

On The Unity of Christ

by Christopher A. Beeley

MICHEL RENÉ BARNES

Marquette University

Milwaukee, WI

LESS THAN FIFTY MILES separate two Turkish cities that loom large in the history of Christianity: Nicaea and Chalcedon. Each city is synonymous with councils and doctrines that became the measures of Christian orthodoxy. The council of Nicaea in 325 defined orthodox Trinitarian theology, and the council of Chalcedon in 451 defined orthodox theology of the Incarnation. Each of these councils has come to dominate perceptions of their centuries: the fourth century was “all about” the Trinity, and the fifth century was “all about” the Incarnation. The reality was more complex, but the logic of “first Trinity, then Incarnation” has a simplicity that is compelling. Logic tends to crush history, and however daunting the task, telling the complicated story of Christian theology in the fourth and fifth centuries needs to happen.

Christopher Beeley’s *The Unity of Christ* is a self-conscious attempt at unmasking the false realities and setting things aright. What Beeley wants to accomplish is to shift the center of gravity in accounts of early Christian belief from Trinity to Incarnation, to find the deep grammar of Patristic theology of God and salvation in its Christology and not in “the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.” In this book, Beeley is less concerned to make a conceptually airtight argument than he is to produce an occasional, albeit seemingly synoptic, work, though the book employs the rhetoric of a comprehensive, finely tuned, forensic discourse—falsely, as it turns out.

Beeley's agenda is huge: to debunk the picture of the Patristic Church as a golden age of Christian theology, to establish the centrality of Christology for understanding that theology in the Patristic era, to praise one trajectory of Christology in the era, and to re-package the reputations of several key theologians of the era. While Beeley's book treats major Christian theologians from 200 to 800—e.g., from Origen to the Cappadocians, to Augustine, to Leo and Cyril, and to Maximus the Confessor—the most substantial chapters are those that treat the authors Beeley claims to have “re-interpreted” the most: Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Athanasius. My review will center upon his treatment of Origen and Eusebius, since everything flows from them. Origen represents the source of a broad trajectory Beeley is identifying (an imperfect source, but the source nonetheless), whereas Eusebius represents the full height of that theological trajectory—almost its booster stage. These two figures are clearly Beeley's heroes; he claims to reveal the “complexities and the unrecognized conflicts” that characterized their contributions to Christian faith. Beeley's rhetoric is highly charged: his narrative has definite good guys, bad guys, and “conflict” between them. The revelation of hitherto submerged “conflicts” is a key feature of what Beeley sets out to do.

However, I cannot say that the book brings to light any unrecognized conflicts involving either Origen or Eusebius. Beeley does retell the stories of widely known conflicts from what he regards as a new perspective. If there is anything previously “unrecognized” in his account, it is the orthodoxy and catholicity he attributes to the theologies of Origen and, especially, Eusebius. His reinterpretation of Athanasius, the third of the trio, makes him out to be the fourth-century version of a not-very-bright fascist. This story is very old news indeed: in 1983 a well-known authority on Athanasius referred to him as a “gangster.” (A short-lived scholarly “Athanasian Society” was even formed to combat the defamation of the saint's character.) Beeley's account re-invents the vitriol as if it had never rolled before.

For Beeley, the theologies of Origen and Eusebius are meritorious in two ways. First, they both have a doctrine of the Trinity that recognizes the full and equal divinity of all three Persons yet does so while avoiding the ontologizing model of “from the essence of the Father” in favor of “by the will of the Father.” And second, to unequal degrees, their Christologies treat Christ as a single, unified “subject” who fully experiences both divine and human life without sacrificing the full reality of either nature as the basis for the unity. In modern theological jargon, the two types of Christology Beeley identifies are known

as the “unitive” and the “disjunctive.” Beeley uses the term “dualist” rather than “disjunctive,” and the intimations of a worldview by the term “dualist” are, I think, intentional. The grammar of a “dualist” Christology regularly turns out to be Platonic, with its hierarchical and polarized conceptions of mind and body, material and immaterial.

The substance of Beeley’s account begins with Origen: the map he offers for the next six hundred years of Christology is based upon the determining influence of Origen’s theology for all the significant theologians of those centuries. Each author is judged according to the degree to which he works within the models for Trinity and Incarnation Origen supplied, or whether he works against them. An Origen-neutral option is not identified and seems not to have been possible. The account of Origen’s theology is offered as though it is new and insightful, but I found it to be neither, for it resembles nothing so much as what one would find in the writings of Hahn (1898) and Prestige (1933). Where Beeley’s account differs from venerable German scholarship, it is not an improvement.

