, "In Christ the divine and human natures, 'are bound and united with one another in such a way that they are not absorbed, or confused, or mixed, but are united or joined together in one person—the properties of the natures being unimpaired and permanent.'"<sup>66</sup> Note, in Bloesch and Rohls (and Schaff and Cochrane), there is an emphasis on the union *in* (within) the person. Only a trichotomous system, which *defines* "person" in three parts, can create such a union without fusion. Any other route leads to Apollinarianism.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 530-534.

<sup>62</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 62.

<sup>63</sup> Bavinck, 542.

<sup>64</sup> Bloesch, 62.

<sup>65</sup> Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 105. Rohls here cites P. Schaff, 1882.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 105. Rohls here cites A. C. Cochrane, 1962.

**Christology of Rahner:** One may wonder why Rahner did not conclude with something like VTE. Such a counterfactual investigation will not benefit us here, but we can at least see which direction he did, in fact, choose to take.

The theory of the Incarnation that Rahner chose to pursue is thoroughly anthropological,<sup>67</sup> and mostly subjective and interpersonal/relational. In fact, “Christology appears as the most radical foundation and elevation of [Rahner’s] anthropological theology.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, it seems quite natural, presupposing Rahner’s human-centered theology that God becomes a man eternally.<sup>69</sup>

Rahner’s Christology is termed “transcendental” and is a Christology from below, beginning from the perspective of anthropology. Though consistent with it, Rahner’s Christology is not a deduction from anthropology. It is, instead, a starting place that goes well beyond it. In this way, humanity is an incomplete version of Christ and Christology thus fulfills an incomplete or “deficient” anthropology. Rahner’s Christology, in Heideggerian language, sees “Christ as the ‘Ek-sistence’ of the human being.”<sup>70</sup>

Instead of being a metaphysical diagram, Rahner’s Christology is formulated from the existential perspective. Thus, it is the “epitome of the encounter between God and Human beings.”<sup>71</sup> As a result, the question of exactly how this is done metaphysically is not addressed rigorously by Rahner. Instead, it seems that humanity is made to exemplify an incomplete picture of what it would be like for God to become human. With the Incarnation, we see a fulfillment of this relevant capacity that serves to complete and connect humanity with God. The resulting conception of the hypostatic union that Rahner puts forward is only addressed on a relational level with little underlying explanation. This was intentional. It seems that, for Rahner, the

---

<sup>67</sup> Anthropology has classically not been limited to the empirical science of anthropology. In more recent times, its philosophical/phenomenological aspect has resided almost entirely in the continental tradition from which Rahner obtains an existentialist influence. See Herbert Spiegelberg, “The Idea of a Phenomenological Anthropology and Alexander Pfänder’s Psychology of Man,” in *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy*, ed. John Wild, et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 76. Rahner’s intellectual dependency upon that tradition, through Heidegger is clear.

<sup>68</sup> Losinger, 42.

<sup>69</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 24-33.

<sup>70</sup> Losinger, 43-44. Intermittently, Losinger quotes K. P. Fischer, *Der Mensch als Geheimnis: Die Anthropologie Karl Rahners*, pages 292 and 293. These quotes of Fischer I have placed in single quotation marks.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



reality of God is personal and that this alone undergirds the possibility of the human person that is created to be in relationship with God.<sup>72</sup> At least, for Rahner, this was the only way to make the Incarnation palatable in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century academic arena.

The only indication of a metaphysical basis for Rahner's Christology is seen in his belief that matter can transform into spirit and vice-versa. "In the incarnation, the *Logos* becomes matter, the Word becomes flesh. This is the climax of the unity of the spirit and matter ... In the incarnation, spirit is fully realized in matter."<sup>73</sup> Here may be found the missing piece of the puzzle for those attempting to get a grasp on *how* Rahner is coming to his conclusions. Yet, even here, we see a striking lack of description that could be worked into a metaphysical basis.

