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Atonement, Christology and the Trinity: Making Sense of Christian Doctrine

By Vincent Brümmer

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0-7546-5225-4/0-7546-5230-0.

[1] In the clear style characteristic of his other writings, Brümmer's new book offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing task of formulating Christian theology in a way that 'makes sense' in contemporary culture. He explores three interrelated themes that are central to the Christian faith – Atonement, Christology, Trinity – and provides a philosophical and theological interpretation of this 'matrix of faith' in the context of the human search for ultimate happiness.

[2] Brümmer divides his project into four parts. The Prologue (Part I) consists of a single introductory chapter: 'The Intelligibility of Christian Doctrine.' He notes that many people, including Christians, find many aspects of Christian doctrine unintelligible, and calls for new forms of interpretation. Brümmer's contribution is both historical and constructive. He shows how philosophy has shaped particular formulations of these doctrines in the past and attempts to articulate them afresh in a contemporary context. Brümmer also insists that theology must not be merely speculative but grounded in the real existential experience of life. Within the 'form of life' (Wittgenstein) that is Christian existence, theology tests its metaphors or pictures in order to solve 'puzzles' (contradictions or inconsistencies). Brümmer argues that theological language can make sense of doctrine without reducing (or 'comprehending') the mystery of God.

[3] In Part II, 'Fellowship with God: The Matrix of Faith,' he outlines this form of life out of which Christian metaphors arise. Chapter 2 refigures the concept of *eudaimonia*, arguing that ultimate happiness depends on fellowship with God. Brümmer suggests that we appropriately desire to be 'rich and famous,' but spells these out in terms of having what we need for fellowship with God. Building on themes from his book *The Model of Love*, he reiterates the metaphorical link between human and divine love. Finally, he identifies the problem that keeps us from fulfilling our *daimon* as estrangement from God, which causes unhappiness.

[4] In Chapter 3, Brümmer explores the Christian understanding of the solution to this problem of estrangement—reconciliation with God. Arguing that the price of reconciliation must be paid by the one who forgives, he outlines the ways in which divine forgiveness is similar and dissimilar to human forgiveness. Brümmer emphasizes the need for a change of heart, the necessary conditions which are provided by divine grace. The Christian matrix of faith is succinctly

summarized at the end of this chapter:

... ultimate happiness consists in enjoying the loving fellowship of God. In such fellowship, God makes our ultimate happiness his very own concern, and we identify with God by making his will our own and living our lives joyfully in accordance with it. Because of our finitude and fallibility, however, we are unable to maintain this loving identification with God consistently, if at all. We therefore become estranged from God and can only regain ultimate happiness by being reconciled with him. The necessary and sufficient conditions for such reconciliation are divine forgiveness and, on our part, repentance and a change of heart by which we can again identify with God's will and live our lives joyfully in accordance with it. In order to achieve such a change of heart, we need first to realize that we can never be ultimately happy in our state of estrangement from God. Secondly, we need that God should *enlighten* our minds to know his will for us, *empower* our wills that we may become able consistently to do his will and *inspire* our hearts that we may seek his will joyfully out of love and not merely out of duty [p. 60, emphasis his].

[5] The largest part of the book is Part III, which is Brümmer's constructive proposal for 'Interpreting the Matrix.' Here he attempts to articulate the doctrines of Atonement, Christology and the Trinity in a way that makes sense in the existential context of the search for ultimate happiness.

[6] Chapter 4 argues that 'Atonement' is the appropriate point of departure; we start where we are, in our estrangement and longing for happiness, i.e., for at-one-ment with God. Brümmer traces some of the major ways in which patristic theologians articulated the idea of atonement, explaining how the Platonic view of 'universals' impacted their use of metaphors. He is particularly critical of 'penal substitution' models, which were so deeply influenced by Anselm. This approach is objectionable for several reasons, but especially because it seems to contradict the biblical claim that atonement is something done by God and not to God, and it appears willing to make sense of the demands of retributive justice at the expense of a focus on restoring fellowship. Brümmer wants to emphasize the importance of this loving fellowship, and insists that atonement is the work of God who provides the necessary conditions for reconciliation by bearing the cost of sin and paying the price of forgiveness. God's fundamental saving acts involve the bestowing of gifts which open the way for our hearts to be changed so that we may be reconciled.

[7] These observations about God's saving works lead naturally to the question of how the role played by Jesus of Nazareth in this gifting and reconciliation should shape our Christology. Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the debates that led to the Definition of Chalcedon. Brümmer concludes that its significance is primarily regulative, and even suggests that it shows the inability of Platonic philosophy to adequately serve as a basic metaphor for Christology. He focuses more on the 'function' of Christ, arguing that the question of the 'nature' of Christ is not central to Scripture nor the existence of Christian life. Nevertheless, exploration of the function of Christ in the agency of divine forgiveness leads him, as it did the patristics, to the conclusion that Jesus must in some sense have been 'fully divine.' We are no longer in fellowship with God, and insofar as only God can provide the

conditions for restoration, and the love of Christ has this restorative effect, Jesus is ‘very God.’ In addition to being the revelation or ‘icon’ of God, however, Jesus is also the manifestation of the will of God for humanity, and so ‘very man.’ For Brümmer, ‘Jesus was divine in the sense that his life (and his death) revealed to us the love of God, and his knowledge and power were such that he *knew how* to live this life and had the ability to do so within the limits of human existence. . . the divinity of Jesus did not override the limits of his humanity, but manifested itself *within* these limits’ (89).

[8] In Chapter 6 Brümmer turns to the doctrine of the Trinity. He outlines the way in which all three ‘Persons’ of the Trinity are involved in reconciling us to God by adapting St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s model of the three ‘freedoms’ that God grants in order for us to be reconciled. These are the freedom of choice (or freedom from necessity), the freedom of council (or freedom from sin), and the freedom of pleasure (or freedom from suffering). According to Brümmer, the freedom of the will is a gift of creation, a necessary condition for overcoming our estrangement from God. As a result of the Fall we are estranged, but through Christ we are enlightened and empowered, liberated to know God and make his will our own. Through the Spirit we are inspired and united with God in ultimate happiness. This ‘trinitarian’ structure of divine agency is the starting point for Brümmer’s analysis and critique of ‘social’ trinitarianism; he opts for a form of ‘Latin’ trinitarianism, in which the emphasis is on God as a single individual.

[9] Part IV consists of a single chapter, ‘Dialogue and the Matrix of Faith.’ Here Brümmer argues that the monotheism that underlies his proposal could facilitate a more robust dialogue with the other Abrahamic faiths (Judaism and Islam), which could accept the basic matrix he described in Part II, even though only Christians will interpret it in the way outlined in Part III.

[10] As with every good book of philosophical theology, Brümmer’s proposal raises many important questions for systematic theology. Is the decision between a ‘Latin’ and a ‘Social’ model of the Trinity a choice forced upon us by particular ways of construing the concept of ‘person?’ Does dependence on the Augustinian category of the ‘Fall’ of humanity make sense in light of contemporary science? How are we to articulate the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in dialogue with other religious traditions?

[11] I heartily recommend Brümmer’s philosophical exploration of these central Christian doctrines, not only because it moves the conversation forward materially but also because it formally opens up new conceptual space that invites systematic reflection on these significant questions.