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Becoming human: Christology and deep time

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Abstract

The Chalcedon formula rests on "fully God and fully human". We creatures have no capacity to understand what "fully God" encompasses, and the question of who and what we are as created human beings remains. Returning to the Nicene Creed today, and here in Africa, possibly more than anywhere else in the world, because of its place as the "cradle of humanity", that question arises above and beyond all the Patristic debates and ecclesial wrangles. The theologians at that time assumed they knew what a human being was. I want to raise this question of what it is to be human and how that impacts the way we might understand the work of salvation today. Christ came in one form of humanity: *Homo sapiens*. So, with the advent of evolution, advances in palaeontology and palaeoanthropology, archaeological finds throughout Africa and DNA testing, then what is human becomes a profound question. This essay examines some of the parameters of that question.

Keywords

time; paleoanthropology; Irenaeus; Christology; evolution; recapitulation

Introduction

Several years ago, a former student from Ethiopia presented me with an Ethiopian Cross. Ethiopian Crosses are as distinctive and inventive as Greek icons. Their metalwork is highly elaborate and densely symbolic. There is no one design, but each cross-maker forges their own theological vision, keeping the upright and horizontal beams upon which Christ was crucified. My cross places the horizontal and vertical planes within

concentric circles and compass points. Three circular bands circumscribe a regular cross design at the centre, circumscribing a rhomboid or diamond. Each of the axes of the vertical and the horizontal planes is then bisected by lines coming from the innermost circle. In this way, a compass figure emerges, which is also an analogue of the clock face and time. The three circular bands bind all these bisecting lines of direction as they reach out in every direction, end-stopped with tiny crucifixes.

The symbolic abstractions in this elaborately wrought geometry invite meditation. There is nothing figurative, like a Christ hanging and pinned in the centre. The cruciformity is a vision of redemption as triune in its process and accomplishment, its circumscription, and its omnidirectionality. The cross becomes the watermark of Christ written into all things created, as Irenaeus and more recently von Balthasar and John Betz have affirmed.[1] Redemption reaches out, gathers in and reconciles all things on earth with those in heaven. The aesthetics of this Cross operate rather like the iconic gaze described in Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* and differ from later Roman 'solar' monstrances (from the Latin *monstrare* to show) insofar as at its centre is not the ecclesial and liturgical work of the eucharist but Christ, the historically crucified one.[2] And while the work I have is two-dimensional, the circles are planetary and cosmic in their embrace. Furthermore, these Ethiopian Crosses are gilded or made of gold, and that means they attract and disperse light. Light is omnidirectional but also involves time. For light waves, and the particles involved in them, are measurements of time over distance, bending to the gravity of grace. Ethiopian crosses are indices, if you like, of the historical, the transhistorical and the cosmic.

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1 For John R. Betz see, *Christ the Logos of Creation: An Essay in Analogical Metaphysics* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2023).

2 Michel de Certeau, following the work of Henri de Lubac in his *Corpus Mysticum*, observes: "After the middle of the twelfth century, the expression (*corpus mysticum*) no longer designated the Eucharist, as it had previously, but the Church. Conversely, 'corpus verum' no longer designated the Church but the Eucharist" (*The Mystic Fable Vol.1*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.82). From 1246, with the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi, monstrances began to appear for public ceremonial purposes displaying either relics of the saints or a consecrated Eucharistic wafer.

Nicaea and following

With this illustration in mind, we can turn to the Nicene Creed. At the heart of the Creed (325 CE), all the debates and infighting that led to its reconfirmation and modification over fifty year later (381 CE), and that finally paved the way for the Chalcedon formula (451 CE) – was how to understand and define the relationship between the humanity of Jesus (who was born and who died in Roman occupied Palestine in the early first century CE) and the Son of God, eternal, equal to the Father as Creator of all things. Across two very different languages, Greek and Latin, they wrestled with what eventually was summed up as a paradox – "fully God and fully human". In the history of the Church, over a long period which saw murders, martyrdoms, expulsions, riots and excommunications, faith was seeking understanding. What was at stake was not how salvation by Jesus Christ operated (for grace always operates in and beyond human rationalisations), but how salvation might be expressed, proclaimed and taught to those baptised in the Church. The Nicene Creed was a foundation for teaching the faith, a blueprint for catechism.

If, ultimately, the Chalcedon formula rested on "fully God and fully human", then the debates on Jesus the Christ confronted what is and will always remain a mystery, something hidden. For we creatures have no capacity to understand what "fully God" encompasses. Furthermore, since Christ is "fully human … apart from sin", then we have no capacity either to understand the composition of being "fully human". Our conceptions of what being human is, are never "apart from sin". Our understanding of humanity always involves sin.

We cannot see who or what we are as God sees us and created us. We do not yet know as we are known, to cite Paul in 1 Cor. 13. Hence, the Chalcedon formula is a paradox, a riddle, that teaches us the limits of human understanding even while faith continues, and must continue, to seek understanding.

