

‘But you, who do you say I am?’

The will as key to Christology

¶ *Esteemed board and members and guests of the Evangelical Theological Faculty,*

‘But you, who do you say I am?’ At one occasion Jesus poses this question to his disciples, none of whom were theologians. At another occasion he asked the theologians, many of whom were no disciples. –A beautiful feature of our Faculty is that a living relationship with God is considered vital to theology. The motto of the ETF website reads: ‘Faith seeking understanding’ (the Latin is also on the invitation for tonight). We aspire a discipline and disciplines guided by discipleship. We hope for reflections on Christ and Christian life that rise from following him. In this context it is a challenge to keep our minds open to legitimate insights ‘from outside’, to truth and goodness wherever it is found, and not only for apologetic but also for constructive theology. Sometimes, when understanding grows, faith too needs to adjust a little.

‘Who do you say I am?’ Jesus asks followers and non-followers, whether hardly educated or highly educated, what they think of his *person*. –The person of Jesus is a pearl treasured by the evangelical movement. I heartily agree, according to Christian faith virtually everything hinges on a personal relation with Jesus Christ. This nobility creates its own obligations, however, especially in our post-Christian world, for who is Jesus? What do we say of him when we use the traditional expression that Christ is one *persona* who is both divine and human? Can this be rendered by: one person?

Another precious idea of the evangelical movement is freedom. Freedom of the will is pivotal to conversion and the commitment to God. With his gospel God appeals to our whole being, mind, heart and body; but the will has a decisive role in the actual response. So we may ask if this also applies to Jesus himself. Does he have a will too, a human will, like ours? –In our modern minds will is intimately related to person. Having a will and the freedom to choose, more than anything else, is considered to be a prerogative of a person over any non-personal being. If Christ has a human will, why not call him a human person? And if God has a will too, Christ may be two persons. Or one person, after all?

As you can see, tonight I do not focus on our will, but on Jesus’ will. In fact, there are many things I will not speak about. Exploring a major theological theme is like entering a city, with old and new sections, with main roads and many alleys. Tonight I head for one plaza, I have a focus that may not immediately strike you as clear and relevant, but that will prove quite decisive for our view on the personhood of the one we profess to be our Lord and Savior, and neighbor and brother.

During the last centuries, in systematic theology – my specific discipline – the will of Jesus has hardly been subject to study. Instead the key to his personal identity was searched in his (self) consciousness. This is another boulevard that we will pass tonight. Doing theology from the classic *fides quaerens intellectum* tradition is a training in doing more with less.

The main question of this oration is simply this: Does the Messiah, the Son of the living God have a human will? The answer to this question makes a lot more difference than it may look at first sight. Is the human will engaged or cancelled in the most intimate union of God and man? Is Jesus with respect to willing essentially different from other human beings – from us – or is he not? I hope to

show that a so-called Alexandrian Christology, that is, a 'high' Christology emphasizing it is God who acts in the man Jesus, cannot avoid ruling out his human will and results in a reduction of the humanity of Christ to a nature. And if that happens to Christ's humanity, it may be extended to 'ordinary' human beings, and even to God. They too can be 'naturalized'. I also hope to show that avoiding this reduction will not take us to a liberal or even Nestorian Christology, claiming that the union of man and God in Christ is essentially the same as the union of any man and God. Christ is the only one who is God *and* man, both in the fullest sense possible.

1 Historical (and sometimes historic) theology

¶ Systematic theology is a discipline with a history. Let me take you briefly to those historical highlights that can lead us to the better understanding of our topic. I depart from the biblical testimony as worded in John 1:14: 'And the Word [which was with God and was God] was made flesh and lived among us, full of goodness and truth, and we have seen its glory, the glory of the only-begotten son of the Father'. The church's systematic reflection on Christ started by trusting this witness and embarked on an intense and rather contingent search for understanding it, which could prove it trustworthy indeed.

