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Justice:  
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# Incarnation and Justice: Anglican Social Theology in Dialogue with Jon Sobrino

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Jonathan W. Chappell

The doctrine of the incarnation is fundamental to orthodox Christianity. If this doctrine is denied, the whole structure of Christian faith, theology and spirituality collapses. Yet for many the very notion that God became a human person is impossible to believe. This sense of incredulity is not confined to our secular, post-Enlightenment age. From the very beginning, there have been those who have rejected the claim that Jesus Christ was true God and true man, and it took a series of fierce disputes and controversies before the Church finally defined the doctrine of the incarnation.

This debate about the incarnation is of considerable significance today in the context of those liberation theologians, such as Jon Sobrino, who are committed to defending the dignity of the poor and oppressed within Latin American society. However, I shall argue here that the way Sobrino attempts to champion the poor is deeply problematic because it entails him advancing a Christology that, by minimising the incarnation, serves to undermine his otherwise laudable project. Through returning to the earliest patristic defences of the dual nature of Christ, and considering Anglican writing on social theology, particularly that of Kenneth Leech, I will present an approach to social justice that is firmly rooted in the incarnation.

## EARLY HERESIES AND THE CHALCEDON COUNCIL

One of the earliest Christian heresies which denied the incarnation was Arianism, according to which God is by necessity not only uncreated but unbegotten, absolutely incommunicable and unique. Accordingly, the Logos, whom the New Testament clearly presents as begotten from the Father, cannot be true God. Given that the Godhead is indivisible and the Logos has his being from the

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Father, it follows that the Logos, though perfect and incomparably above all other created beings, is still a mere creature. The essential doctrine of Arianism was a rejection of the *divinity* of Christ.

Strongly opposed to Arianism, but equally repudiating the incarnation, were the Gnostic and Docetist heresies, which held that the material world was inherently impure. Gnosticism, by denying the role of God in the realm of matter and of historical reality, constituted a denial of the historical and material dimension of the Christian faith, while for the Docetist, God was pure spirit, and could not therefore become incarnate in a corrupt material body: Jesus's human form was an illusion. The basic tenet of both these positions was a rejection of the *humanity* of Christ.

These key Christological disputes were finally resolved by a series of councils, culminating in the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, which affirmed the existence of one person in two natures, which are united unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably.<sup>1</sup>

The Christological view that one takes regarding the incarnation has huge implications for theological anthropology.<sup>2</sup> This fact was recognised by St Athanasius (296-373), who, in his *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, emphasised that humanity can only be taken into the Godhead if the Son of God truly became a human being. God was *humanised* precisely so that we might be *deified*; in order for such deification to occur, the Son himself must be truly God. Equally, it was not possible for humanity to be brought into the Father's presence unless the Word had truly taken on human flesh. This served as the rationale for Athanasius's insistence on the need to uphold both the divinity and the humanity of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

#### JON SOBRINO AND THE 'CRUCIFIED PEOPLE' OF EL SALVADOR

The Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino is one of the most prominent liberation theologians, and one of the leading witnesses of the ground-breaking religious, social, and political events that have shaken Latin America and the Catholic Church in the decades since the Second Vatican Council.<sup>4</sup>

Latin American theologians responded with alacrity to Vatican II's call to embrace a 'preferential option for the poor', developing

- 1 Andrew Louth, 'Christology in the East from the Council of Chalcedon to John Damascene', in F. A. Murphy and T. A. Stefano (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 139-140.
- 2 Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018, pp. 225-226.
- 3 See Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background*, SCM, 2002, pp. 68-72.
- 4 On this point, see also Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 26-32.