That question of who and what we are as created human beings remains. Returning to the Nicene Creed today, and here in Africa, possibly more than anywhere else in the world, because of its place as the "cradle of humanity", a question arises that was never really asked in all these protracted debates

and ecclesial wrangles. The theologians at that time assumed they knew what a human being was. This understanding had not changed since the days of Aristotle. Damasus, bishop of Rome, writing in 376 CE, exemplifies this: "We acknowledge that the Son of God became a human being as well without sin in the assumption of the entire human nature – that is, of a rational and intellectual soul and of human flesh."[3] "Sin", at this point, was not recognised as something that could distort cognition, and cognition at that time was not recognised as that small percentage of consciousness that is most brightly lit. They did not reckon with what we now call "deep mind" and sin's emotional and physiological impacts, and its systemic effects through social and cultural institutions.

I want to raise this question of what it is to be human and how that impacts the way we might understand the work of salvation today. What the patristic tradition bequeathed to us and will be important is a distinction in anthropology between "image" and "likeness". Genesis, we recall, had God making us in God's "image and likeness". This enabled theologians from Irenaeus onwards (including Augustine and Aquinas) to understand the image as a profound and divine imprint upon us and the likeness as the ongoing work of grace perfecting our adoption as sons and daughters. The process of becoming "like" worked towards our conformity with Christ.[4] And it was Christ who was the perfect image of the Godhead, the eikon theou. Salvation pertained to becoming "like" that we might know in what way we were created in the "image" of God. So, if Christology frames our understanding of the "image", Pneumatology frames our understanding of coming to a "likeness". "Likeness" (in Hebrew *demût*, also includes a sense of form, model and pattern) points up a human formation *in* Christ *with* God and the praxis of becoming (rather than some metaphysical essence of being) human. Christian spiritual formation, such that we come to know (ourselves and our humanity) as we are known (as lives hidden in Christ with God), is a Trinitarian action, an *oikonomia*. This commitment to a

3 Cited in John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp.113-4.

4 This distinction agrees with Wolfhart Pannenberg's claim that, in making human beings, God gave an ineffaceable gift and a destiny. See Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp.43-79.

distinction between image and likeness (lost at the Reformation) announces a divine providential continuity between protology and eschatology. It holds open the temporal and created space for salvation. Human beings are created and constituted to be in, and transformed by, an intimate relationship with God. That is their/our nature and their/our destiny.

I say this because Christ came in one form of humanity: *Homo sapiens*. This will be my starting point. Born, as Jesus was, of a *Homo sapiens* mother. But is salvation then only for *Homo sapiens*? Is sin only something that can be attributed to *Homo sapiens*? Certainly, both salvation and human sin have been conceived that way for centuries. In the early years of Portuguese and Spanish conquests, both the native peoples of Africa and the Americas were regarded as sub-human; nevertheless, it was thought they were salvable. Their humanity was recognised in some diminished form. But with the advent of evolution, advances in palaeontology and palaeoanthropology, archaeological finds throughout Africa and DNA testing, then what is human becomes a profound question. We are coming to recognise (as Augustine already saw) that being human is a mystery, the depths of God speaking into the depths of humankind. We are asking ourselves a question.[5] If we don't allow the question to be raised, then Christian teaching risks no longer being able to speak to the world we live in, in which the question of where we came from as a species (and where we're going) is highly important. It risks minimising the mystery that we incarnate. The empirical facts point to some continuity between various *Homo* species. The palaeoclimatologist, Mark Maslin, writes: "*Homo heidelbergensis* may even have been a common ancestor of Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*."[6] And a common ancestor is necessary since the DNA evidence points to Neanderthal interbreeding with *Homo sapiens*. The possibility of crossbreeding lies in belonging to the same genus. And *Homo heidelbergensis* existed from around 600,000 to 300,000 years ago. So, the incarnation of Christ as a distinctive human species is not unrelated to Jesus being part of a genus going back nearly two million years and to

5 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. William Watts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), Book X.XIII, p.169. Watts translates *mihi questio factus sum* as "I have become a problem to myself".

6 Mark Maslin, *The Cradle of Humanity: How the Changing Landscape of Africa Made Us So Smart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.36.

the evolution of *Homo Erectus* and *Homo Antecessor*. There's a genetic genealogy that science is learning increasingly more about with each new fossil find. There were Neanderthal genes in Jesus, let's put it that way.

Theological responses

Of course, what I am exploring is nothing new to modern theology. Wentzel van Huyssteen's important research (among others),[7] explored these questions through the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. But my own focus is on the question of soteriology, so I must start with Christology. Christology being the fundamental site for contestation in the framing of the Nicene and Chalcedon creeds. For today, Christology must embrace, among other natural dynamics, evolution, if all things were created in, through and for the Word. As Paul understands, God is understood as in all things, through all things and above all things, both visible and invisible, and "he [Christ] holds all things together" (Col. 1.17). Only as such can our lives be "hidden in Christ with God" (Col. 3.3).

