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Spirit Christology: Intentions, Challenges, and the Ecumenical Potential of a Concept

Kristologija Duha: nameni, izzivi in ekumenski potencial

Abstract: Spirit Christology has resonated within Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic theology. This is due to several limits of the traditional approach based on the formula of Chalcedon which have been highlighted since the 18th century. Entangling Christology and Pneumatology is regarded a promising solution to the notorious problem of explaining the person of Jesus Christ. In this paper, both the intentions and the challenges of Spirit Christology are being displayed. An important aspect will be to differentiate between two types of Spirit Christology: first, attempts to deepen and enrich the understanding of the traditional approach, and second, attempts to replace it. In recent theological discourse, both views are being expressed.

Keywords: Christology, Pneumatology, Spirit-Christology, council of Chalcedon

Izleček: *Kristologija Duha se je pojavila v anglikanski, protestantski in katoliški teologiji. Razlog za to je več omejitev tradicionalnega pristopa, temelječega na kalcedonski veroizpovedi, ki so bile izpostavljene od 18. stoletja dalje. Prepletanje kristologije in pnevmatologije velja za obetavno rešitev razvpitega problema razlage osebe Jezusa Kristusa. V tem prispevku so prikazani tako nameni kot izzivi; pomemben vidik bo razlikovanje med dvema vrstama kristologije Duha: prvič, poskusi poglobitve in obogatitve razumevanja tradicionalnega pristopa, in drugič, poskusi, da bi ga nadomestili. V nedavnem teološkem diskurzu sta izražena oba pogleda.*

Ključne besede: *kristologija, pnevmatologija, kristologija Duha, kalcedonski koncil*

Internationally and interdenominationally, Christology is practiced very differently. One approach that is currently receiving some attention is Spirit Christology. Especially since the latter part of the 20th century, it has resonated within Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic theology (Habets 2016; Liston 2016; Sánchez M. 2022; Dahlke et al. 2022; Stubenrauch 2023). This is remarkable considering that these very denominations have traditionally

adhered to the formula of the council of Chalcedon, crafted in the fall of 451, as a foundational framework. However, the formula shows noticeable limitations (section 1). In light of this, it can be explained why pneumatologically oriented Christologies were and still are regarded as helpful, sometimes even as progressive (section 2). It is important to mention that the concepts presented here often remain outlines and frequently highlight ideas which might be developed further on rather than being comprehensive in scope – quite understandably so, given the necessity to address and enhance a common understanding of pneumatology across the denominations. Thus, a carefully drafted concept of Spirit Christology continues to be a desideratum, as will be explained in the final part of this paper, pointing to the ecumenical potential of the concept (section 3).

1 Limits of Chalcedonian Christology

One question every Christological concept must answer is that of the enduring significance of the early councils: To what extent are they authoritative and, thus, doctrinally binding? What is the meaning of their decrees concerning the personhood of Jesus Christ? If the ancient teachings are still significant, they must be preserved, at least in terms of their content with singular terms to be altered (Dahlke 2021). In case they are outdated, however, one can and should replace them. The question just mentioned arises especially with regard to the formula adopted by the council of Chalcedon in order to end controversies that had long been going on in the eastern Mediterranean region (Grillmeier 1979; Leuenberger-Wenger 2019). At issue was whether the union of God and humankind in Jesus Christ should emphasize the separation or rather the union of the two distinct realities. The formula held that in Jesus Christ two natures are personally united, unmixed, unchangeable, undivided, and indivisible. However, the attempt to end the controversies failed. Anti-Chalcedonian churches were formed, which slowly separated from the imperial Byzantine church (Van Rompay 2022). Nothing like this happened in the West. There, the formula determined the Christological discourse during both the patristic era and the period of scholasticism as well as in early modern times (Hainthaler 2019; Sidaway 2020; Cross 2022; Cross 2023). In the 18th century, however, an awareness of the limitations of Chalcedonian Christology began to develop in Protestant theology. These limitations could not



be ignored by either Anglicans or Catholics, although it took some time to acknowledge them (Dahlke 2017).

