

Dogmatic aspects of the Christologies of Kant and St Innocent (Borisov)

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Abstract. In his momentous writing *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant attempted to conduct a complete rational-idealistic interpretation of traditional dogmatic Christology. The Son of God was represented by Kant as an idea of the good principle mystically existing in the human soul, and the Incarnation of the Son of God as a descent of the good principle into evil human nature. Therefore the Lord Jesus Christ, according to Kant's representation, should be merely a simple man (an example for human beings) who realised the good principle in his life, becoming a model for us to copy and a proof that we also can realise this principle – having Christ as an example, though on our own, independently, i.e. without having any special ontological relation with Him, and without any other external factors having impact on us. St Innocent (Borisov) was the first thinker in the whole tradition of Russian theology who seriously dealt with the theological opinions of Kant, especially with his rational Christology. St Innocent did not neglect the meaning of Kant's Christological views, but attempted, firstly, to incorporate their positive roots into traditional Christology and, secondly, to respond to Kant's "challenge", i.e. his notion that the doctrine of Christ's native holiness is not compatible with the view of Him as an example and ideal. The Russian theologian stated that Christ is the Ideal and God Himself. To respond to Kant, he formulated the conception of the gradual manifestation of divinity in Christ.

Keywords: Christology, St Innocent (Borisov), Immanuel Kant, Russian theology, moral choice

1 Introduction

As has been noted by a researcher of Immanuel Kant's Christology, "the characteristic of his Christology is a total reorientation of the main traditional Christological themes" (Vogel, 1954, p. 402; tr. A.M.). The Christology of Kant can be considered as an attempt to

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emancipate the traditional¹ Chalcedonian Christology from its two aspects – the dogmatical and historical-biblical (mystical) ones.² The purpose of Kant’s dealing with the traditional teaching on Christ is to expound the universal, practical and moral meanings of this teaching. Kant’s moral interpretation of dogmatic Christology is presented in his *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*.³ It is important to note that Kant, while criticising the dogmatical and historical-biblical aspects of traditional Christology, acts as a representative of the tradition of rational theology. His criticism shows him as a person who is thoroughly familiar with traditional Protestant theology which appears as a direct object of his examination and sometimes attacks.

2 Kant’s Critique of Traditional Christology

Kant tried not to highlight the critical-polemical pathos of his goal in his manipulation of traditional Protestant theology. Therefore, the object of Kant’s criticism ought to be made clear. He not only does not designate the theological theses which he criticises, but also avoids traditional Christological terms. In the “Christological” part of his work Kant does not use the term “*Christus*”, and in his general comment to the “Third Piece” he uses it only once (*RGV*, AA 06: 141n; Kant, 2009, p. 156n). The Greek word “*Christos*”, which translates into English as “anointed” and is normally used to designate the incarnated Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is replaced in Kant’s work by the abstract term “the truly divinely minded human being” (*RGV*, AA 06: 63; Kant, 2009, p. 70). In Kant’s system Christ is “the example of a human being pleasing to God” (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, Kant uses some terms from the lexicon of traditional dogmatic Christology: “abasement” (*der Stand der Erniedrigung*) (*RGV*, AA 06: 61; Kant, 2009, p. 67), “assumption of humanity” (*das Annehmen der Menschheit*) (*ibid.*), “will” (*der Wille*) (*RGV*, AA 06: 64; Kant, 2009, p. 71), “human nature” (*die menschliche Natur*) (*RGV*, AA 06: 61-63; Kant, 2009, pp. 67-70). More than once Kant also uses the concept “Son of God” (*der Sohn Gottes*) (*RGV*, AA 06: 60-62; Kant, 2009, pp. 66-68). All traditional terms which in Kantian theology refer to the discourse of traditional dogmatic theology are refilled with special moral content.

Kant turns at least to four topics of traditional Christology:

- 1) the doctrine of the Son of God, i.e. triadology;
- 2) the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God;
- 3) the doctrine of the supernatural Conception and Birth of Jesus Christ;
- 4) the doctrine of the Divine and human natures of Jesus Christ.

Kant critically interprets each of these topics, following the moral principles of his own philosophy.

