

In Defence of the Crucified God

Richard Bauckham, Reader in Christian Thought,
University of Manchester

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Moltmann's understanding of the cross as an event of divine suffering contains valuable insights, but needs certainly some clarification and perhaps some qualification.

(1) The problem of patristic Christology

A discussion can usefully begin with the problem of patristic Christology, which, as Moltmann correctly sees, enshrined the contradiction which has always hampered the development of a thorough-going theology of the cross: 'since that time most theologians have simultaneously maintained the passion of Christ, God's Son, and the deity's essential incapacity for suffering – even though it was the price of having to talk paradoxically about "the sufferings of the God who cannot suffer."' But in doing this they have simply added together Greek philosophy's "apathy" axiom and the central statements of the gospel. The contradiction remains – and remains unsatisfactory' (*The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* p. 22).

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From the point of view of the problem of divine suffering, patristic Christology had two rather different sides to it. On the one hand, it should be recognized that in Alexandrian Christology, as represented especially by Cyril of Alexandria, and in Chalcedonian orthodoxy, especially as clarified by the fifth ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople of 553, it was very important to be able to say that God the *Logos* was the subject of the passion and death of Jesus. Such language was as old as Ignatius of Antioch, who spoke of 'the passion of my God,' and the paradoxes it engendered were equally traditional: Melito of Sardis (frg. 13) already writes, 'the invisible was seen..., the impassible suffered, the immortal died, the heavenly one was buried.' In the Alexandrian tradition a major concern in Christology became the need to maintain the single divine subject of the whole incarnate life, so that to be able to say that 'God was born' (and therefore Mary was 'Mother of God') and 'God suffered' were treated as the shibboleths of orthodoxy. The Antiochenes resisted such statements because they seemed to make divine nature passible, but the Alexandrians insisted on them because only in this way could the work of salvation be

God's work. God the *Logos* must be the one and only subject of the whole of the incarnate life of Christ, including especially the redemptive passion and death. They allowed no human subject in Christ to whom such experiences could be attributed. That Chalcedon itself taught this Cyrilline doctrine of a single divine subject of the incarnation, to whom the suffering of Christ must be attributed, was not clear in the period immediately after Chalcedon, when its defence against the so-called Monophysites was in the hands of theologians who interpreted it in an Antiochene way, but its meaning was eventually clarified through the theopaschite controversy of the sixth century, in which the so-called Neo-Chalcedonians promoted a Cyrilline interpretation of Chalcedon, which was endorsed by the Council of Constantinople of 553. The significance of the theopaschite controversy has been undeservedly neglected by modern theologians who have tended to see Chalcedon as the conclusion of the patristic christological debate, so far as its relevance for later theology goes. Moltmann, who notes the controversy, incorrectly states that the theopaschite formula, 'One of the holy Trinity suffered in the flesh,' was rejected (*The Crucified God* 228).¹ In fact, it was endorsed by the Council of Constantinople, which maintained that 'Jesus Christ who was crucified in the flesh is true God and the Lord of glory and one of the Holy Trinity' (the statement alludes to 1 Corinthians 2:8 as the proof-text for saying that God was crucified). Such language was nothing new, but the Council established, probably quite correctly,² that Chalcedonian orthodoxy entailed it.

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Moltmann probably underestimates this side of patristic Christology,³ but he correctly notes that the Fathers found it wellnigh impossible to see the suffering thus attributed to God as a real experience of suffering for God (*The Crucified God* 227-9). According to the doctrine of the two natures, also established at Chalcedon, God in the incarnation is the subject of two natures, his own impassible divine nature and the passible human nature he assumes in incarnation. To say that God suffered meant that he was the subject of the sufferings of his human nature. He who in his own divine nature is impassible suffered in his human nature. The Fathers might have resolved the paradox by saying that only in incarnation can God suffer, but in fact the axiom of divine impassibility was so strong that they usually resolved the paradox by minimizing the reality of the suffering for God.

