

Paradox in Christian Theology: Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status

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Abstract

It is commonly claimed that certain tenets and doctrines of the Christian faith are *paradoxical*, that is, they give the appearance (at least) of logical inconsistency. In addition to alleged conceptual problems with classical theism, certain distinctively Christian doctrines — most notably, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation — have frequently been thought to suffer from serious internal logical difficulties. As such, questions are naturally raised about the rationality of Christian beliefs.

Since the earliest days of the church, sceptics have marshalled such considerations in defence of their stance of unbelief or outright disbelief with respect to the Christian faith. More remarkable, however, is the number of Christian thinkers who have concurred with their conclusions. Some have conceded not only the charge of paradoxicality but also the charge of irrationality, shrugging it off or even championing it as a virtue. Others have granted that certain doctrines are paradoxical, but reject the accusation of intellectual impropriety. These differing stances indicate that there are two key questions to be answered concerning paradox in Christian theology. (1) Are any essential Christian doctrines genuinely paradoxical? (2) Can a person be rational in believing a paradoxical doctrine?

In the first part of the thesis I develop a case for answering (1) in the affirmative, arguing that the orthodox Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, as reflected in the creeds and confessions of the early church, are indeed paradoxical. This conclusion is supported by (i) the history of the early trinitarian and christological controversies and (ii) the failure of contemporary theologians and philosophers to identify interpretations of these doctrines which avoid paradox while preserving orthodoxy. I also consider a range of strategies for responding to the problem of theological paradox, concluding that each is inadequate on either philosophical or theological grounds (or both).

In the second part of the thesis I develop a case for answering (2) in the affirmative: even if certain Christian doctrines are paradoxical, Christians can

nonetheless be rational in believing them. Building on Alvin Plantinga's model for warranted Christian belief, I provide an account of how belief in Christian doctrines *in general* can be rational. I then set out a model for understanding paradoxical doctrines according to which belief in such doctrines will normally be rational for Christians (both intellectually sophisticated and unsophisticated believers). Finally, I defend the model against a range of theological and philosophical objections.

The thesis thus makes a novel contribution to studies in religious epistemology, with significant implications for biblical interpretation, systematic theology, and apologetics.

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