what came to be known as ‘liberation theology’, and Sobrino was swift to make his own distinct contribution to this revolutionary approach.<sup>5</sup> Born in 1938 in Barcelona, he joined the Jesuits in 1956 and, aside from undergraduate studies in the United States and doctoral studies in Frankfurt, has spent the whole of his life in El Salvador. Sobrino’s studies in Germany had a significant impact on his theological development, introducing him to the ideas of major Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner, and to liberal Protestantism as exemplified by Rudolf Bultmann and his followers, who were much indebted to existentialism. He received his doctorate in 1975 for his thesis on the Christologies of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, and has spoken of how important Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* was to him. However, in a highly significant remark, Sobrino declares: ‘I have not found verification that God is also on the cross so much in theological arguments or texts or even Scripture, but in reality: in the suffering servant of our world’.<sup>6</sup>

Exposure to the legacy of Bultmann’s radical school led Sobrino to ‘demythologise’ his faith. On his return to El Salvador, he felt he encountered God for the first time in the ‘crucified’ common people of his adopted country. He became convinced that a way must be found to communicate the gospel so that it spoke directly and meaningfully to those who were undergoing profound suffering.<sup>7</sup> He thus set himself the task of developing a theology firmly rooted in history.<sup>8</sup> For Sobrino, if we wish to encounter God, we must meet him where he said he would be in Matthew 25 – among the poor and rejected of this world.

Sobrino’s project of making Christ speak meaningfully to the ‘crucified people’ of El Salvador is of the utmost importance, and reflects the emphasis on the ‘preferential option for the poor’ which has become an integral part of Catholic social teaching. However, this otherwise laudable initiative has led him to place an excessive emphasis on the humanity of Jesus in a way that is in danger of obscuring his divinity. In consequence, Sobrino’s Christology arguably moves too far in the direction of the quasi-Arian ideas

5 See Miguel A. De La Torre, ‘Liberation Theology’, in C. Hovey and E. Phillips (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 35–36.

6 *Jon Sobrino: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Robert Lassalle-Klein, Orbis Books, 2018, p. 7.

7 See Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, Orbis Books, 1988, pp. 154–156. William T. Cavanaugh explores these ideas further in his excellent book *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, Blackwell, 1998, pp. 60–64.

8 Jon Sobrino, ‘Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God’, in I. Ellacuria and J. Sobrino (eds), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books/Collins Dove, 1993, pp. 448–449.

identified above, vitiating his theological project of defending the poor.

SOBRINO'S CHALCEDONIAN SCEPTICISM

Sobrinó is openly sceptical about the Chalcedonian position. He is disturbed by the fact that, in traditional Catholic theology, 'it has been customary to start with the dogmatic formulations of the Council of Chalcedon, which affirms that Christ is a divine person with two natures – human and divine'.<sup>9</sup> Sobrinó claims that the 'content of dogma cannot go beyond, or say more than, the content of the reality of Christ as it is accessible to us in Scripture' and that, when we look at the Gospels, we do not find the kind of Christology offered to us by Chalcedon. He contends that the Chalcedonian formula was greatly influenced by a type of Hellenistic thought which was alien to the Gospel writers, and argues that, in Chalcedonian theology, 'God is presented in terms of epiphany rather than in the biblical terms of being at work in the world ... in the struggle for justice and the expectations of hope'.<sup>10</sup> In one of his most controversial statements, Sobrinó writes that the New Testament does not explicitly teach the divinity of Christ, but simply establishes the presuppositions for it. He concludes:

All this means that at the outset Jesus was not spoken of as *God*, nor was *divinity* a term applied to him; this happened only after a considerable interval of believing explication, almost certainly after the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, there are clear difficulties for Sobrinó in identifying any stable or definitive Christology in Scripture itself, because 'the New Testament presents not *one* but several *different* Christologies, and it is impossible to unify them into one'. He holds that 'we are forced to admit that it is the concrete figure of Jesus himself, and not some later theological effort of conceptualization, that unifies the various Christologies of the New Testament'.<sup>12</sup> This focus on the 'concrete figure of Jesus' means that 'our Christology will thereby avoid abstractionism, and the attendant danger of manipulating the Christ event', as 'any focusing on the Christ of faith will jeopardize the very essence of the Christian faith if it neglects the historical Jesus'.<sup>13</sup>