A first landmark in this quest is the discussion with Apollinaris (second half of the fourth century). Apollinaris proposed to read the phrase 'the Word was made flesh' straightforwardly. In Jesus the Word of God embodied himself. This entails that in the man Jesus the Word has taken the 'place' of a human soul or mind. In Jesus God the Son animates, and presides over, a human body. Christ is God incarnate, literally. –It is not difficult to guess a primary reply to this view. Church father Athanasius, for one, rejected it because it implies that Jesus does not have a soul and therefore cannot be truly human. In fact, having only a body would make him only half human. The first council of Constantinople (381) followed him in this assessment.

Assuming that Jesus does have a soul, a human mind – that he does have feelings and thoughts and memories essentially like other human beings – our quest is not ended but will take us one step deeper into the constitution of a human being. For in the soul there seems to be something that has a relation to the soul which looks like the relation of the soul to the body. This something, or at least an essential part of it, is the will. Thoughts and feelings appeal to the will to act upon them or not. The will decides. So maybe in Jesus the Word takes the 'place' of the human will. In this way God the Son is seated in, and presides over, a human body *and* a human soul.

There we are, we have arrived at an Alexandrian Christology, or rather an Alexandrian Christology as profiled after the most important church council on the matter. For this council, at Chalcedon (451), kept things slightly more general. It only stated that Christ is truly God and truly man, one *persona* (or *hypostasis*) with two natures, the divine nature and human nature. Whether having a human nature also includes having a human will, so that Christ has two wills, one divine and one human, was left open. That became an issue of intense debate in the following centuries.

¶ To understand the outcome of this discussion we need to make a distinction. For the term 'will' can refer to at least two things, for which we in our present languages use various terms. Willing something can mean that we desire something, that we are strongly inclined to do something. But it can

also mean that we choose something, that we consent to something or decide for it. In the work of Augustine this distinction clearly emerges, but it is not absent in Eastern (Greek) church fathers. Now our question branches off into two questions. Does Christ have a human will in the sense of human inclinations, for instance the desire to preserve his life, to feed his body or to enjoy friendship? And: does Christ (also) have a human will in the sense of a human faculty of consent, choice or decision? The Alexandrian type of Christology after Chalcedon tends to deny the latter, in order to ensure that it is God who freely speaks, feels, acts in Jesus. Nevertheless, at the Sixth Ecumenical Council, the third one held in Constantinople and the concluding council on Christology (681), it was officially stated that Christ has two wills, one divine and one human, 'will' also taken in the sense of 'faculty of decision or choice'.

Does this mean that Nestorius was rehabilitated after all, the theologian who was condemned at Chalcedon? Nestorius defended that in Christ there is a union of wills, not of nature, between God and man. To some extent this question remains open. 'Constantinople III' was mainly concerned with a consistent extrapolation of Chalcedon. If Christ has two natures, then of course two wills as well. And so the council declared that in Christ one divine person, who has the divine nature – the second person of the Trinity – took on a human nature which comprises, among other things, human inclinations (like natural desires) *and* a human faculty of consent.

This view has been labeled duotheletism and is especially indebted to Maximus Confessor († 662). Maximus, however, took another step, anticipating the next pressing question once this view is accepted. How is it that Christ, having two faculties of decision, is really one Christ? The councils had formulated this oneness in terms of personhood and initiative, which is not the same as, yet closely linked to, agency. Maximus pulls these three aspects tightly together. In Christ the human faculty of choice, like the rest of his human nature, is *used* by the Son of God. The will is a power or potency, and a power or potency is an instrument. So it is the Word that makes the human will operative. On this account it is quite legitimate to say that the Word not only acts but even wills (decides, chooses) in a human way. God the Son is the one free subject in the body and soul of Jesus.

¶ But isn't this a Pyrrhic victory, losing as much as it wins? On this view, the man primarily referred to as Jesus does not consent and decide himself. It is hard to see how this is not a serious loss to his humanity. –Remarkably, in the thirteenth century both Eastern and Western theology arrived at a critical point. In fact, Christology had run into an implicit contradiction along the better lines of both traditions. The Eastern view formulated by Maximus was consolidated by John Damascene († 749) and as such, in a church which was still undivided, it gained authority in the West. Meanwhile, thanks to a new impulse by Anselm of Canterbury († 1109), the West itself had arrived at a similar position. We heard Maximus' view: in Jesus the human will as faculty of choice is *used* by God the Son – Bonaventure († 1274), referring to Anselm, defines the will as a self-moving *instrument*. To my mind, either something is an instrument, but then it does not move itself, or it moves itself, but then it is not an instrument. I will argue that the will cannot be a self-moving instrument, for such a thing cannot exist; yet the will must be a special self-moving potency, or else there is no will, but only a nature.