Of course, Teilhard de Chardin, in his *The Phenomenon of Man,* said the same. He examined the movements and generation within the lithosphere into the biosphere and on into what he called the *noosphere*. The physiological, psychic and spiritual culminate in the advent and salvific work of Christ as the Omega Point. Examining a very limited number of fossilised hominid finds available at that time (1955, though the book was mainly written during the Second World War), he nevertheless concluded that "they probably represent a type through which modern man [sic.] must once have passed in the course of his [sic.] phylogenesis."[8] This being so, I want to work in the other direction, a theological direction:

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7 Apart from Chardin, there is Karl Rahner, *Hominization: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem* (New York: Herder and Herder,1968). More recently, there is the work of Joshua Moritz. See, 'Evolution, The End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the *Imago Dei*', *Theology and Science* 9,3 (2011) 307-39 and 'Does Jesus Save the Neanderthals? Theological Perspectives on the Evolution and Boundaries of Human Nature', *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 54.1 (2015) 51-60. Those working on Deep Incarnation have also explored the limits of anthropocentric thinking with respect to evolution and ecology, though not often within a paleoanthropological frame.

8 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p.194.

not proceeding upwards and teleologically to the Christological, but descending downwards from the revelation of Christ into the biotic and spiritual.

This means crossing a line, or rather blurring the line, between what is often called specific revelation and general revelation. Let me explain that briefly. Special revelation is associated with what Karl Jaspers, and more recently Karen Armstrong, has termed the Axial Age (from c. 900 BCE).[9] This was a time in which religions began developing notions of divine transcendence and revelation. More specifically, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is announced in the call to Abram. "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your own country, your kinsmen and your father's house and go to a country that I will show you'" (Gen. 12.1). This line of divine revelation leads directly to the establishment of Judaism, the law of Moses, the Davidic kings and, finally, to Jesus. We can understand this movement of history in terms of its various covenants between God and humankind or through various dispensations of grace. But, in the genealogy of Abram that comes in the verses before the one I cited, we find another and earlier movement. Abram was called in Harran, yet before that calling, we have Abram's father, Terah. Terah, it is written, "set out from the Ur of the Chaldees for the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:31). What prompted this movement towards a part of Asia Minor that would become the promised land is never explained. What led Terah to "set out from Ur" and to have the land of Canaan in his sights remains hidden and is not part of the explicit call made upon Abram. Harran was an ancient city and seaport in what is now Turkey. It was not Canaan. So, Abram completed his father's desire to journey into Canaan, following a specific revelatory call from God. I make this observation because it is evident that before special revelation, there was a movement of the Spirit and the Word of God upon human lives. Noah, for example.

In his book, *Neanderthal Religion*? the Jesuit scholar Thomas Hughson writes of "early revelation involv[ing] some manner of salvific effects in

9 See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953); Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The World in the Time of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

Neanderthals."[10] His book focuses "on the pre-condition for soteriology."[11] General revelation is not unknown in the Christian Scriptures. St. Paul points out to the Greek Christian communities of Rome that God's "invisible attributes, that is to say His everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20). What characterises general revelation is divine immanence and experiences of the numinous. These notions of the sacred are animist, pantheist and panentheist, finding expression in both ritual and belief. Hughson points to several aspects of this expression in Neanderthals: burial of the dead, the cult of the bear and ritualised settings such as the ring of stalagmites in the Bruniquel caves in southwestern France (dated to 176,500 BCE). That is well before the advent of Anatomically Modern Humans (around 100,000 BCE). In fact, these Neanderthal practices may have been imitated by early *Homo sapiens*: the bear cult, for example, is found among Cro Magnons and stone circles are found throughout Europe and dated as Neolithic. Neanderthals are categorised as Middle Palaeolithic and Cro Magnons as Upper Palaeolithic. One can observe this in South Africa, with the discovery of *Homo Naledi* and the ongoing work at the Rising Star Cave, where another species of *Homo* appears to have buried their dead and engaged in rock art. Their flourishing is dated to approximately 250,000 BCE, and their extinction is possibly linked to early forms of *Homo sapiens*.

The point of my argument is that with general revelation or what Hughson calls, after Bernard Lonergan, "early revelation"[12], we are exploring the "precondition for soteriology". But unlike Hughson, I am engaging this exploration from a Christological perspective that I shall say more about later. For now, it is time to introduce at least one of the theologians who have been engaged in this exploration in their own way. I only have time to treat Wentzel van Huyssteen, who has had a long association with this university.

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10 Thomas Hughson SJ, *Neanderthal Religion?* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2024), p.220.