Thus, the trichotomous scheme used in this paper is merely based upon concepts created by Karl Rahner. His notion of the supernatural existential allows others to add a critical element to trichotomy even though he did not conceive of humanity in this way.

## VI. ANTICIPATED COUNTERARGUMENTS

VTE not only needs to distinguish itself from the existing theories, but it needs to be defensible with regard to the criticisms that are likely to be brought against it. What others have done in book length must be done here in a few pages, so the *responses* will be necessarily brief. Nevertheless, the intention is to at least be thorough in *listing* them.

**Counter to the Mood of the Day/Metaphysics is Passé:** The "dilemmas of metaphysics" have been seen, in recent centuries, as dead ends and quagmires. It is the goal, now, to escape metaphysics rather than to find a way to work out its dilemmas.<sup>74</sup> While it is true that a dichotomy of substance had led to many odd notions and debates in the pre-enlightenment theology of Europe, and it is also true that Greek metaphysics had created a system whose walls were prematurely assumed to encompass all of reality, it is also true that the current discussion of trichotomy is not necessarily about substance, and it is not necessarily making any positive metaphysical claims.

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph Paniappallil, *Jesus the Christ and Religious Pluralism: Rahnerian Christology and Belief Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 83.

<sup>74</sup> Raven, 272.

It is clear that grand, comprehensive theories have been quite unpopular in recent decades. With the rise of Deconstruction and various postmodern theologies, a certain epistemological humility seems to be much preferred to all forms of dogmatism. Thus, the mood of the academic community is anti-metaphysical (anti-system), and the study of the metaphysics of the Incarnation is likely to be seen as presumptuous even before it is begun. Yet, it should be clear that the utility of the VTE proposal does not directly involve a metaphysical view. Instead, by showing that the doctrine of the Incarnation is not necessarily incoherent, VTE is merely showing that there is one way for the problem to be understood rationally. It is capable of appealing both to those who hold to any rational metaphysical reality as well as to those who eschew it completely. That is, for those who disdain metaphysics, the rationality or irrationality of the Incarnation is of little concern, but for those who require logical coherence, *only* the solutions that lie in the area of metaphysics will be acceptable. Thus, this formulation can make the Incarnation more acceptable to the latter group without making it less palatable to the former.

Furthermore, this proposal is not limited to the platonic dualism that dominated the early Christologies. It is capable of being formulated within a process metaphysical system. While the congruity with Process *Theology* is likely to be a bit more forced, the main focus of VTE is relational, thus it is compatible with a metaphysics that substitutes relationships for substances. While the trichotomous diagram is likely to be understood as a combination of three substances, it is important to realize that the three aspects are defined mainly by their relationship to the other parts. Thus, their attributes are imputed. One need only refer to relationships between “actual occasions” in order to seamlessly transition into the Process perspective. (Note: The Process notions involving an immanent, panentheistic God would probably be less compatible. Yet, even here, VTE may permit a variation that works.)

**Two Minds:** Despite being one person, would the VTE Christ have two minds? First, being of the same nature as is found in “normal” human beings, the result of the proposed formulation is not any more schizophrenic than the rest of humanity. Second, there may be a sense in which it is correct to notice two minds here, but not in the relevant sense. Thus, the

criticisms leveled by Erickson against the “Two Minds” theory of Thomas V. Morris do not apply here.<sup>75</sup>

**Effects upon Faith and Practice of Christianity:** A theory that answers all of the criteria for the Incarnation cannot possibly harm any doctrines that are based *upon* those criteria. While it is true that many Christians have ceased their Trinitarian and Christological investigations and currently rest in inescapable mystery and ineffability in the Godhead, it is hard to imagine that all but the most die-hard Fideists would reject a rational formulation that makes sense of such an important element in the Christian faith.