Half-way the thirteenth century Alexander of Hales († 1245), who became a Franciscan at a later age, reinforced the idea of willing is self-moving and applied it to the humanity of Christ. The one person of Christ has two wills, two self-moving potencies. He is one *persona* in virtue of the higher dignity of God the Son, which makes the lower dignity of the man Jesus 'disappear' – much like the bishop of

Rom, who is also pope, can be justly addressed by just one of his titles, the highest one. The Dominican Thomas Aquinas († 1274) thought that this view is Nestorian and therefore heretic. To his mind, all human activity in Jesus, including willing, is done by God the Son. The Word is the active subject of the entire human nature and precisely this enables her to accomplish all that he came to do, like suffering, dying and rising from the dead, satisfying for sin and meriting for sinners. In Thomist Christology the human will is taken as a potency which is actualized either by a human self or by a divine self – like an instrument that can be played by different players.

At the turn of the thirteenth century the Franciscan John Duns Scotus († 1308) makes us wonder whether this view does not reduce the humanity of Christ to a nature. In fact, does it not reduce the *will* to a nature? Putting it like this allows us a quick sidestep to present day philosophy and theology, in which the prevailing view is, once more, that the will *is* a kind of nature. In recent discussions it is mainly brain science that imposes this view on many minds. –For his own move Scotus resumes an Augustinian formulation transmitted by Bernard of Clairvaux and Richard of St. Victor. The will is that power or potency that is master over its own activity. The aspect of self-movement is inadmissible and entails nothing more and nothing less than that a will determines itself to will. All other potencies or faculties do not have this mastery, they reside under the name ‘nature’. They have in common that the way in which they generate their activity is ‘given’ or ‘programmed’. A nature works as it works, it does what it does, it cannot work differently unless something or someone *else* intervenes.

¶ Now not only physical beings, but also non-physical beings have a nature. According to classical theologians even God has both a will and a nature. As for human beings, we clearly have a complex physical nature, a body. But we have a complex spiritual nature as well. In fact, the dispositional dimension in our thinking and feeling and willing works as a nature. Scotus draws the obvious conclusion: willing in the sense of being-inclined is not *willing*. A disposition is not a volition. Scotus prefers to use the term ‘will’ only for that power or potency that produces volitions – very much like we, moderns, generally do. For Christology Duns agrees with Damascene: Christ not only has the divine will, but also a human will. But this must mean that in Christ not only God, but also the *man* Jesus *wills*; *he* too is a subject, *he* too can initiate his own activity, like other human beings. If not, his human nature would consist of nature only and hence, would certainly not be fully human.

From Scotus it becomes convincingly clear that on closer inspection an ‘instrumental’ view on the will disconnects three aspects that cannot be disconnected after all: the will as potency *eliciting acts* – eliciting these acts *itself* (it is not done by something or someone else) – while having the real possibility of *not* eliciting them. Only these three aspects together can render the will’s defining feature ‘having mastery over its own act’. Take one aspect unqualified by the other two and there is no will anymore. Then there is only nature, whether physical or spiritual. This nature may not work in a necessary way, it may even work randomly; but in any event it cannot *make itself* work or not work or work differently. A nature cannot start something new and therefore cannot bear responsibility. In a culture nurtured by Old and New Testament nature cannot be a prime notion – the first word of the bible, in Thora and Gospel, Genesis and John, is: beginning.