11 Ibid.

12 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), especially pp.101-24 on 'Religion'.

The publication of Wentzel van Huyssteen's *opus, Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science a Theology,*[13] followed from his Gifford Lectures in 2004. The book was published in 2006, before the discovery of *Homo Naledi* in 2013, the Neanderthal stalagmite circle in the Bruniquel caves in 2016, and the mid-face skull of *Homo erectus* found in the *Sima del Elefante site* in 2022[14] or the genetic discovery published in March this year (by scientists at the University of Cambridge) that the *Homo* family tree split radically into two species around 1.5 million years ago, to interbred around 300,000 years ago.[15] The keyword in van Huyssteen's serious scholarly research is "uniqueness", which is a theological question arising for him from Gen.1:26. But this keyword is part of a larger project: offering a case study for theology and science working dialogically and entering an interdisciplinary space governed by transversal reasoning. Its concern is as much with methodology as anthropology. He argues that the symbolic, and possibly ritualistic, work of Cro Magnon reveals early modern humans as creative in a way that might be correlated with the creativity suggested by being made in the image of the Creator in Genesis. He does not make a distinction between image and likeness. But he argues these Upper Palaeolithic people are responding, in some sense, to a world understood as created and in ways suggestive of an origin for spiritual/religious experience. And van Huyssteen deepens this "uniqueness" by relating it to a new cognitive fluidity in early modern humans as propounded by the scientists Steven Mithen and David Lewis-Williams.[16]

My theological project is quite different, though equally interdisciplinary. More recent discoveries (both paleoanthropological and neurological) suggest that van Huyssteen's thesis needs some important revision. Neither Teilhard de Chardin nor Thomas Hughson regards *Homo sapiens* as a

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13 Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science a Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

14 Rosa Huguet et.al., 'The Earliest Face in Western Europe' Huguet, R., Rodríguez-Álvarez, X.P., Martinón-Torres, M. *et al.* The earliest human face of Western Europe. *Nature* 640, 707–713 (2025).

15 See Cousins, T., Scally, A. & Durbin, R. A structured coalescent model reveals deep ancestral structure shared by all modern humans. *Nat Genet* 57, 856–864 (2025).

16 For Steven Mithen see *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996). For David-Lewis Williams see *The Mind in the Cave* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

unique species. Chardin argues this on evolutionary grounds because there are no radical breaks such that a phylum is without precedent. There are diversity, efflorescence and convergence, but the tree of life remains one tree and one life, "the *irreversible coherence* of all that exists."[17]

Human beings took many forms. Hughson argues this on theological grounds, which are ultimately based on creation and a belief in divine providence. Paleoanthropological debates are still being fought. Any resolution would not affect my thesis because whether *Homo sapiens* arose multi-regionally across Europe and Asia following *Homo erectus*' exodus from Africa, or whether they emerged in Africa and left in a second exodus in the Middle Palaeolithic era, the species to which we belong goes back to *Homo erectus*. Although, as van Huyssteen notes, around 1.7 million years ago with *Homo erectus,* "the hominid group was at its most densely branched, and at this time at least three species co-existed."[18]

My concerns do not lie with defining human uniqueness as such. I think the idea of "uniqueness" is reductive with respect to the mystery of the human condition and tends to smuggle in human privilege and separation from the rest of the biological order. As Hans Jonas pointed out with respect to Darwinism: "evolution precisely abolished the special position of man."[19] I do admit, though, that the Judaeo-Christian traditions have accepted without question that we are unique. My focus is on the broader evolutionary trajectory in which several *Homo* species eventually arrive at one sole survivor of the process: us. Although we, too, are still evolving in a complex morphology that is both biological and cultural. Evolution does not proceed as a continuum. Stephan Jay Gould, Niles Eldredge, and, more recently, David Maslin,[20] have shown that there are rapid and slow speciation events related to climatic, geological and planetary changes. The

17 Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, p.218.

18 Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the Universe?* p.61.

19 Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Towards a Philosophical Biology*, trans. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p.57. Despite his critique of Chardin, their respective examinations rest on the same premise: "the organic even in its lowest forms prefigures mind, and that mind even on its highest reaches remains part of the organic" (p.1). If Jonas articulates a philosophy of life and Chardin's theology of the same, Jonas, too, concludes his account of transcendence with a metaphysics expressed in terms of his Jewish faith.