However, invoking the theology of Rahner, in small part, may call to the minds of many a significant divergence from their own theological ideas. For example, the notion that humans have the capacity to “figure God out” on their own (without grace) or that they have an innate capacity to know God is abhorrent to theologians such as Barth.<sup>76</sup>

Instead of a God above or even inside of us, Rahner’s view of God places him in front of, or along side of humanity.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, as seen by Küng, Rahner’s concepts may very easily be steered into various forms of functionalism.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, of course, there are other avenues of thought to which Rahner’s unique ideas have led. In response, it must be pointed out that this paper does not depend upon anything in Rahner but the notion of the supernatural existential. While this is central to the theology of Rahner, it is used here only in a very limited sense. Thus, it is contended that widespread theological effects need not occur. One’s theology need not be compatible with all or even most of Rahner’s in order to make use of VTE Christology. In other words, elements of the supernatural existential can be used in isolation to resolve the otherwise mysterious Incarnation.

Similar to the Free-Will Defense that has been used to answer the Logical Problem of Evil, any rational solution, whether ultimately correct or not, will have the effect of silencing

---

<sup>75</sup> Erickson, 557-558.

<sup>76</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 56.

<sup>77</sup> Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J. R. Stephenson (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark Ltd, 1987), 400.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 539-540.

claims that the Incarnation necessarily involves a hard logical contradiction. Any utility beyond this initial goal must be pursued in a much more rigorous manner. As a result, VTE may not have any effect at all on the practice of Christianity except to tip the balance away from the Fideist camp.

**VTE Christology Makes the God-Man Too Similar to Humanity:** This is the very same problem that led Apollinaris to formulate his Christology. He, like Athanasius, was concerned to distinguish between the kind of “inspiration” that occurred with the prophets (the divine entering *into* man) and the Incarnation (the divine *becoming* man). But, where Athanasius failed to make any positive assertions at all, Apollinaris failed *in* his positive assertion.<sup>79</sup> It is at this point that VTE succeeds. It makes the *humanity* of Jesus identical to that of every other human being. The only difference is in the identity and/or role of the divine component. Yet, this difference is sufficient to posit the *possibility* of the soteriologically essential distinction between a normal human being and the God-man. Put simply, it is a difference that allows for the meeting of the criteria listed in this paper.

As mentioned earlier, there may be room to argue for the possibility of the plurality of the Spirit-Human link (normal humanity) and the necessary singularity of the Logos-Human link (Christ’s humanity). This argument is weak, but it remains sufficient to allow for the *possibility* of the conclusion.

Of course, the situation may not be black and white. There may be degrees of “strength” or “nearness” in the external existential. Thus, not only may one normal human differ from another in this way, but the difference between Jesus and the rest of humanity may become quite pronounced, quantitatively, as well. The “holy mystery” that remains transcendent to normal humanity may actually be fully immanent, or maximized, within the God-man.<sup>80</sup> This would *add* a quantitative distinction to the already-mentioned qualitative distinction.

**VTE Has Not Addressed Soteriology or Pneumatology:** These are related, but distinct issues. Perhaps it is premature to mention this as a potential criticism, but it is important to

---

<sup>79</sup> Esler, 594.

<sup>80</sup> Grenz and Olson, 243.

recognize the need for the implications of VTE to be worked out in other areas of theology and, perhaps, even philosophy.

**Contra Trichotomy, Does Death Alter Definition of Humanity:** In a trichotomous scheme, one must consider how the loss of one or more of the elements would affect the status of the person. Obviously, according to most Christian systems, both normal humanity as well as the person of the Incarnation can survive the loss of the physical body. If one considers situations where the spirit is lost as well, then it is clear that only the soul is the truly human or personal element.

Yet, it remains *possible* that the loss of the external existential would destroy the person. In fact, this was the position taken by Rahner himself. Without the supernatural existential, a person could not be considered truly human.<sup>81</sup> If this is the case, and it is at least possible that it is, then this criticism fails to preclude the possibility of a trichotomous diagram wherein the loss of the body is tolerable but not preferred. In medicine, similar situations involve the loss of various organs or functions. If this is to be an analog for the current discussion, we can note that it is truly debatable whether the loss of any one human function removes the status of humanity.