What Cyril seems to mean by the claim that God 'suffered impassibly' is that the *Logos* was aware of the sufferings of his human nature, accepted them as his own, because the human nature is his, but did not experience them as sufferings. No doubt this did not seem as docetic then as it does to us, because of the contemporary ideal of human detachment from suffering.⁴ But it is logically unsatisfactory, because there can be no such thing as suffering unless *someone* actually suffers. Since Cyril denies a human subject in Christ, the crucifixion can be described as suffering only if God experiences it as suffering. He cannot simply acknowledge the suffering as his own without experiencing it as suffering, because unless he experiences it as suffering no suffering exists for him to own. In this sense the Antiochenes were correct: the only way to preserve the reality of Christ's human experience and the absolute impassibility of God was to attribute the former to the man Jesus, a human subject not identical with the *Logos*. Chalcedonian orthodoxy, with its single divine subject in Christ, must logically deny either that any suffering took place when Jesus was crucified or that God is absolutely impassible. But it would be quite coherent to claim that God can suffer *only* in incarnation, that is, only by experiencing the human experience of Jesus as his own.

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(2) God's incarnate suffering

While it is true that the Fathers' Christology was hampered by their Platonic definition of divine nature, the problem raised by patristic Christology cannot be solved simply by rejecting their definition of divine nature, as Moltmann does. Taking incarnation seriously requires us to assert that divine nature – what it is for God to be God – includes the possibility of being human, that is, of making his own all the finite experience of a fully human life, of course without ceasing to be God. It is not possible to define divine nature in such a way as to exclude the properties of being human, as the Fathers did, and then unite the two natures, without separation or confusion, in the divine person of the *Logos*. Unless divine nature includes the possibility of being human, incarnation is not possible. But, on the other hand, incarnation does not mean a general dissolution of the difference between divine and human natures. Only in the unique instance of the man Jesus is God human in the full sense that he is all that it means to be a finite human creature. At this point, isolating the issue of suffering can be misleading. Whatever we may say about suffering, we are bound, if we take incarnation seriously, to distinguish between what can be said of God *as human* (in the incarnation) and what can be said of him *as God* (outside incarnation). Even if we took the most anthropomorphic language of the Old Testament as the criterion of what can be said of God, still many statements remain which can only be made of God as the subject of the human life of Jesus: that he eats, gets tired, sleeps, is afraid, dies. In fact, Moltmann's title makes just such a statement about God: that he was crucified. Precisely in order to preserve the reality of the incarnation, we must not abolish the difference between what is possible for God in incarnation and what is otherwise possible for God. In order to say that God

suffered crucifixion, we need to be able to assert, not that some kinds of human experience have analogies in the divine experience, but that incarnation, which entails all the utterly and precisely human experience of a fully human life, is really possible for God. Then it follows that God suffered crucifixion in exactly the same way as it follows that God was suckled at Mary's breast and slept in a boat on the sea of Galilee.

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I do not make this point in order to deny that God can suffer outside the incarnation. That question is still open. But it is important to be clear that, whatever may be said about God's suffering outside the incarnation, his human suffering as Jesus is unique, since this is precisely *human* suffering. There is a danger that a doctrine of divine passibility can promote its own peculiar kind of docetism. In other words, we may think of the suffering of Jesus as the kind of suffering which we suppose to be attributable to God, unconsciously reducing its fully human character and forgetting that the point of the doctrine of the incarnation is that in Jesus' case his utterly human suffering – his fear in Gethsemane, his loneliness as friends desert him, the excruciating physical agony, and so on – is precisely as utterly human suffering attributable to God. The inattentive reader of Moltmann's account of the cross as an event between the divine persons may succumb to this kind of docetism. It is not Moltmann's intention. What he wishes to say is that the thoroughly human history of Golgotha takes place within the relationships of the Trinity. But his general discussion of divine passibility, which does not distinguish God's suffering as human from his suffering as God, could mislead. We have noted Moltmann's admission that the doctrine of divine impassibility was legitimate insofar as it 'really says that God is not subjected to suffering in the same way as transient, created beings' (TKG 23). But applied too simply to God's suffering in Jesus this could seriously mislead. In Jesus God suffered precisely the sufferings of a transient, created being. Moltmann's statement applies to God's incarnate suffering only in the sense that in the act of incarnation God voluntarily assumed all the human experience of the man Jesus.

(3) God's non-incarnate suffering

In the incarnation God the Son suffers human suffering. Should we, with Moltmann, go on to say that in the event of the cross the Father also suffers, though differently? Three lines of argument may take us in that direction: (a) If incarnation is possible for God, then God is not limited by the traditional metaphysical attributes. (b) In the human life of the Son of God, the Father is revealed. But what is most revelatory of God in the human life of Jesus is his loving identification with the godless and the

godforsaken by which he shares and suffers their fate. The supreme revelation of the Father's love is not a human example of purely active benevolence, but the *suffering* love of the crucified Jesus.