20 *Op.cit*.

fundamental changes in brain size, for example, seem to have occurred around 500,000 years ago; 1.3 million years *after* the emergence of *Homo erectus*. Nevertheless, in that long evolutionary process, we are the bearers of ancient ontogenetic, phylogenetic and epigenetic markings in which the interface of the biological and the cultural gets increasingly strong from the moment any *Homo* ancestor becomes a *homo faber* (a maker of tools, a producer of technology). And if *we* are so marked by various genetic drifts and modulations, then so was Jesus. In the recent work of paleoanthropologists like Agustín Fuentes[21], Christopher Henshilwood,[22] Marion Prévost[23] and Francesco d' Errico,[24] what constitutes human uniqueness is not simply the cognitive capacity for creating symbols but the capacity to make tools; to create, imagine, and even embellish their tools. With *homo faber,* there is no longer just adapting to but also changing our environments, and relations between biological and cultural evolution follow.[25] Furthermore, this co-evolutionary trajectory issues in highly organised religious expression well before the Axial age. In Çatalhöyük in southern Anatolia, for example, we have a city that goes back to 7,000 BCE. Part of, central to, that "city" is a religious veneration of ancestors, for from the excavations it appears that the living lived alongside the buried

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21 Agustín Fuentes, *The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional* (New York: Dutton, 2017).

22 Christopher Henshilwood, 'The Origins of Symbolism, Spirituality, and Shamans: Exploring Middle Stone Age Material Culture in South Africa' in *Becoming Human: Innovation in Spiritual and Material Culture,* ed. Colin Renfrew and Ian Morley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.29-49.

23 Marion Prévost et.al. 'Early evidence for symbolic behaviour in the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic: A 120 ka old, engraved aurochs bone shaft from the open-air site of Nesher Ramla, Israel', *Quaternary International*, Volume 624, 2022, 80-93.

24 Francesco d' Errico, "The Origin of Symbolically Mediated Behaviour from Antagonistic Scenarios to a Unified Research Strategy" in Christopher Henshilwood and Francesco d' Errico (eds.), *Homo Symbolicus: The Dawn of Language, Imagination and Spirituality* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011), pp.49-73.

25 See Franz Wuketits, working in evolutionary epistemology, for an examination of both the constraints and the propensities that follow from the shift from biologically driven to culturally driven evolution. *Evolutionary Epistemology and Its Implications for Humankind* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990). More recently, also, Christopher Wills, *Children of Prometheus: The Accelerating Pace for Human Evolution* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1998).

dead.[26] It is co-evolution, then, that is the key term in my project[27] and how this might be framed Christologically and soteriologically. Which is why Teilhard de Chardin's work raises questions, for me, that still seek answers.

More precisely, how do the processes of this co-evolution in which being human issues in several forms that experience and express themselves spiritually, relate to a notion of the divine *oikenomia* in which Christ gathers all things created and submits them to the sovereignty of the Godhead (Phil. 2)? Christ, that is, through whom and by whom to all things were created. Furthermore, I am associating co-evolution, *oikenomia* and salvation (which therefore cannot *pace* Gould conceived evolution as purely contingent and governed by chance nor be deterministic) to our NOT knowing what it is to be "fully human" as Jesus Christ was "fully human"; our continual need to explore and understand the mystery of our developing human nature. What is, organically and materially, the eschatological processes of coming into a likeness to Christ, such that we arrive at an understanding of how we were made in the image of God and know even as we are known?

Recapitulation

The lynchpin that holds these three aspects of my argument together – human co-evolution, divine *oikenomia* and salvation – is Christ as the recapitulation of all things. And this is the second part of my essay, theologically addressing the questions of human being as a praxis.

The word "recapitulation", understood in terms of Christian theology, pertains to Christology and ecclesiology: in particular, Christ as the head of His body, the Church. Taking Ephesians as Pauline, it states that "For he [God the Father] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will (*mystêrion tou thelêmatos*) according to his purpose which he outlined in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time (*tou plêrômatos tôn kairôn*), to unite all things (*anakephalaiôsasthai*) in him, things in

26 See two documentaries on the excavations at Çatalhöyük and a lecture by Ian Hodder, a leading archaeologist on the site. [Online]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU0Mk-Em1rk and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o70A1VqrxEQ.

27 Co-evolution is not considered by either Chardin or Jonas (or van Huyssteen).

heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). This unification of all things, the grand incorporation into one body, expands any notion of "church". The verb in Greek means "to comprehend"; it has an epistemological sense that links back to wisdom, "insight" (*phronesis*) and the revelation "made known". It was also used technically and rhetorically as a succinct briefing of a complex legal affair before judgment. Paul uses it in this sense in Romans 13:9, where the law (as expressed in the Ten Commandments) is summed up as "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". Love, in this *resumé*, is the fulfilment (*plêrôma*) that "sums up" the law. Since *plêrôma* is so profoundly related to the movement of the Holy Spirit in Paul, with respect to the revelation of God in Christ and salvation, we can begin to see how "complex" a verb (and a verbal noun) *anakephalaioô* is. Although the word is only used twice in the New Testament. While being a summary, it also implies an economic ordering of time and space, which is both dynamic and teleological (towards the fulfilment of what until that point is inchoate).