1. Kant does not remove the metaphysical notion of the Son of God from his own rational theological system but transfers it from the ontological level, where it is in traditional systems, to the rational level. Namely, in Kantian theology, the Son of God is a personalised idea of the good principle. In other words, He is the personification of the idea that is situated within human reason or exists in the human soul. According to Kant, the Son of God is both the personalised idea of humanity morally pleasing to God and the personalised idea of the good principle. The Son of God is the ideal, idea, archetype and prototype of human moral

¹ In this article, unless indicated otherwise, “traditional Christology” means the general theological trend, rooted in the teaching proclaimed at the Chalcedonian council of 451 – the notion of Jesus Christ as the God-Man, one Person in and from two natures, namely divine and human.

² Vogel speaks of Kant’s dehistoricisation (*Enthistorisierung*) and ideologisation (*Ideologisierung*) of Christology (*cf.* Vogel, 1954, pp. 403-408).

³ There is a vast number of studies of Kant’s theology, e.g. Michalson (2014). See also Hector (2015); Schmid (2016) and Goodin (2018).

perfection. It is the duty of every human being to elevate themselves to this inward ideal, and this act of self-elevation should be independent from any outward motives. It is an imperative of the moral law. Kant states that we must, therefore are able to, imitate the Son of God. As Kant writes, “no example from experience is needed to make the idea of a human being morally pleasing to God a prototype for us: the idea resides as such a prototype already in our reason” (*RGV*, AA 06: 63; Kant, 2009, p. 69).

2. Consequently, according to Kant, the incarnation of the Son of God is not the historically grounded, though mystical, fact of assumption of human nature by the Son of God, but a conjunction of the idea of the good principle with the evil thinking of humanity. To Kant, the inscrutability of the incarnation lies not in the ontological incompatibility of the Divinity and humanity, but in the inconceivability of the sources of the morally legislative reason. The mystery of the incarnation is the mystery of the origin of the good principle in mankind.

In the same way Kant transforms another notion important for traditional Christology – the *kenosis* of the Son of God. In Kant’s interpretation, *kenosis* is not the real, historical act of condescension⁴ of the divine Logos for the sake of human salvation, but a mysterious phenomenon of the occurrence of the good, moral principle in depraved humans. While a natural human being is guilty and should be conscious of himself as a culprit and therefore not worthy of unity with the Son of God (i.e. not worthy of possession of the good principle), the Son of God – the idea of the good principle – Himself voluntarily descends to humanity, i.e. He voluntarily takes up suffering. It is significant that no human being can take up suffering voluntarily because, with people, suffering is always an appropriate consequence of their faults. Only the holy Son of God can suffer voluntarily because He does not have any faults.

3. Kant sympathises with a dogma essential to traditional Christology, namely the freedom of Christ from original sin. This dogma is stated in traditional Christology along with the dogmas of the supernatural Conception and Birth of Christ. Kant states that “to think, as possible, of a person free of the innate propensity to evil by having him born of a virgin mother is an idea of a reason accommodating itself to a moral instinct, as it were, that is difficult to explain and yet also not to be denied” (*RGV*, AA 06: 80n; Kant, 2009, p. 90n226). The philosopher states that the mode of normal human birth has in itself amoral traits. These traits make us common with the animals and do not befit the wise Man (i.e. Christ), who is acknowledged as having come down from Heaven. Kant’s agreement here with one of the basic dogmas of traditional Christology contradicts the general logic of his own Christology. The contradiction will be apparent when we take into account Kant’s attitude to the idea of the native holiness of Jesus Christ.

4. The doctrine on Christ as the unique Saviour of the world is rejected by Kant. According to him, every person is a “christ” because of the mysterious incarnation of the good principle (Son of God) in the depth of every person’s mind. Humankind does not need a person that possesses the unique ability to bring it salvation. The existence of the good principle is completely enough: “[...] the existence of this archetype in the human soul is already incomprehensible enough by itself, so that one does not exactly need to assume it apart from its supranatural origin, as also hypostatised in a particular human being” (*RGV*, AA 06: 64; Kant, 2009, p. 70). Nevertheless, Kant, retreating from the severity of his previous theses, simultaneously states that the phenomenon of an example of a truly divinely minded human being would generate a revolution in humankind. Consequently, according to Kant, Christ is only an auxiliary for people who strive to realise the good principle; He is an

⁴ Kant, meaning condescension of the Son of God, used the verb “*herabkommen*”. The term “condescension” is used in this article in the sense which in Greek is associated with the term “*sygkatabasis*”.

example, namely an example of perfect realisation of the good principle. Christ is an example of the ideal, but not the ideal itself.