**The Number of Wills in the Incarnated Man (Monothelism?):** Whence the will? Obviously, a very important topic, but it need not be considered here because the source of the will is not a determining factor in this discussion. That is, since the will of a normal human is variously proposed along a spectrum (metaphysical/libertarian freedom, divine influence, divine control), the will of Jesus *qua* human can be described in each of the same ways because his humanity is identical to everyone else's. Thus, it is conceivable that any of the three options can be worked into a VTE Christology so long as the same application is made to the rest of humanity.

## VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

One need not be an adherent of libertarian free will to appreciate the accomplishment made by the Freewill Defense of the Logical Problem of Evil. Its purpose was to show that the logical form of the problem had at least one logical solution. As a result, there *is no longer* a

---

<sup>81</sup> Badcock, 145.

logical problem. Instead, only an evidential problem remains. In similar fashion, one need not be a trichotomist, an adherent of Greek-style metaphysics, or even a theist to appreciate what is being argued here. The goal has been merely to provide *one* answer that is at least *possible*. The result should be to move the debate to evidential territory.

There seems to be no advantage to remaining on the *via negativa* if one has an option to proceed with the *via positiva*. Generally speaking, theologians have avoided making positive metaphysical formulations for quite some time with good reason, yet perhaps that reason is no longer relevant. Rather than worrying about the threat of heretical condemnation, perhaps, in a diverse and postmodern climate, the threat of leading millions down an erroneous path is not so great. Because the Christian community is already multifarious, real competition between ideas may have a value that outweighs the risks of hypothesizing.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Badcock, Gary. "Karl Rahner, the Trinity, and Religious Pluralism," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 143-154. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, trans. John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Berkouwer, G. C. *Man: The Image of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962.
- Bloesch, Donald G. *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Chisholm, Roderick "Identity through Time," in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, ed. Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman, 173-185. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998.
- Erickson, Millard J. *The Word Became Flesh*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991.
- Esler, Philip Francis. *The Early Christian World*, vol. I. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Grenz, Stanley J. and Roger E. Olson. *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992.
- Kelly, J. N. D. *Early Christian Doctrines*, revised ed., 2nd printing. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2004.
- Kilby, Karen. *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Küng, Hans. *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J. R. Stephenson. Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark Ltd, 1987.
- Losinger, Anton. *The Anthropological Turn: The Human Orientation of the Theology of Karl Rahner*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom. New York, Fordham University Press, 2000.
- Olson, Roger E. *The Story of Christian Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- Pailin, David A. *The Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning Theological Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Paniappallil, Joseph. *Jesus the Christ and Religious Pluralism: Rahnerian Christology and Belief*

- Today*. New York: Crossroad, 2001.
- Phan, Peter C. *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1988.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "The Free Will Defense." in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennet, 22-49. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Purcell, Michael. *Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner & Levinas*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998.
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych. New York: Seabury, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Raven, Charles E. *Apollinarianism: An Essay on the Christology of the Early Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923.
- Reno, R. R. *The Ordinary Transformed: Karl Rahner and the Christian Vision of Transcendence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Roberts, Louis. *The Achievement of Karl Rahner*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967.
- Rohls, Jan. *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.
- Rorem, Paul. *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*. New York, Oxford University Press (US), 1993.
- Roy, Louis. *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Spiegelberg, Herbert. "The Idea of a Phenomenological Anthropology and Alexander Pfänder's Psychology of Man," in *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy*, ed. John Wild, et al., 75-85. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967.
- Vass, George. *The Mystery of Man and the Foundations of a Theological System: Understanding Karl Rahner*, vol. 2. London: Sheed & Ward, 1985.