The word is compounded, adding the suffix *ana* to the Greek word for "head" (*kephalê*). Ana has a range of uses: an upward thrust (as in *anabainô* – to ascend[28]), though also a sense of "along" and 'throughout'. *Ana* can also have counteracting implications as *analogical* and *anachronism,* or even anaconda (the reptile that coils back upon itself). The suggestiveness of this suffix is rich: a dynamic verticality and horizontal trajectory, both of which Pauline Christology and ecclesiology emphasise, but also something countering our notion of progress and the spatialising of vertical and horizontal. Christ, as head of His Body, the Church and the revelation of God, reveals and perfects salvation in ways that are not easily assimilable to either our calculations of linear progress or transcendence. Nevertheless, as "head", Christ is the one to whom all things will be submitted, while also being a point above and beyond upon which all things will converge. This sense of a process of convergence, or gathering up to summarise, pertains not only to the "head", but to the workings of the rest of the body.

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28 We can observe how Paul couples *anabainô* and *katabainô* (to descend) in the figuration of Christ's incarnation and redemption in Ephesians 4.8-10 to establish a cosmic Lordship and point to the omnidirectionality of grace from God who is "overall and through all and in all" (Eph. 4.6). In this way, *kenôsis*, *yennêsis* and *anakephalaioô* become inseparable in a pneumatological economy.

And we can note, in passing, how important the word "convergence" is in the processes of evolution.[29] Through Christ, as the point of convergence (Chardin's Omega point), the church is drawn into the economical ordering of salvation as an ascending, diachronic and countering activity, Spirit-led and Spirit-motored. All spiritual actions, from the writing of the Gospels to preaching, liturgical performances and bearing witness, participate in this Christomorphic and pneumatological dynamic towards the creation of one body. The suffix and the noun, when verbalised in *anakephalaioô* evoke, then, complex rhythms and movements with respect to salvation, time, transcendence and immanence, that I am attempting to elucidate, and my Ethiopian cross illustrates.

We can begin by drawing out five characteristics evident in these two Pauline uses of *anakephalaioô*. First, there is the formation of a summary; second, a dynamic movement towards a telos; third, a divine intentionality (*thelêmatos*) governing this movement through a providential plan; fourth, a dialectic of visibility and invisibility with respect to what is hidden (*mystêrion*) and revealed, though known eternally in the Godhead; and, fifth, a construal of time or, more accurately, overlapped temporalities. These characteristics structure the complexity of the word, giving it value and currency for later theological developments. But it is not just the structure and the increasing currency of this complex word that I wish to examine, but the way this verbal complexity can impact the dynamics of how we might conceive Christ, salvation, time and transcendence today, in a contemporary recapitulation of recapitulation.

As Irenaeus develops a theology of recapitulation in the second century,[30] he picks up on Paul's suffix "ana", which, because it details a forward

29 Both Chardin and, more recently, Simon Conway Morris have drawn attention to the centrality of 'convergence' as offering limits to the biological efflorescence and diversity. Morris explicitly uses this notion to counter Gould's claim that the evolution of human beings is simply one possible toss of the cosmic dice. For Conway Morris, see *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

30 In his Duffy Lectures, Denis Edwards, pursuing his deep incarnation reflections, also turns to Irenaeus. He mentions, though does not focus on, Irenaeus' notion of 'recapitulation', though he does insightfully show how Irenaeus expands Paul's use of the term to encapsulate all of creation and therefore includes far more of humanity's ecological environment. Evolution can never be separated from environmental

movement, is associated with repetition and improvement. In this way, he relates *anakephalaioô* to Paul's observation about Christ as the second Adam. Since Adam, like Christ, is viewed as a historical figure, then appeal can be made to the genealogy in Luke's Gospel. Such a generational connection appears to reinforce a linear understanding of time and Christ's "recapitulation of man [as a species] in Himself."[31] "When He became incarnate and was made man, He recapitulated in Himself the long history of mankind and, in that summing up, procured for us the salvation we lost in Adam."[32] But genealogy is not the same as a linear chronology (though Luke's "history" might well be suggesting this): the passage of time from past to present to future. And Irenaeus seems to be employing genealogy in a more modern sense (after Nietzsche and Foucault), where a hermeneutic (Christ) is sought for the prevailing situation, and exploration is made of the past to illuminate the present. In Christ, the trajectory of human history is both taken up and transposed into a new spiritual key, a new generation (*novum generationem*).[33] With the incarnation of Christ, what is human must go back to interpret the creation of Adam. Adam's genesis must be reframed, and the interpretation of the Adam narratives given mythic (not historic) sensibility. This has important consequences for my argument.

First, while no doubt Adam was considered by Irenaeus as a historical figure, this figure is only important for him because, fashioned in God's image while coming into its likeness only in Christ, Adam is the progenitor of the human race. It is Adam, as the beginning of the human species, that is important for Irenaeus. As John Behr rightly discerns, "The unfolding of the economy [of salvation in Christ] cannot, therefore, be told by beginning with Adam, considered in himself, proceeding the 'Fall', then the 'history of salvation', and finally to Christ, but must be told in such a manner that the end and the beginning mutually inform each other in one arc, both synchronically, in that the arrangement of the whole is revealed together in

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conditions. See *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (New York: Orbis Books, 2019), pp.29-54.