Having in his mind the traditional teaching about the divine and human natures of Christ, Kant cautiously states that Christ – the specimen of how the idea of a divine-human being can be realised – should be a “naturally begotten human being” (*RGV*, AA 06: 64; Kant, 2009, p. 70), therefore He must have only a single nature – human nature. According to Kant, admitting the divine nature of an Example is not only superfluous but also contradicts the prime sense of His service – to be an example.

The main contrast between traditional Christology and Kant’s moral Christology concerns the question of the native holiness of the human will of Christ. In other words, Kant’s disagreement with traditional Christology concerns the theme of the deification of Christ. Kant implicitly notes that the traditional notion that the holiness of Christ is the result of the assumption of the human nature by the divine Logos – the Son of God – destroys the main significance of the phenomenon of Christ. The traditional doctrines of the divine nature of Christ and of the native holiness of His will contradict the moral logic of Kant’s system. According to his own notes, they have no practical importance.

The Christology of St John of Damascus – an eighth century thinker belonging to the patristic tradition who arranged traditional dogmatics into a strict system – can serve as an example of a Christology which does not satisfy the German philosopher. In his work, *Fount of Knowledge*, St John writes: “Now, since the Lord was not a mere man, but was also God and knew all things, He stood in no need of reflection, inquiry, counsel, or judgment. He also had a natural affinity for good and antipathy for evil” (John of Damascus, 1958, p. 302). But according to Kant, the human will of Christ (ability to make a choice) must be identical to the will of an ordinary human individual. Christ must be able to commit a transgression, to have natural affinity both for good and for evil. As Kant writes, “even if the nature of that human being pleasing to God were thought as human insofar as he were thought as fraught with the very same needs and thus also the same sufferings, with the very same natural inclinations, and thus also the same kind of temptations to transgression as we are, but yet as supranatural insofar as his purity of will by no means an achieved, but an innate, unchangeable purity of will would make any transgression absolutely impossible for him, then this distance from the natural human being would thus in tum become so infinitely great that the divine human being could no longer be set up as an example for the natural human being” (*RGV*, AA 06: 64; Kant, 2009, pp. 70-71). Consequently, the doctrine of the divinity of the specimen for an ordinary man as a whole and the notion concerning the native holiness of will of this specimen in particular prevent us from recognising in this specimen-Christ the true image to imitate and therefore the “proof of the practicability and attainability for us of so pure and exalted a moral good” (*RGV*, AA 06: 64; Kant, 2009, p. 71).

Kant’s criticism of traditional Christology compelled the theologians of the age to make a choice between two options. On one hand, they could agree with Kant’s criticism and modify traditional Christology by annihilating the dogma on the native holiness of Christ’s will. On the other hand, they could stay within the boundaries of traditional Christology, at the same time considering it to be “impractical”, as Kant had called it.

3 Christology of St Innocent of Kherson

In Russian theological tradition the first thinker who attempted to answer Kant was St Innocent (Borisov), Archbishop of Kherson and Tauris (1800–1857). Ivan Borisov (this was the birth name of the future St Innocent) studied theology at Kyiv Theological Academy from 1819 until 1823. One of his teachers was Archpriest Ioann Skvortsov, a famous populariser of modern German philosophy in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century. From Skvortsov, Ivan Borisov inherited an interest in German philosophy. While studying at