First, Beeley overstates the orthodoxy of Origen’s Trinitarian theology, and one is left with the impression that the difference between Origen’s Trinitarian theology and that of late fourth-century Nicenes lies only at the level of details. Moreover, the step-by-step Trinitarian logic that Beeley discovers in Origen’s theology is the product of his own synthetic redaction of Origen’s writings (the neat progression in Origen’s Trinitarian grammar is documented by stitching together passages across his writings).

Second, Beeley is careless about key load-bearing concepts he finds in Origen’s theology, such as “essential,” “simple,” and “being.” These terms often float free of any identified Greek or Latin words, and it sometimes seems that Beeley considers these concepts as rough synonyms. He also argues for the Son’s full and equal divinity to the Father on the basis of the Son’s being “simple” as the Father is “simple” and then speaks of the Father as being “really simple.”

Third, while Beeley is right to draw out the significance between essential and accidental in Origen’s Trinitarian theology, he does so at the expense of any significant reflection on the role that participation plays in it. Beeley’s emphasis on the categories of essential and accidental seems like a carry-over from his previous study of Gregory Nazianzus. Very few scholars can match Beeley for his minimizing of the role of “participation” in Origen’s Trinitarian theology; if you blink, you will miss its mention. Beeley’s entire discussion of the “Son as Image” takes place without any dense discussion of the fact that,

for Origen and Eusebius, the dynamics of “image” were mapped out through the calculus provided by the school of Platonism. Patristic exegesis of Hebrews 1:3 from AD 100 to 400 evidently owed nothing to philosophical discussions of causality. I will return to the matter of Beeley’s handling of philosophy.

The center of gravity of Beeley’s reading of fourth-century Christology is Eusebius of Caesarea, who carries Origen’s theology into the fourth century. Beeley starts off with the (seemingly) bold declaration that it is Eusebius who should be regarded as the mainstream representative of Greek Christian theology for most of the first half of the fourth century—Eusebius, and not Athanasius. Beeley is the third English language scholar in the last ten years who has “discovered” this insight into Eusebius’ significance and offered a narrative based on this “new” perspective—and I am getting tired of it. In 1998 I published “Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon,” in which I denied that Athanasius was an exemplar for Greek theology, giving that status to Eusebius. In that article, I professed nothing more than that I was expressing the understanding of fourth-century development of Trinitarian theology that was at that time (1998) current among “those whose field of research is fourth-century Trinitarian controversies.” Beeley makes no mention of this article, nor does he acknowledge that his turn to Eusebius is fifteen years behind the curve.

Beeley regards the shift from Origen’s (and Eusebius’s) doctrine of *the Son produced from the will* of God to Alexander’s (Athanasius’s, and Nicaea’s) doctrine of *the Son produced from the essence* of God as an epoch-making change. He also regards it as the ontologization of Trinitarian theology (which, for him, is not a good thing), a turn that was unnecessary, quasi-materialist, and possibly crypto-gnostic. The doctrine of the Son being produced from the will of God avoids the implicit and unavoidable materialist connotations of “being” and “essence.” Beeley is emphatic that Origen and Eusebius believed that the Son had the same divine nature as God, a divinity not less than the Father’s. But yet, for him the category of “having the same nature” does not trigger “ontology” or “metaphysics,” while “same in essence” does. Beeley goes so far as to argue that Father-Son models used by Origen and Eusebius, which privilege the title “Son” (instead of “Word”), must work on the principle of “the child is of the same nature as the parent.” For Beeley, such a logic does not admit the possibility of subordinationism, and thus both Origen and Eusebius are falsely, ignorantly, and maliciously accused of teaching a two-tiered Trinity.

Origen’s argument for a theology of the full and equal divinity of

the Father and Son includes two questions: what do the Father and the Son both properly possess that differentiates them from *everything else*, and what do the Father and the Son each properly possess that differentiates them from *one another*? Beeley is not the first to argue that, for Origen, the Father and the Son both properly possess goodness (R. P. C. Hanson did in 1981), though this reading is still disputed. Even if the Father and Son both possess goodness properly, can we move on to deduce that they both possess being—and all other divine attributes—properly? What differentiates them one from each other is—at a minimum—their identities as cause (the Father) and effect or product (the Son).