Above all, Sobrinó says, there is:

9 Jon Sobrinó, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, SCM, 1978, p. 3.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

11 Jon Sobrinó, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, Orbis Books, 2001, p. 114.

12 Sobrinó, 1978, pp. 5–6.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

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a clearly noticeable resemblance between the situation here in Latin America and that in which Jesus lived. ... the resemblance does not lie solely in the objective conditions of poverty and exploitation that characterize Jesus' situation and ours ... It lies primarily in the cognizance that is taken of the situation.<sup>14</sup>

Sobrino argues that this concrete social situation has profound implications for our theological hermeneutic. The crisis of meaning concerning existence and history which has arisen among the oppressed peoples of the world cannot be addressed by repeating old formulations and abstract concepts which are no longer credible.

According to Sobrino, the formulas of Chalcedon mean that 'the humanity of Christ is subsumed under the conceptual category of nature', and 'we do not find the historical categories that are typically highlighted in the New Testament: the conflict-ridden reality of Jesus, his temptations, his ignorance'. He believes that the significance of Jesus can only be understood today if it is 'mediated historically' through 'cultural' and 'sociological' analysis.<sup>15</sup>

Sobrino's statements clearly indicate his doubts about the veracity of the Chalcedonian definitions relating to the full divinity and humanity of Christ, and it is understandable that when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith investigated his work in 2006 it identified some legitimate concerns with his theology. Sobrino is right to emphasise the importance of the historical Jesus acting in concrete reality, and is equally right to stress the need to guard against an overly 'spiritualised' Christology. However, his scepticism concerning an orthodox reading of Chalcedon raises considerable difficulties for the cogency of his own liberationist project. In particular – as will be discussed in more detail in relation to Kenneth Leech's theology below – it serves to undermine his stated aim of defending the poor. The incarnation unites human and divine, thereby hallowing humanity and demonstrating the value that God places on it, and thus the dignity of all human beings. Therefore, unless we uphold the orthodox doctrine of Chalcedon concerning the nature of Christ, it is impossible to uphold a robust and coherent Christian defence of human dignity, and to champion the rights of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised.

## HOW THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH CAN HELP

If Sobrino's scepticism concerning an 'orthodox' Chalcedonian interpretation of the incarnation only serves to vitiate his aim of defending the dignity of the poor, then the question arises: how

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330, 331, 329.

can we find a view of the incarnation which fully supports, rather than undermines, Sobrino's vision of social justice? One way of doing so is to turn to the Fathers of the Church, whose ideas about a fleshly, material incarnation serve as a natural basis of social justice.<sup>16</sup>

While the germ of incarnational Christology is to be found in the Prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1: 'The Word was God'), Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 108/140 CE) unequivocally declared that Jesus was God and wrote movingly of the suffering of God in Christ. Tertullian subsequently stressed the fundamental role of the flesh in the work of salvation. Likewise, in his disputes with the Gnostics, Irenaeus of Lyons underscored the centrality of the fleshly incarnation.

The work of Gregory of Nazianzus hammers home the importance of the fleshly incarnation to an even greater extent. His most significant contribution is his claim that Christ took on the whole of human nature, and not simply one aspect of it. In order for salvation and healing to be fully effective, Gregory argues, it was necessary for humanity in its entirety to have been assumed and taken into God.

Far from repudiating or taking flight from the world, Christians must be driven by a passionate love for all material reality. They must see the handiwork of God in matter, and the face of Christ in all human beings. St Isaac the Syrian, in the seventh century, speaks of the loving heart, which, while being profoundly spiritual, has an intense love for, and shows deep compassion and solidarity towards, all created things.