the Academy, Borisov also became interested in contemporary Protestant theology, especially Christology. The title of his dissertation was “On the Moral Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ”. On graduation from the Kyiv Academy in 1823, Ivan Borisov was appointed as a lecturer of theological disciplines to the theological seminary of the then capital of Russia, Saint-Petersburg. In the same year he was tonsured (he was named Innocent), after which he was ordained a deacon and then a priest. In 1824 he became a lecturer at Saint-Petersburg Theological Academy, then an inspector and professor at the same Academy. In 1830, being already a famous theologian and a doctor of theology (owing to his lectures and popular articles in the theological magazine “Christian Reading”), Innocent was appointed to his *alma mater*, the Kyiv Academy, as its rector and also a professor of the theological disciplines (dogmatics and moral theology). After six years he was ordained a bishop, and four years later bishop Innocent was appointed to the north of Russia – to the see of Vologda and Veliky Ustyug. Soon he became Bishop of Kharkov and Akhtyr; in 1848, already a bishop, he became Archbishop of Kherson and Tauris. Archbishop Innocent died in 1857, having gained fame as a prominent scholar, hierarch and preacher (“Russian Chrysostom”).

Almost all sermons of St Innocent show him as a preacher who did not intend to modify or supplement the traditional content of the teaching on Christ. However, this was caused by his genuine intention to hold back from modern theological problems in his preaching practice. Other writings of St Innocent, such as his work, *The Last Days of the Earthly Life of our Lord Jesus Christ*, which quickly became famous among the educated Russian people of the time, show him as a theologian who not only uses modern terms (like “personality”, “subject”, “consciousness” / “self-consciousness”) in the fields of Triadology, Christology and anthropology, but also attempts to work out tradition-based answers to the questions raised by rational theology. Even the student’s lecture notes of the future hierarch show how early and deep this interest was. St Innocent was the first theologian in the Russian tradition who showed interest in modern German theology, recognised the theological lacunae when giving Orthodox Christian answers to the issues it proposed, and tried to fill these gaps. Most notable here is his effort to give an answer to Kant’s criticism of traditional Christology.⁵ The saint’s records of academic lectures contain references to all four items of Kant’s Christology listed above.

In *A Reading of the Gospel Narratives about the Circumstances of Jesus Christ’s Earthly Life before He Entered into Public Ministry for the Salvation of the Human Race*, St Innocent notices and approves Kant’s opinion concerning the dogma on the Birth of Christ from the virgin mother and the uncleanness of the normal human mode of birth-giving.

He also appreciates Kant’s conception of the Incarnation of the Son of God as a condescension of the good principle into humanity. The Russian theologian states, “even Kant, who admitted the image of the Christian redemption to be a great moral ideal, acknowledged that all things peculiar to human purity are not of human origin but are a donation from Heaven, and that the evil is unable to generate the good” (Innocent [Borisov], 1908a, p. 404; tr. A.M.).

St Innocent transfers Kantian notions about the ideal into Orthodox Christian theology. With reference to Kant, the Russian saint says that “Jesus Christ is the Ideal of all humanity” (Innocent [Borisov], 1908b, p. 782). St Innocent does not mechanically adopt Kant’s vision but makes essential correction to the latter. According to the Russian theologian, Christ is not an *example* of realisation of the ideal, or the good principle, by a human being, but the ideal *itself*. Whereas for Kant the duty to imitate the ideal (which is the Son of God or the good principle) is an imperative of the morally legislative reason, for St Innocent the duty to imitate the ideal (which is the God-Man Jesus Christ Himself) is the divine command to imitate God. This command cannot be found within reason but in the Holy Scripture alone. St Innocent

⁵ On the attitude of St Innocent to Kant see Khondzinskiy (2017, pp. 94-102).

understands Christ not only as the Ideal of humanity, but also as Messiah, truly God and truly Human.

The most interesting aspect of St Innocent's Christology is his *in absentia* dispute with Kant's criticism of the traditional Christological teaching on the native and unchangeable purity of Christ's will. The Russian saint accepts Kant's remark that a person who cannot commit a transgression cannot be an example for simple human beings in realising the good principle in their own lives. St Innocent states that Christ, while living on earth in the state of His humiliation, had an ability,⁶ to commit a sin, while without this ability all His virtues would be deprived of their worth. The Russian theologian maintains that the ability to sin does not humiliate Christ, but, "on the contrary, this is what elevates Him: it is the ability to sin that makes His virtues real, and to lose the ability to fall is nothing of a virtue" (Innocent [Borisov], 1908b, p. 810; tr. A.M.).