But what is most revelatory of God in the human life of Jesus is his loving identification with the godless and the godforsaken by which he shares and suffers their fate

.So it is to this kind of love – love which through involvement with the beloved suffers – that we should consider God's love analogous. God's incarnate love in Jesus is of this kind because the incarnation is grounded in this kind of love in God. Of course, to speak of God's suffering love – other than in the incarnation – is to use anthropomorphic analogy. All personal language about God is anthropomorphic analogy. But this no more enables us to conclude that God does not really suffer than it enables us to conclude that God does not really love. The point is that whereas the tradition of metaphysical theism held that purely active benevolence was the only kind of human love which has an analogy in God, the cross requires us to say that it is human suffering love to which God's love is analogous. Moltmann's claim that the Father suffers in grief the death of the Son on the cross is bold anthropomorphism, but consistent with much biblical language. As theology it may be criticized only if its analogical character is neglected and it is supposed to claim that we know what it was like for the Father to suffer the death of Jesus. Of course, we do not know what anything is like for God, only that some things in human experience have an analogy in divine experience. What does lay Moltmann open to the charge of speaking mythologically about the divine experience is his failure to distinguish, in his account of the cross as a trinitarian event, the human suffering of Jesus, which is human suffering, from the divine suffering of the Father, which is only analogous to human suffering. If we could speak as literally about the Father's experience as we can about the human experience of the incarnate Son, incarnation would not be necessary.

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(c) The third line of argument is to take seriously the Old Testament revelation of God as the context for understanding the incarnation and the cross. Against the background of the Old Testament, the incarnation is in one sense something quite new, but in another sense continuous with the God of Israel's involvement with his people and their sufferings. Moltmann adumbrates this line of argument in his use of Abraham Heschel's pioneering study of the *pathos* of God in the prophets,⁵ but it could be taken further with the aid of other studies in Old Testament theology,⁶ such as Terence Fretheim's recent book

on the suffering of God in the Old Testament.⁷ Such studies not only show that the suffering of God is a far more pervasive theme in the Old Testament than the classic passages usually cited might indicate. They also take the Old Testament's anthropomorphic language about God seriously as revelatory of God, instead of dismissing as *mere* anthropomorphism not to be taken seriously, whatever does not accord with the traditional metaphysical concept of God.

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One way of relating the Old Testament tradition of God's suffering to the cross as an event of divine suffering between the Father and the Son might be, in summary, as follows. God in the Old Testament suffers empathetically *with* his people in their sufferings. He also suffers *grief because* of his people when they reject him and are lost to him. Finally, both these kinds of suffering constitute a redemptive suffering *for* his people.⁸ In Jesus God's identification with people in their sufferings reaches a new and absolute depth. He goes beyond empathy to an act of solidarity in which he suffers as one of the godless and the godforsaken, sharing their fate of abandonment. But this identification of God with those who suffer (in the person of the Son) at the same time causes him grief (in the person of the Father). In the Father's suffering of the death of Jesus God's grief at the loss of those who are estranged from him reaches a new and absolute depth. He suffers that loss as the loss of his own Son identified with the godless and the godforsaken. Thus human estrangement from God comes between the Father and the Son, they suffer it in their common love for the world, and their mutual, but differentiated suffering overcomes the estrangement and so proves to be redemptive suffering for the world.

(4) Anthropomorphism and apophaticism

Finally, we return to what Moltmann calls metaphysical theism and offer a critique somewhat different from (though not contradictory to) Moltmann's. The tradition of metaphysical theism in Christian theology could be seen as having two rather different strands in it, both deriving from its origins in Platonism. The two strands may be called anthropomorphic⁹ and apophatic. The first, dependent on the Platonic view that the human intellect is the element in human nature which is akin to the divine, conceives God as the supreme *Nous*. The human being is most akin to God when the mind, which is the true self, abstracted from the body and all relations with the material world, contemplates eternal, unchanging truth. God is 'without body, parts or passions,' as in the Platonic view the human mind can be when it recollects its true nature. Divine *apatheia*, therefore, is not so much a definition of God as wholly other than us, but rather the ideal to which Platonic humanity itself aspires. For this view of God as the supreme Mind, to attribute knowledge and will to God is appropriate, if analogical, but to attribute emotion or bodily sensation to God is inappropriate. The latter is considered anthropomorphic, the former not. In reality, of course, this view is selective anthropomorphism. It speaks of God in terms of one

facet of human personality (impassive reason), not of others, and corresponds to an anthropology which treated this facet as the highest element of human nature. Biblical anthropomorphism is also selective, but not in this way. The biblical God does not, for example, eat, sleep, fear, doubt or die, but he is, for example, grieved and roused to anger, he desires and feels compassion, he hides his face and shows strength with his arm, just as much as he knows and wills. The deep-rooted prejudice that reference to God's reason and will is more literal than reference to God in emotional and physical terms derives from Platonism, rather than the Bible. It would be better to recognize that all personal language about God is equally anthropomorphic. Such language should be justified not by a Platonic anthropology in which the human mind is the image of God, but by a biblical anthropology in which human personality as a psychosomatic whole and in community is the image of God.