Beeley understands this mechanism of distinction to imply no difference in nature between the two: the Father, being “cause” is not thereby superior to the Son as “product.” Beeley asserts this on the basis of an analogy to material parenthood: an offspring has the same nature as the parent(s). The fact that his argument depends upon a materialist understanding of divine generation escapes Beeley; it did not escape theologians of the third and fourth centuries. What happened in the fourth century, after Nicaea, was a polemically developed understanding in which the hitherto intrinsically materialist notion of parenthood was stripped of its materialist ground in a way not unlike Plotinus’s stripping away the materialist ground of Stoic *tonos* causality and then applying that causality to the intelligible. But the fact that Plotinus was able to develop Stoic *tonos* causality “beyond” its original materialist ground does not mean that the Stoic causality was always implicitly—much less explicitly—conceptually free of materialism; something Origen owes to Plotinus. Beeley talks as though the fact that, in the late fourth century, Father-Son causality was understood apart from a material logic means that all previous Father-Son causalities were supported by an immaterial logic.

This is just one of the ways in which Beeley takes late fourth-century Trinitarian orthodoxy and finds it in Origen. In almost every case, he does this by declining to recognize technical philosophical content in discourse about immaterial realities. Beeley covers his failure to engage by identifying Origen’s ideas—and his own ideas—with the simple, un-philosophical narrative categories of Scripture. It is one thing for Beeley to be innocent of the philosophical content of third- to fifth-century discussions of immaterial causality; it is something else to assert that Origen was innocent of such discourse—and then to make an account of Origen’s Trinitarian theology depend upon such an innocence.

One reason Beeley feels free to presume a fully developed logic of immaterial “reproductive” causality in Origen (and Eusebius) is the fact that catholic Patristic author(s) attack and reject gnosticism because it represents a materialist logic of reproduction. The orthodox rejection of gnostic materialism goes a long way for Beeley: it solves all potential problems of a materialist ground for all orthodox Trinitarian theology—if an author rejects the materialist logic of gnostic causality then that author has freed himself from all materialist logics. But this is not so. For one thing, it is not possible to claim that the relationship between gnostic generative logic and orthodox generative logic was that of simple, mutually exclusive, and polar oppositions. Tertullian, Origen’s Latin contemporary, makes a point of claiming emanation language for orthodox Catholics even if the gnostics use it too (*Against praxeus* 8). Every Catholic who talks about the origins of the Son in the Father explicitly rejects and criticizes gnostic materialist causality and finds it in the theology of their opponent. This move binds Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Alexander, Arius, Marcellus, and Athanasius, and indeed one could argue that the rhetoric is part of the construction of “Catholic” theology over-against “gnostic” theology. To be Catholic is to worry about gnostic “materialist” Trinitarian aetiologies. From Irenaeus to Tertullian and Origen, the gnostic alternative is alive, and Catholic rebuttals are quite specific about their opponents. (Think of Origen’s counter-exegesis of Heraclitus’s reading of John.)

But after a certain point in time (i.e., the early fourth century), one wants to ask: who, exactly, is talking material partition of the Godhead? Moreover—and this goes directly to Beeley’s presumption that anti-gnosticism signals a wholly post-materialist Trinitarian logic—no one at the time draws the conclusion that denouncing gnostic materialism inoculates a theology from materialism. Beeley imports the rhetoric of opposition between Catholic and gnostic, accepts it uncritically, and uses it to make the “Father-Son” model safely free of materialism and—already with Origen—as successful an aetiology of common nature as anything produced in the fourth century. All questions about “participation” are either contained within an orthodox Father-Son theology or rendered irrelevant by such a theology. Again, this is not so.

The thesis that the Trinitarian theology of Eusebius (and other non-Nicenes) was based upon a volitional, psychological causality rather than the metaphysical, ontological causality of Nicaea (and Athanasius especially) was argued in 1981 by Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh in their book, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*. Like Beeley,

Gregg and Groh regarded the volition-based model as soteriological and narrative-centered, in contrast to the Nicene foundationalism of metaphysics and “being” (see their chapter on “Arian Christology: A Christology of Divine Will”). Where Beeley differs from Gregg and Groh is that he sees the volitional-versus-ontological Trinitarian debate as dependent upon tectonic Christologies in opposition with each other. Beeley has jettisoned Arius as superfluous, expanded the doctrinal narrative, and reclaimed the “problem” of Hellenization (with a hint of Barth thrown in). He also declines to give any recognition to the weaknesses inherent in a volition-based divine origin for the Son.