ANGLICAN SOCIAL THEOLOGY'S INCARNATIONAL TRADITION:  
KENNETH LEECH

One important tradition which built upon this strong patristic legacy, and thus offers a clear answer to Sobrino's scepticism about Chalcedon, is that of Anglican social theology, which is rooted firmly in the Greek Fathers, and which sees the incarnation as a natural basis of social justice.<sup>17</sup> The most powerful expression of this intertwined incarnational basis of spirituality and socio-

16 Karl Barth argued that the early Church wrestled for centuries with Christological issues because it recognised how central they were to our view of anthropology and soteriology. For Barth, to say that the Creator of the universe assumed human flesh is not merely to make a statement about the being of God; it is to say something profound about our own corporeal condition. As Barth wrote, 'a report about ourselves is included in that report about God'. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.1, T. and T. Clark, 1975, p. 7.

17 For a comprehensive study of Anglican social theology, see the important collection of essays in Malcolm Brown et al. (eds), *Anglican Social Theology: Renewing the Vision Today*, Church House Publishing, 2014; and Stephen Spencer (ed), *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology*, SCM, 2017.

political action is to be found in the writings of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-Catholic socialists such as F. D. Maurice, Thomas Hancock and Stewart Headlam, who believed that the incarnation lies at the heart of any serious approach to societal issues and serves as a prime motive for political and social action.<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Leech (1939–2015) is perhaps the most influential recent exponent of this venerable tradition of radical Anglican social theology.

Much of Leech's Christology can be viewed as a response to the liberal German theology which had such a formative effect on Jon Sobrino.<sup>19</sup> Leech sees this type of theology as having had disastrous consequences for those who wish to defend the poor and uphold the principle of human dignity. If Jesus is not fully divine, then there is no meaningful Christian ground on which to uphold the dignity of the human person. Moral theology minus the incarnation is little more than a benign form of secular humanism.

For Leech, this awareness of the significance of the incarnation for humanity means that it is essential for Christianity to address concrete issues relating to social, economic and political injustice.<sup>20</sup> Christians must engage in politics and political action precisely because of the stupendous reality which underpins all existence: the central Christian fact that God became a human being. Thus, Leech argues, 'the incarnation is more than an assertion about the reality of the flesh and materiality of Christ; it is a governing principle of the Church's life, of God's relationship with the world, of the structure of all spiritual life and experience'.<sup>21</sup> If the incarnation is denied, the fundamental goodness of human physicality is called into doubt, and the whole work of atonement, as well as our participation in Jesus's suffering, is rendered meaningless.

Moreover, Leech sees incarnation as not limited to a singular

18 See Jeremy Morris, *F. D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority*, Oxford University Press, 2005; and John Richard Orens, *Stewart Headlam's Radical Anglicanism: The Mass, the Masses, and the Music Hall*, University of Illinois Press, 2003.

19 The Anglican theologian John Milbank has discussed the influence of liberal German theology on both 'liberation theology' and 'political theology' in his book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, 2006. For Milbank, the work of German theologians such as Karl Rahner and Johann Baptist Metz has encouraged many liberation theologians to 'reinterpret Christianity in terms of a dominant secular discourse of our day' (p. 208). This, combined with the attempt by early liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez 'to found a theology upon Marxist presuppositions' (p. 206), has resulted in a hermeneutical approach geared towards an accommodation with the Enlightenment and autonomous secular thinking. Such an approach, Milbank argues, has had a highly deleterious impact on Christian theology because of its tendency to 'naturalize the supernatural' (p. 207).