The second strand in the tradition of metaphysical theism is negative theology. It does not tell us what God is like (he is the supreme intellect) but what he is not (he is not finite like us). All the traditional metaphysical attributes can be understood in this sense: God is not limited by time as we are, God is not limited by space as we are, God is not limited in knowledge or power as we are, God is not subject to change or suffering as finite creatures are. God transcends finite existence in every respect: this is all the metaphysical attributes really tell us about God. In Platonism, this kind of negative theology gave God a transcendence which removed him from all relationship with the world: the metaphysical attributes exclude their finite opposites and make it impossible for God to relate to this world. The great struggle of patristic theology was to recognize God's transcendence as the wholly other whose incomparable difference from creation does not exclude but enables his incomparably intimate relationship with his creation, in immanence and incarnation. Probably the most effective way of continuing that struggle is to understand the metaphysical attributes not as excluding but as including their opposites.¹⁰ That God transcends time need not mean that he cannot also relate to us in time. That God transcends space need not mean that he cannot also relate to us in space. That God is not subject to change or suffering as we are need not mean that he cannot change or suffer in any way at all. That God transcends every human limitation need not prevent him also assuming every human limitation in incarnation.

God suffers, but as the one who transcends all finite suffering.

To speak as adequately as we can of God we need to use both anthropomorphic and negative language, but not to confuse the two.¹¹ Negative theology should not inhibit the use of anthropomorphism, but stands as a permanent qualification of all anthropomorphism. God suffers, but as the one who transcends all finite suffering. We may say that there is something analogous to human suffering in the divine experience, but we may not thereby claim that we know what it is like for God to suffer. We might even say, with Cyril, that God suffers impassibly, but not, as he did, of the incarnation. The incarnation, in which God is not like us but actually one of us, anchors all our language of God

in his concrete human history. But the ocean in which it floats is the boundless mystery of God's infinity.

¹ Fiddes, *Creative Suffering*, 115 n. 11, says that 'while approved by the second Council of Constantinople in 553, it was finally rejected by the Western Church.' This is also incorrect.

² For the view that neo-Chalcedonianism was faithful to the intentions of Chalcedon, see P.T.R. Gray, *The Defence of Chalcedon in the East (451-553)* (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

³ The discussion in CG 231-232 uses the term 'person' in a more Antiochene than Alexandrian-Chalcedonian way ('the whole of the divine and human person of Christ'), and so seems to miss the point that the *divine person* suffers and dies, though not in his divine nature.

⁴ Cf. F.M. Young, 'A Reconsideration of Alexandrian Christology,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 22 (1971) 103-14.

⁵ On Heschel, see Bauckham, "'Only the suffering God",' 9-10, and more fully: J.C. Merkle, 'Heschel's Theology of Divine Pathos,' in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. J.C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan/London: Collier Macmillan, 1985) 66-83; J.C. Merkle, *The Genesis of Faith: The Depth Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Macmillan/London: Collier Macmillan, 1985) 130-135.

⁶ E.g. E.S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Suffering*, tr. J.E. Stealy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) 98-102; E. Jacob, 'Le Dieu souffrant, un thème théologique vétérotestamentaire,' *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983) 1-8.

⁷ T.E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Overtures to Biblical Theology 14; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁸ These three kinds of suffering of God in the Old Testament are distinguished and discussed by Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, chaps 7-9.

⁹ I use the term 'anthropomorphic' in the general sense of applying to God language which we otherwise use of human persons, not merely in the sense of attributing the physical features of human persons to God.

¹⁰ Cf. H. Küng's notion of the 'dialectic of the attributes': *The Incarnation of God*, tr. J.R. Stephenson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987) 445-453.

¹¹ On this, cf. S. Tugwell, 'Spirituality and Negative Theology,' *New Blackfriars* 68 (1987) 257-263.