Very different objections have been and still are raised against Chalcedon, namely five: (a) an objection based on theological principles, (b) an exegetical objection, (c) an historical objection, (d) an ecumenical objection. Particularly grave, however, is (e) a genuinely dogmatic one, concerning the personhood of Jesus Christ. In the following, these five aspects will be discussed sequentially:

(a) The formation of Church doctrine is always relative, and quite literally so. It is relative both to the revelation it claims to capture and to the contexts in which it emerges. Because of this twofold connection, dogmatic theology requires both an understanding of the relationship between God's revelation and ecclesiastical teaching and a knowledge of the history of theology and dogma. The stronger the awareness has grown since the 19th century that formation of traditional doctrine is relative on multiple levels, the more room has opened up for new theological approaches. This correlation is evident in the work of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834). In his opinion, Protestantism had merely adopted the usual body of doctrine instead of examining it in view of the Reformation's insights and, if necessary, reforming it profoundly – including Christology (Schleiermacher 2003a, 169–172 [§ 25]; 2003b, 58–60 [§ 95]).¹ Therefore, Schleiermacher saw reason to creatively rewrite it (2003b, 38–58 [§§ 92–94]).² In Protestant theology, it became widely accepted that adopting the doctrines without substantial change was insufficient. Anglicans and Catholics took longer for that. In Catholic theology, an awareness of the relativity of doctrine did not develop until the final third of the 20th century, accompanied by considerations of Spirit

1 For an English translation, cf. Schleiermacher 2016, 108–111 (§ 25) and 2016, 389–390 (§ 95).

2 For an English translation, cf. Schleiermacher 2016, 374–389. After sketching his own theory, Schleiermacher leveled accusations against the traditional doctrine – cf. 2003b, 60–94. For an English translation, cf. 2016, 391–417 (§§ 96–98). A detailed analysis is provided by Dahlke 2016, Junker-Kenny 2021.



Christology. Until then, the definition of Chalcedon was regarded the absolute norm.³

(b) Of the four gospels considered as canonical, the gospel of John has probably had the strongest influence on the formation of doctrines in the early Church. This is especially true for its prologue, which holds: *Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο* (Jn 1,14). This verse, together with the notion of pre-existence presumed by it, not only played an instrumental role in the Trinitarian discussions of the early Church but also determined the development of Christology (Uhrig 2004; Frey 2014, 231 n. 2; 2024). The idea that God would show a single human person his special favour, as the gospels seem to suggest with the baptism of Jesus (Mk 1,9-11), was discarded, for this ultimately leads to the idea of adoptionism. Rather, it is the Logos who takes up humanity, which, with recourse to the philosophical concept of *φύσις*, is conceived impersonal. In later theological discourse, this teaching was developed into the notion of *assumptio carnis*.

Due to the dominance of the Gospel of John, other strands of the New Testament receded into the background and received less attention. In the 18th century, however, with a form of exegesis emerging that emancipated itself from dogmatic guidelines, the diversity of the biblical testimony was emphasized and, in addition, the distinctive perspectives of the synoptic gospels in contrast to John highlighted. By now, it is a general opinion that the fourth gospel, which is strongly shaped by theological interests, is only partly suited to gain insight into the »historical Jesus«. This, of course, has consequences for Christology, in that it can no longer centre around the *assumptio carnis*, but needs to have Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God as its starting point.

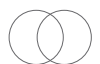
3 Cf. Essen 2024, 42: »Es gab im gesamten Zeitraum von Anfang des 19. bis Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts keinen katholisch-dogmatischen Traktat, in dem die Aporetik der Zweinaturenlehre als Problem bewusst und als solches thematisch wird. Nirgends wird auf den Transformationsdruck, dem die traditionelle Christologie in der Moderne ausgesetzt ist, durch die Suche nach alternativen Denkformen reagiert.« Whether or not the conciliar formula is »aporetic« deserves further discussion. From Schleiermacher onwards, this charge has been repeated oftentimes, especially within Protestant theology – cf. Dahlke 2017, 138–139.146.155.192–193.



The personhood of Christ will need to be addressed from Jesus' specific relationship as a human being to God rather than from the incarnation of the pre-existing Logos. Here, pneumatological aspects inevitably come into play, since it is the *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* that enables the incarnation in the first place (Mt 1,18; Lk 1,35). Recent New Testament scholarship has emphasized this (Levinson 2019; Feldmeier 2020, 9–16.143–194; Sánchez M. 2022; Becker 2022). Likewise, Jesus' ministry, too, is determined by the Spirit right from the beginning (Mk 1,10–12; Mt 3,16–17; Lk 3,21; 4,1–30; Jn 1,32–34). Thus, concepts of Spirit Christology also owe themselves to a broader perception of the New Testament's testimony as a whole.