But how is it possible simultaneously to speak about Christ who is able to commit a sin and not to contradict the Orthodox dogma that the will of Christ and His humanity as a whole have been deified, i.e. are naturally holy, from His conception and birth?

To combine the Kantian and traditional Christologies, St Innocent developed an original Christological theory of gradual manifestation of divinity in Jesus Christ, namely in His human nature. In a lecture he delivered, the Russian theologian said: "Although in Christ divinity united with humanity only once and for all eternity, the activity of His divinity did not manifest itself in Him at once but was manifesting itself gradually. Initially, there was supernatural activity of divinity in Christ – in the womb of His mother and during His babyhood. When consciousness appeared in the humanity of Christ, the divinity united with His human consciousness; but even after this, His divinity was manifesting itself in His life gradually" (Innocent [Borisov], 1908a, p. 493; tr. A.M.). In some passages, the process of gradual manifestation of the divinity in Christ or His human nature is understood by St Innocent as gradual growth of Christ's consciousness of His own mission. This mysterious, incomprehensible process, which took place only during the state of humiliation of Christ,⁷ allowed the possibility of sinning to be preserved in the human nature of Christ. According to St Innocent, his theory of gradual manifestation of the divinity in Christ does not contradict the patristic Orthodox teaching on the unity of the Person of Christ. There has been only one and complete unification (*unitio*) of divinity and humanity in Christ – the one that happened at the moment when the divine Logos assumed human nature.

The theory of St Innocent also appears in one of his sermons on the Leavetaking of Pascha. As Nadejda D. Gorodetzky (1938, pp. 114-115) writes, the Russian theologian asks: "Was not that forty days' period before the ascension 'a certain preparation of Christ to hold the fullness of divine glory?' Indeed, in Christ His divinity is hypostatically united with His humanity. But, at the same time, His divinity acts without violating the laws of development of His humanity it is united with. That is why, while on earth, it reveals itself gradually and is completely hidden at times, as in Luke 2:52 and Mark 13:32. Therefore there is nothing incongruous with the dignity of the God-Man if, by His humanity, for forty days after His resurrection He would be gradually approaching the summit of divine glory where He was to mount in His ascension."

⁶ While writing on this topic, St Innocent uses two terms: "ability" (Russian: *sposobnost'*) and "possibility" (Russian: *vozmozhnost'*).

⁷ The theory of St Innocent is based on the theses of Lutheran scholastic kenotic Christology. The original theory underlies a Lutheran conception of the two states of Christ, and also the distinction between *possession* and *use* of divine majesty communicated to the Christ's body. Orthodox Lutheran kenotic Christology was adopted by Russian theological tradition at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The most influential theologian at that time was Archbishop Theofan (Prokopovich) – the author of the first Russian Orthodox theological system (*cf.* Theophan (Prokopowicz), 1827, pp. 469-480).

St Innocent expounded his Christological theory in the late 1820s, a quarter-century prior to the famous Protestant theologian Isaak August Dorner⁸ who offered a similar Christological conception (“the theory of continuous incarnation”) in the second edition of his *History of the Development of the Doctrine of Christ* (see Dorner, 1853, pp. 1256-1266).

4 Conclusion

To sum up: St Innocent attempted to fruitfully combine modern German rational theology with Orthodoxy, Kant’s conception of Christ as the example of the realisation of the good principle with traditional Christology. St Innocent attempted to preserve in Christ’s humanity the possibility of sinning or making a moral choice and simultaneously its deification. St Innocent’s intention was to show that traditional Christology can meet challenges of modern philosophical thought without any loss of its own essence. The case with the theory of St Innocent demonstrates that the Russian theological tradition of the age, being represented by the most prominent of its scholars, could yield outstanding results when reflecting on contemporary theological problems. Although these problems themselves originated within the western tradition of thought, the solutions were generated by the inward powers and intuitions of Russian Orthodox tradition.

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⁸ On the relationship between Christologies of St Innocent and Dorner see Malyshev (2019, pp. 29-38).

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