Before I drop out of this mini-course in historical theology to think it through for my own position, we need to pose one more question to Scotus. If Christ has two wills, one divine and one human, both taken in the sense just clarified, what is it that makes Christ one? Scotus, of course, would ask, with the term coined by the early church: what is it that makes Christ one *persona*? Critically proceeding

in the line of Hales, Scotus responds that a being is a *persona* not in virtue of having a will, nor in virtue of a dignity bestowed on it. To be sure, every human being has a will together with the dignity that comes with it; but someone is a *persona* in virtue of another feature: a specific ontological independence. This independence does not add anything to the constitution of essential aspects which every human being has, like having a will, but it makes it exist in a particular way. For a being can be taken by God into a special relation to himself, or it can exist 'on its own'. As man Christ is a human individual who has a will, yet he is not his own person because his entire being is put, by God, into a unique position, in fact a twofold position: presenting him *and* the goal of creation. He is the only human being 'assumed' to this end.

2 Orthodox 'low' Christology

After an important conversion experience, during my study, I thought that a 'high' Christology ensures the best way of thinking about the magnificent figure of Christ. Especially if this view is elaborated in a 'kenotic' manner, for then it can be explained how a divine person can produce human acts of will. A being with an all-embracing range of activity can put himself in the shoes of a being with a limited range of activity (the reverse is not possible). This is basically a matter of self-limitation. 'Kenosis' means that God humbles himself, by putting himself in a position in which he uses his power and knowledge and will only to a very limited extent. When he who creates the world by his will and continues to do so, also comes into the world and acts within the restrictions of one human being, he factually confines himself to activities proper to such a being.

However, adorned and modified by this clarification the Alexandrian view still entails that Christ does not have a *human will* (will in the proper, Augustinian sense). In fact, in this way it is even more clear that Jesus has only one will, namely, the divine will; for it is the divine will that confines itself within the range and conditions of human willing. In Christ the human will is replaced by the divine will.

Kohlbrugge, a famous nineteenth century Protestant theologian, once said that we humans need to be converted twice, first from our unbelief and then from our new zeal both in faith and in the fight against unbelief. It gradually came home to me that a new-found truth can be overstated. Less can be more. I stranded in a post-Chalcedonian Alexandrian Christology, be it in a modern, kenotic form. I reencountered it in Maximus and Thomas. There is a grain of truth in Nestorius' position. When it becomes clear what must be meant by *will*, there are only two possibilities: Christ has only one will, or he has two. And then there are only three basic positions: the one will of Christ is a human will (the liberal view) – the one will of Christ is divine (the modern-orthodox view) – Christ has two wills, one human, one divine. Thomas opts for the second position, though somewhat indirectly. The result is a re-enforced Alexandrian Christology moving away from the classical-orthodox view of Chalcedon and Constantinople III. Scotus conscientiously takes the third position: duotheletism, clarified.

After the thirteenth century Thomism and Scotism are the two major orthodox types in Christology, at least in Catholic theology. When Protestant theology becomes increasingly dominated by the emerging historical-critical bible-interpretation and by the secularization of science, it is increasingly occupied by the opposition between the first and second position. In this battle the third position gets lost. Since, as I pointed out, that position is closer to the early church councils, we must say that modern orthodoxy became more or less ultra-orthodox in its need to oppose modern liberality. I

think that Scotus chose the better part. Christ who is God and man has two wills, two powers that are master over their own acts.

¶ Let me dwell on this position a little longer. A first important qualification has already been made. The mastery of the will is a precisely limited mastery. The will is only master over its own acts, over acts *of will*, volitions. What we usually call *acts* comprises much more, it generally includes an important physical component: *acting* means moving our body or a part of it. If I decide to walk, there is not only an act of my will, but also a physical reality with mechanisms somehow connected to it which, in normal conditions, are mobilized by the act of my will. These mechanisms work in their own complexities but do not work as a will, they work as a nature. If the distinction between will-power as power over volitions and will-power as power to act in the physical reality is not clear, we may ask a handicapped person. Nor is will-power by itself power over psychological or mental dispositions. This is another mastery not given with the will, but to the will, another complex facilitating power which as such can be lacking or damaged, acquired or lost in many forms and degrees.

This leads to a second qualification. The term 'self' refers to at least two distinct things. When we say that a being does a lot of things (by) *itself*, we often mean that its specific nature is 'doing' that. My body breathes, my mind is active even when I sleep. Many things we humans do are not done by our will. 'Self-done' in the strict sense is only an act of will. All other senses are derivative, starting with the (bodily) act that in normal conditions springs from an act of will, like walking or speaking. Theologically this is important because if God is the creator of our nature and will, all our natural activities do exactly what he let them do, so in a sense He is doing them. But that is not the case with will-activity. If God would do that too, He would not have created a *will*, there would not *be* a will.