31 Irenaeus, Against Heretics, Volume 10 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) pp.309-507. Book V. 14. 2.

32 Ibid., Book III. 13. 1.

33 Ibid., Book V.1.3. Note that "generation" is not a static substantive here. It is a verbal noun: that which generates.

its recapitulation, and diachronically, as it is unfolded throughout time."[34] The origin and end of humankind are synchronically (and transhistorically) and diachronically (throughout history) gathered, recapitulated, in Christ. The chronological has consequence and value (materially) *only* in its eternal and economic counterpoint; a counterpoint that circumscribes the whole process. This understanding of "recapitulation" is closer to the way the term has been used in the development of the sonata form in music from the middle of the eighteenth century. The final movement of a sonata gathers the musical exposition of themes explored and developed in the earlier sections. Irenaeus uses the metaphor of the symphony, understanding salvation as a symphonic movement in which the melodies of history capitulate to an economic rhythm of divine recapitulation. His theology of musical rhythm anticipates Augustine's De musica (particularly Book Six).

Irenaeus's appeal to Christ as the revelation of what it is to be human is, perhaps, more in line with Paul's thinking in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-8, where the interest lies less in the first Adam than the second. Paul pays very little attention to any pre- or post-lapsarian state. As the biblical scholar Nicholas A. Meyer puts it: "Paul knows nothing of Adam's lost glory."[35] Adding later, "There is no 'fall' from God's original design – if that is understood as a property of ontic perfection, but rather a deviation from an original intention."[36] Irenaeus would agree: there is no historical Fall – God's plan continues, albeit stalled by human disobedience. This does not mean Irenaeus has no concept of original sin and judgment. Sin is original insofar as it is written into the human species itself from the beginning in terms of the freedom to choose. And there is judgment.

Second, while what is past is looked back upon and transformed by its symphonic continuity with the Incarnation and Passion of Christ,[37] the

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34 John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, p.148.

35 Nicholas A. Meyer, *Adam's Dust and Adam's Glory in the Hodayot and the Letters of St. Paul: Rethinking Anthropogony and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p.127.

36 Ibid., p.175.

37 John Behr notes, following Rolf Noorman's *Irenäus als Paulusinterpret: Zur Rezeption und Wirkung der paulinischen und deuteropaulinischen Briefe im Werke des Irenäus von Lyon* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), that "Irenaeus does not differentiate too sharply between the 'Incarnation' and the "Passion, neither as 'events' nor in terms of their effects: both are embraced by the 'coming' of Christ in the last times." *Irenaeus of Lyons*, p.134, fn.15.

future is a working out of the salvific and material economy by the Body of Christ, of which Christ is the Head. The future, the materiality of that future, lies with the Spirit-led Church and the perfection of that "second generation"[38]. This is the new human being in Christ that, even following the resurrection, continues as it grows closer to the Godhead.

Third, and more briefly, what Irenaeus's theology embraces is historical processes but not in any linear, chronological manner. Revelation is historical, as it is profoundly embodied. There is no *Heils* without *Geschichte*, while the patterned significance of those processes shifts with the sands of time towards an eternal grounding. Theology would have to wait until Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and then the nineteenth century before such a commitment to the historical is again fundamental to theological method.

This presentation of salvation history, while seemingly linear in its recognition of the necessity of all cultural and material realities of history, actually moves in cycles or arcs (John Behr's word). The object of this "long pedagogy"[39] is the human race, created in the image and being brought into the likeness of God. And within that "pedagogy", the nature of being human moves in one cycle from Adam to Christ (the old generation) and a second cycle from Christ to the Church as the expression of conformity to (the likeness) the glory God had always intended (the new generation). Both cycles are linked through Christ, the alpha and omega, so that protology and eschatology constitute the perfection of God the Father's intention and fall within the embrace of salvation in Christ. As Thomas Torrance writes with respect to Irenaeus' understanding of recapitulation: "he [Christ] penetrates back into the very beginning of the human race and gathered it all up in his incarnate existence … thereby bringing the divine purpose of creation to its destined fulfilment and end."[40] What we have in the incarnation cannot be separated from redemption as some divine work that lays the foundations for the real job on the Cross. Incarnation and Passion cannot be divorced, and this is important for Irenaeus's conception of time. Christ's own coming and departure, as a historical creature, is

38 Irenaeus, *Against Heretics*, Book V.1.63.

39 John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, p.203.

40 Thomas F. Torrance, 'Kerygmatic Proclamation of the Gospel: Irenaeus' in *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1995), p.68.