Several times, Beeley remarks that Eusebius of Caesarea’s reputation has suffered unjustly through the machinations of his opponents and critics, and this judgment applies both to Eusebius’s contemporaries and to modern scholarship. Not much evidence is offered in support of these twin judgments, and through his silence, Beeley has left his reader the task of filling in the blanks. The problem with Beeley attributing such machinations to Eusebius’s contemporaries is that very few of his exact contemporaries—those who attended Nicaea—left writings for us to judge them by; the pool of suspects who have left any evidence is very small. Alexander of Alexandria and Athanasius are the obvious exceptions to this statement, but the writings of Eusebius’s *bête noir*, Marcellus of Ancyra, survive only to the extent that Eusebius quotes them in refuting them. (There is a short letter by Marcellus that survives independently.) In any case, Beeley goes through these three and then comes up short on other examples of anti-Eusebian polemic that successfully depreciated him.

What other Nicene attendant left any texts to judge the author by? The obvious suspect to answer Beeley’s charges is Eustathius of Antioch. But, if Eustathius successfully obscured the “real” Eusebius, he did so only at the cost of being himself rendered invisible. Beeley is cagey about Eustathius because a serious treatment of this Nicene figure would contradict Beeley’s narrative. Eustathius was vehemently anti-Arian: in 325 he hosted a synod in Antioch that investigated Alexander’s charges against Arius. Alexander was not there, but Eusebius was—and the synod condemned Arius and questioned Eusebius’s orthodoxy, requiring the latter to present a summary of his beliefs at the coming council in Nicaea later that year. This Eusebius did, in the presence of the Emperor and of Eustathius, who chaired the council (perhaps only temporarily). Once Eusebius signed the Creed, he was welcomed back into the fold—and in less than three years was respon-

sible for Eustathius being deposed as bishop of Antioch and exiled. Now no one is sure when or where Eustathius eventually died. Eusebius died May 30, 339.

The story of Eustathius is most revealing about Eusebius—or at least the Eusebius Beeley wants us to believe in—not so much because it shows Eusebius to be more closely aligned with Arius than Beeley says, nor even because Eusebius is seen to be vengeful and calculating. The story of Eustathius unseats the “Eusebius” Beeley constructs because several of the key doctrines that Beeley claims to be distinctive to Eusebius are in fact held by Eustathius as well. Like Eusebius, Eustathius applies “Son” to the pre-Incarnate Second Person. Like Eusebius, Eustathius favors “image” language for the Son’s production. And—most importantly—like Eusebius, Eustathius believes that Christ had a complete human soul and that this soul is significant for the economy of the Incarnation. How can these doctrines be Eusebius’s great and distinctive development of the *Alexandrian* heritage when Eustathius—his strong opponent in the office of the *bishop of Antioch*—has the same beliefs? It almost seems that the glue that holds Beeley’s narrative together is his conviction that his readers will be ignorant. The frightening thing is that, to an extent, Beeley’s confidence in his readers’ ignorance is warranted, because many people will read Beeley’s book precisely so they do not have to know who Eustathius was. This is a book for people who do not sweat the details.

In Beeley’s account of the council of Nicaea in 325, he asserts that the Creed it produced was based upon that used by Eusebius of Caesarea. The relationship between the Nicene creed and Eusebius’s is laid out confidently by Beeley as he gives a detailed exegesis of the “Nicene” Creed (N) through a comparison with its supposed origin, Eusebius’s own creed. Beeley’s confidence misleads the reader: his judgment on the relationship of N to Eusebius’s creed is the same as that offered by Harnack, and it was carefully refuted in 1950 by J. N. D. Kelly in his monograph, *Early Christian Creeds* (London and New York: Longmans, Green)—a work that receives no mention in Beeley’s book. Kelly writes: “The truth of the matter is, as anyone can discover for himself who cares to make an exhaustive comparison, that CAES. [Eusebius’s creed] and N differ . . . radically” (218).

In Beeley’s account, the definitive moment in Eusebius’s Trinitarian theology occurs in the last two years of his life, when he writes against Marcellus of Ancyra. The purpose that Eusebius writes for—that is, the genre—in each of his texts is a fact that Beeley feels other scholars have been insufficiently sensitive to, which has resulted in some of

Eusebius's writings being read "excessively literally" (70). The product of such excessively literal readings of Eusebius's apologetic writings is, in turn, a widespread scholarly projection of philosophical concepts and sources onto his theology, seeing "ontological mediation," when in fact Eusebius espouses nothing of this sort.