20 See Kenneth Leech, *The Social God*, Sheldon Press, 1981, pp. 25–28.

21 Kenneth Leech, *True God: An Exploration in Spiritual Theology*, SPCK, 1985, p. 245.



event in geographical space and historical time. On the contrary, by the very act of taking human flesh, God has sanctified *all* human life. Leech illustrates this point by quoting from the work of the Anglican socialist priest Stanley Evans (1912–65), whose book *In Evening Dress to Calvary* offers a vivid account of why he was reluctant to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land:

The fact that I never had any deep desire to go to Palestine and kneel at the site of the manger at Bethlehem, or rejoice at the Cana where the water was turned into wine, or tread the bitter road to Calvary, is simply a reflection of the fact that I have been brought up to realise that Bethlehem could be the outhouse of any pub, that all water can be made wine, and there are Calvaries enough and to spare in London and New York. The essential theological point of the early Councils of the Church was their declaration of the universality of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

The logical conclusion that Leech draws from this is that, when we encounter human beings who are poor, in need or distressed, we encounter God the Son himself. For, as Jesus said, ‘whatsoever you do to the least of your brothers and sisters, you do unto me’ (Matthew 25: 40).

This has monumental implications for the way we treat each other. It means that we must see the face of Christ in the downtrodden, despised, exploited and oppressed; we must welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison.<sup>23</sup> Human dignity is thus guaranteed by the fact that the Word became flesh. This strong Christological vision shows that there is no contradiction between a ‘high’ Christology and liberation theology’s fundamental commitment to defending the poor.<sup>24</sup>

22 Kenneth Leech, *The Eye of the Storm: Spiritual Resources for the Pursuit of Justice*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992, p. 186, quoting Stanley Evans, *In Evening Dress to Calvary*, SCM, 1965, p. 6.

23 Kenneth Leech, *We Preach Christ Crucified: The Proclamation of the Cross in a Dark Age*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006, pp. 35–36. See also Kenneth Leech, *The Sky is Red: Discerning the Signs of the Times*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003, 141–144.

24 Leech also develops these themes in relation to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. ‘The Eucharist’, he writes, ‘can be seen as the “extension of the incarnation”, not only in the sense that the incarnate Christ is present here in many thousands of places, and in his fullness, but also in the sense that this presence is extended from the altar to the street, as the incarnational process itself is extended from Galilee and Jerusalem to the world’. However, he sounds the following cautionary note: ‘Yet, as it is possible – and common – to profess faith in the incarnation while denying Christ in the poor and the rejected, so it is possible – and common – to worship Christ in the Eucharist while failing to see him in the bodies of men and women’. See Leech, 1985, p. 287.

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### CONCLUSION

I have argued here that the position one takes on the question of the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ has profound ramifications for one's view not only of God and the Church but of humanity itself. Our position on this question will determine our understanding of human dignity, our view of society, our love of humanity and our care for the poor. Unless we uphold the orthodox doctrine of Chalcedon concerning the nature of Christ, then it is impossible to uphold a robust and coherent Christian defence of human dignity, or to champion the rights of the poor, the oppressed and marginalised.

Anglican social theologians such as Kenneth Leech show that a strong Christological commitment to the fleshly incarnation, supported by the patristic tradition, offers a far surer foundation for the political defence of the poor than Jon Sobrino's 'low' Christology, his excessive faith in 'secular reason' (drawing on liberal German theology) and his over-reliance on contemporary sociological theories. Roman Catholic liberation theology's defence of the poor can thus be enriched by dialogue with Anglican social theology, which sees a fleshly incarnation as a natural basis of social justice.

**Revelation.** Christians tend to think that revelation comes out of the blue, suddenly hitting us and knocking us sideways. That can happen, of course, as Paul discovered on his journey to Damascus. But there is always another side, just as Buddhist experience of enlightenment is made up of both cognitive and affective dimensions. Wisdom grows from a heightened awareness that persists through all activity; compassion sums up the affective dimension of the relations between sentient beings. The 'three trainings' – ethics, concentration and wisdom, which summarise the Noble Eightfold Path – are interdependent. There's something analogous at work in Christian spirituality, a channelling of desire through worship and devotion, study and social action, that seeks a balance – a Middle Way – between action and contemplation.

– MICHAEL BARNES, SJ, *Ignatian Spirituality & Interreligious Dialogue*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.97.