The implication for Christology will be clear. Whatever Christ as man wants in the sense of wills, is not done by God. What he wants in the sense of desires is 'done' by his human nature and hence, indirectly by God. This means that the relation between Jesus and his Father is a relation of obedience. It is the man Jesus who himself wills what God the Father wills. There are *two* subjects here. Incarnation means that God, taking on a complete and concrete human nature, also takes on a human will, and that must mean: creates a second free subject. It means that God says: 'Everything this man does, assign it to me; it is not done by me but it is rightly predicated of me, consider them my acts. For this man represents me, not only in his nature, but also in his acts of will'. Thus, in 'doing what God wills' a decisive distinction must be made. When a nature, including a human nature, is doing what God wills, this nature does not have a choice, but when a will is doing what God wills, the will does have a choice. It chooses to do it.

I said that there is a relation of obedience between the *man* Jesus and *God* the Father. Obedience is a conformity of wills in which one is following the other, and in this relation there are two wills. Where the tradition speaks of the *divine* Son in relation to God the Father, there is no relation of obedience, because between God the Son and God the Father, between the Trinitarian first and second *persona*, there are no two wills, but only one. But that is something I defended on another public occasion.

A third and more existential qualification needs to be made. If Christ has a human will, how does that not jeopardize our salvation? It seems to make Jesus as fallible as we, ordinary humans, are. Could he have sinned, could his mission have failed? –If we follow the Christological position preferred by me, Jesus' sinlessness cannot be warranted by an appeal to his divinity, unless this warrant includes Christ's human willing with its freedom of choice. The warrant must be in Christ's humanity as well.

Which is possible if we take that humanity in the way classical theology took it: as an eschatological humanity. Jesus is that human being who, from conception to resurrection, received what all other human beings can receive by arriving at their destiny. Classical theology is 'thinking from the end', since that end is the very first thing in God's will, as the goal of all his acts.

Let me indicate two ways in which this eschatological humanity can be conceived, just for giving it some flesh and bone, and for showing that faith, after arriving at a better understanding, is always invited to continue its search. The first way: Christ's human sinlessness is warranted by a sound set of dispositions with which he grows up in a very good environment. In these conditions the human will, which is principally free to choose wrong, cannot but factually choose right. In this way Jesus resembles the saints in heaven, who live in the presence of God. He resembles all other human beings in that he too is given the freedom to *choose* for a life with God. Christ's human sinlessness can also be warranted by a will that is 'confirmed', that is, a will that cannot choose wrong itself. In this way Jesus resembles God, who has a will but can only choose between good options. And he would resemble other human beings if he would have a nature that is not completely sound or holy (untainted by the effects of sin in our world), yet could not 'make' him sin because in virtue of his infallibly good will he would not act upon it.

¶ So after a prolonged conversion I arrived at an orthodox but 'low' Christology. Let me show some wider implications of this position, which may also characterize my way of doing (systematic) theology. Let me start once more with the concern for salvation, which I think is supported, not endangered by this position. The New Testament testifies that Christ has saved us from sin and revealed the justice of God in doing so. Anselm has given a well-known argument showing that salvation requires satisfaction. Here I do not need to explain what he means by satisfaction, I only point at one requirement for it, namely, that man ought to give it. This in turn requires that the one giving satisfaction –who must be God as well – must have a human free will. Anselm in fact emphasizes that for satisfaction the voluntary obedience of the Son to the Father is imperative. This is Johannine diction, of course, but remarkably, Anselm describes it as the obedience of the man Jesus to the (Trinitarian) God. I think this description hits a mark. Without Christ's human free consent it is, all things considered, only God who, by means of a human nature, fulfills the demands of justice and mercy. In Christ's saving work God does have a major role, but only in such a way that there is really a human being who chooses to do what he ought to do for others in order to save them from sin.