In *Ecclesiastical Theology* III, Beeley singles out Eusebius's exegesis of Proverbs 8:22–30 as an exemplary case of Eusebius' exegetically-driven theology expressing itself free of apologetic concerns. In this text, Eusebius gives an extended argument that Proverbs 8:22 and following describes the origin of Wisdom (the Son) and not, as Marcellus claims, the Incarnation. (These two alternate readings function, for Beeley, as trajectory markers.) Eusebius' polemically-driven exegesis is indeed impressive, but the passage in *Ecclesiastical Theology* III ends up defeating the division Beeley has insisted upon between Eusebius's theology formulated for pagans and his theology formulated for other Christians. The origins of the "Trinitarian" reading of Proverbs 8:22 and following are precisely apologetics: in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 61 and 89, Justin Martyr—for the first time in Christian literature—applies Proverbs 8:22 to the Second Person, identifying Wisdom with the Word. Wisdom is inserted into a list of titles—mostly derived from Jewish apocalyptic literature—by which Jesus is identified as the pre-existent Messiah, Glory of the Lord, Son, Wisdom, Angel, Lord, and Logos.

The apologetic significance of Proverbs 8:22 and following was already evident in Aristobulus Paneas, the Jewish writer who put the Old Testament passage in line with what he regarded as similar texts from Orphic literature and the Peripatetics. We know that Aristobulus used the passage in this way because Eusebius himself preserved the fragment in his *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.12. Eusebius' Christian contemporary, Lactantius, who read his own "apologetic" *Institutes* to Constantine in Arles, quotes Proverbs 8:22–30 in chapter 6 of book IV of that work, sandwiched between a Sibylline oracle and a reference to Hermes Trismegestes. At what point and in what way did Eusebius bracket all the "apologetic" content that he had read concerning the passage? And did he think his readers would also practice this selective conceptual amnesia? If Eusebius was able to construct that kind of a noetic "safe room," then that was a process worth documenting.

The quality of Beeley's handling of the philosophical sources is not just a question by a crusty old-timer (me) raging against the philosophical illiteracy that is now the norm in theology. (Patristics fails to be an exception to this rule.) Beeley's handling of the philosophical sources is fundamental for any evaluation of the book's arguments because of

the way in which Beeley's conclusions are implicitly contained, if not predetermined, in the language he himself uses. The most important case of an undefined term carrying Beeley's argument is the word "subject." "Eusebius observes that Jesus is speaking of himself as having existed before his incarnation, as being dependent on the Father, who sent him, and as now being the incarnate Christ—a single *subject* of existence" (81, emphasis added). Does "single subject of existence" simply stand for the Greek word, "hypostasis"? Why does he not say so? Does the phrase have this meaning every time Beeley uses the "subject" phrase, or only sometimes? Does this phrase indicate a concept that Beeley thinks was present across different vocabularies but never clearly articulated by the ancient authors? Or does he think that this concept *has to be there* because his sense of the texts requires it?

In Beeley's analysis, "single subject of existence" minimally functions to name what continues from pre-Incarnation into Incarnation, and which contains (or stands under) the two kinds of existence, divine and human. The single subject is what speaks self-reflexively (in, e.g., Prov. 8:22 and a host of Johannine texts). Is self-reflective speech important because it indicates self-consciousness and historical self-reflective speech (e.g., "I was" or "I am") indicates continuity of a single self-consciousness? Is this judgment about the link between self-reflective speech and a single subject of existence the ancient author's (Eusebius's), or Beeley's, or the coincidence of the two? Or is self-consciousness irrelevant because "single subject of existence" refers simply to "that which acts"—a single continuous actor or agent? "Eusebius normally speaks of Christ's economic *activity* as a single subject of existence" (93, emphasis added).

The ultimate effect of Beeley's rediscovery of the true theologies of Origen and Eusebius is to render their Trinitarian theologies more conventionally "orthodox" and their mental lives more jejune. Both Origen and Eusebius were men of great intellectual scope, with rare breadth and depth of knowledge (Origen probably the greater depth, Eusebius possibly the greater breadth). Christianity and Western civilization are indebted to the textual treasures that Eusebius preserved in his works. What is strange in Beeley's account of the theologies of these two brilliant men is that, to hear him tell it, very little of all that they knew made any positive contribution to their theologies: their worldly knowledge made them more effective apologists, but their accommodations to apology distorted their theological insights and disfigured their texts in tradition. Yet, there is a correspondence between what

Beeley says and how he says it: in each case “narrative” trumps “logic.” Logical, dense, “metaphysical” articulations of the Incarnation are seen as wrong; narrative, economic articulations as right. Why even try to offer a dense articulation of this theological principle, or a dense account of its dynamic in the history Christian theology? To offer that kind of scholarship would contradict the Christian narrative’s trump of logic. This is a book whose reach has exceeded its grasp. **N·V**