one single time; a time in which chronology (*kronos*) is assumed into the transhistorical (*kairos*). As such, this incarnational temporality forms a distinct interval in the continuity Irenaeus traces between the first cycle from Adam to Christ and the second cycle from Christ to the perfection of His body, the Church. Given Irenaeus's commitment to continuity, the interval is not interruptive, but it sets apart the revelation of God; the advent of the Godhead issuing out of invisibility to visibility. We might picture this specific temporal interval as an operation of salvific grace working in an omnidirectional manner, gathering and redeeming all that is in the deep time of the past and all that is in the deep time of the future. It is customary to speak of Christian salvation as God's revelatory act in history. But we must recognise here that the very historicity of this 'history' is fractured and tessellated. It is not linear. Furthermore, events such as the incarnation and resurrection (or ascension) are paradoxically (like Christ) fixed in time and transcending time. Salvation operates in and through temporality, going forward (from Pentecost and the formation of the Church) and backwards into the creation of all things. The omnidirectionality of that movement has, of course, implications for any doctrine of providence which, to date, takes time as linear.[41]

Concluding observations

It is time to bring this examination to an abrupt conclusion, but what I hope you can see are the enormous theological implications of this paradigm shift with respect to Christology and deep time. The implications mentioned align with and expand on the cosmic Christologies developed by the Patristic Fathers and Mothers.

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41 This might explain why providence is not a NT word. The emphasis there is more on the promise of provision, preservation and governance. See recent attempts to re-frame theologies of providence: David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and Ernst M. Conradie, *A God Who Cares? Reformed Perspectives on God's Providence amid the Shift from the Holocene to the "Anthropocene"* (Cape Town: Avarsity, 2025). Both Fergusson and Conradie, in their different ways, seek to mitigate the "real danger of an independent interest in providence that yields an arid deism that becomes isolated from the soteriological core of the Christian gospel and the Trinitarian pattern of the Christian faith" (Conradie, p.xix). Both submit to an apophatic understanding of God's *oikonomia*.

1. Divine purpose and the operations of redemption work providentially with the materiality of molecules converging to form life and then through biological and cultural evolution. In agreement with Denis Edwards "it can be said, with the theologians of deep incarnation, that is [the] kenotic and self-humbling love that is at work in the emergence of the universe over the last 13.7 billion years, and the evolution of life on earth over the last 3.7 billion years, with all its terrible costs and in all its wonderful outcomes."[42] Deep incarnation accepts the God of deep time. Salvation is not just about human sin; it concerns "the redemption of the body" (Rom. 8:23) for which all creation groans. From this redemption, a new body emerges – the body of Christ – and this body embraces "all things". Ecclesiology must therefore be rethought.

2. Humankind is on a journey, a "long pedagogy", to understand itself in terms of its likeness to Christ. A corollary of this is that *Homo sapiens* (who are still evolving) may have aeons of ontogenetic, phylogenetic and epigenetic change to come, just as it took aeons of ontogenetic, phylogenetic and epigenetic change to bring *Homo sapiens* to their present condition. Though the evolutionary record demonstrates that the extinction of a species is also possible.

3. With the advent of *homo faber* (stonecutter, fire-user, the devisor of technology) and the rise of cultural evolution (related to enhanced and increasing brain size), the question is: what is it we are, ultimately, making? What is the divine telos of our technicity as it governs future developments?

4. Salvation concerns all things gathered and embraced in Christ as Pantocrator. The church is the beginning of a new incorporation in which not only the evolution of humankind is embraced, but all the billions of years of cosmic change that go back to the Big Bang and go forward to the cosmic dispersal.[43] I say this at a time when particle physicists and cosmologists are asking how creation is at all possible,

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42 Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*, p.79.

43 See Fred C. Adams and Greg Laughlin, *The Five Ages of the Universe: Inside the Physics of Eternity* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

given that at the Big Bang, matter (of which we and stars are made) and antimatter were produced in almost equal measures. So, the Big Bang should immediately lead to the Big Implosion.

5. Salvation is not linear. The still point in this gathering, which diffuses salvific grace backwards and forwards across and through time, is the years from the incarnation to the crucifixion and resurrection. This is "the fullness of time (*tou plêrômatos tôn kairôn*)" or the spiritualisation of time, radiating through the whole of unfolding creation.

6. Finally, to follow van Huyssteen's observation that "certainly Christian theology, in a sense, still has to come to terms with the enormous vistas of time revealed by Darwinian evolution",[44] we have to nuance the way we understand the relationship between early or general and special revelation. They cannot become two forms of divine agency. This means developing a Christology, pneumatology and sacramentality that recognises the preconditions for soteriology. In turn, this requires revisiting what are often scare words for Christian orthodoxy: animism, shamanism, pantheism, panpsychism, panentheism, theism and the veneration of the ancestors.

44 Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the Universe?* p.204.