A second, wider implication. The classical Christian notion of man as the image of God states that God, by his own initiative, created a being who looks like him in some important features. Surely one of these features is: having a will. And surely, however distorted by sin this part of the image by our actual willing may be, having a will still belongs to it. If both God and man have a will, a human being without a will cannot reflect God unless in a severely reduced way. Conversely, how can God express himself in his desire to share his goodness to a being other than himself without endowing this other with one of his own most personal features, a will? Only such a being can represent God fully. An instrument or organ never can. Moreover, only this representation makes unambiguously clear that man's freedom of will is not just a dangerous rival of God's freedom of will (which for securing God's final objectives needs to be taken out).

This calls for a still wider implication. If Christ as a human being is the image of God but primarily in an instrumental way, he can hardly be the *model* for other human beings in all that is essentially hu-

man. And then an important strand in New Testament texts – in fact the counterpart of the strand speaking of Christ as representing God – will be repressed. I mean the texts about Jesus as the first-born of creation, the crown on God's work, the actually existing prototype of all human beings. I also mean the ethical and spiritual implications of this belief, especially the call to the imitation of Christ, to Christ-conformity. Maybe someone like Francis was needed to make people, laymen and theologians alike, re-appreciate this dimension of Christian life and Christology.

This dimension has been down-tuned by a great deal of modern orthodox theology since the fourteenth, the sixteenth and especially the nineteenth century. Orthodoxy became increasingly preoccupied by the need to oppose the secularizing tendency in Western thought which reduced Christ's essential humanity to a humanity generally present in the world, not just inside but also outside a personal relation with God. Liberal theology took the man Jesus gradually to this level, while orthodox theology – did effectively something similar, but by placing him preeminently on the side of God, as his most dearest instrument in dealing with sin: which left his humanity only partially imitable. Seen in this way these theologies seem *feindliche Brüder*, for both evade the true greatness of the 'son of God and mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ', and with it the *full* appeal from his person to all human beings. A greatness that is more common, and more glorious, than could be admitted, from two opposing sides. A center was lost, in Christology, in theology, in society and culture.

A final and widest consideration. 'Evangelical' is a precious word. Wherever I hear that word, something in my heart starts to sing, it evokes a faith that does not rest until it arrives at the best that human reflection has to offer. In tradition, the term 'evangelical' is used for two major renewal movements in church and theology: the wave of Revivalism in the eighteenth to twentieth century and the Reformation wave in the fifteenth to seventeenth century. In the last decades both movements experience a need for reevaluation and resourcing. My Christological sounding suggests that this reevaluation can greatly benefit from another wave of European *réveil* which was historically the first to be called 'evangelical', namely the twelfth to fourteenth century renewal movements, especially the Franciscan movement.

For evangelical faith the person of Jesus is a pearl. To my understanding, as a human being having his own free will Jesus is a person indeed, a human person, who as such is God's persona, the second persona of the most-high person.



I cannot conclude my address without words of gratefulness. Gratefulness first of all for being recommended for my new task and for the enthusiasm by which this recommendation was accepted. Jan, Patrick and Andreas and Pim, Ron – thanks to you all. I am also grateful for the first little things I have been able to do with other colleagues, like Ad and Ruth. And for the courteous and very supporting personnel, to Liisa, Julie, Bernard and others. Some colleagues I already know for some years, like Philip, or for many precious years, like Willem, and especially Antoon – many thanks to you! I hope the circle of academic and administrative co-operation will expand over the next years. Last but not least I like to thank the ETF students I met, like Marina, I enjoy their perceptive minds.

I am glad that there is a delegation from my community in Bussum, and a impressive delegation at that. I am also very glad that my dear parents are here. And my daughter who will soon be my col-

league, with my son-in-law. Fortunately a brother is present as well. And also a sister, though only in thirty five year old footsteps . There is another last but not least: my wife, who came all the way from the new World to become the friend of my life and my travel partner in faith and understanding.

May God bless us in our lives and in our thinking, including our theological thinking. What is it that makes our lives and minds ring from their very heart? 'It existed from the beginning – we heard it, we saw it with our own eyes, we have witnessed it and touched it with our hands, *that* is what we speak about, the Word that is life'.

I have said.



Paul van Dongen: pietà (2000)