(c) For centuries, the formula of Chalcedon has functioned as a sort of matrix of Christology. In view of this, it is not surprising that at times it has been and continues to be placed on the same level as the central creeds, i.e., the *Apostolic* and the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*. This is, however, questionable insofar as the text explicitly states that it does not intend to define anything beyond the decisions of the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople; the circumstances simply required clarification. The formula of Chalcedon is thus an explanatory comment on the *Creed of Nicea*. Hence, recent research in the history of dogma strongly emphasizes the situational character of the formula, since it referred to debates occurring in the 5th century. For example, the American Jesuit Brian E. Daley (b. 1940) points out that the formula was merely one step along the way (Daley 2018, 1–27). For at the time, the objective was to pacify an impending conflict, not to provide a definite solution to a complex theological problem. This is supported for one by the fact that the terms used had not yet been clearly defined. Secondly, several councils convened later that continued to deal with the personhood of Jesus Christ.

(d) Ongoing study of Christology was necessary because many Christians who had been deterred by Chalcedon established their own ecclesiastical structures in the eastern Mediterranean. For them, the pejorative and factually hardly accurate designation of »Monophysites« became common. Moreover, since they rejected the formula that had become normative, they were considered



heretics. In the 20th century, however, there was a change of opinion, because the Christian churches considerably strengthened their effort to improve their mutual relations. The founding of the *World Council of Churches* after World War II was an important impetus for this as this ecumenical institution enabled numerous meetings and, with the group *Faith and Order*, had a format for addressing controversial theological issues. Further momentum was brought by Vatican II, with which the Catholic Church opened up and committed itself to ecumenism. While the council was still going on, the foundation *Pro Oriente* was created in order to promote dialogue with the many Eastern churches. One result was the so-called *Vienna Christological Formula*, signed in 1971, which sought to accommodate varying interests (Kommuniqué 1992). However, similar thoughts existed from the end of the Patristic period through the Middle Ages to the early modern times. The alleged confessional difference was regarded merely as a terminological divergence. While the *Vienna Christological Formula* does use the negative adverbs established by Chalcedon (which, however, created a dynamic effect), it avoids the council's rather static terminology of nature, which suggests a duality of Godhead and humankind. This is intended to allay concerns. Building on the understanding that *Pro Oriente* made possible, further promising bilateral understandings could be achieved (Olm 2003; Marte and Prokschi 2014). If a more far-reaching unity has failed to come about, this is due more so to ecclesiological differences. In the field of Christology, the rapprochement is remarkable. For example, it is now customary to speak of *mia-* rather than *monophysitism*, which is more accurate insofar as the intention had not been for the Godhead to absorb the human reality of Jesus Christ (Brock 2016; Hainthaler 2023). Another step of progress is to refrain from accusations of heresy and to use the designation »Oriental Orthodox« churches (Nedungatt 1998). This acknowledges that one can be »Orthodox« in the literal sense without accepting the formula of Chalcedon. This is possible because the Nicene-Constantinopolitanian creed, i.e. the confession of the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), is recognized as a common foundation, as a basic text, so to speak.



(e) While so far theological, exegetical, historical and ecumenical objections have been presented, now a weighty dogmatic objection shall be named. The formula merely states *that* God and humankind are connected. However, it remains ambiguous as to *how* this should be understood, given that the four adverbs employed are negative in nature. Thus, it lacks specific assertions without positively clarifying what should be said (Coakley 2002). Yet the formula creates a significant problem precisely by the terms it uses: while on the one hand it distinguishes between two abstract, impersonal realities that are equally called φύσις, on the other hand it asserts their personal unity – referring to the very same Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Son of God. In technical terms, the point of union is alternately referred to as ὑπόστασις or πρόσωπον (Grillmeier 1997). As early as the 5th and 6th centuries, there was both intense and controversial debate about how to make the union of God and humankind plausible on this basis – a debate that would hold on. Despite all elaborated efforts, some modern Protestant theologians were sceptical that the Hypostatic Union could be made comprehensible at all. There has even been talk of the »aporetic« nature of what is now called the doctrine of two natures (*Zweinaturenlehre*⁴). Similar objections have been raised by Anglican and Catholic theologians, usually repeating the arguments of their Protestant colleagues. In dogmatics, there is a keen awareness of the problems brought along by the church's early teachings.

2 Concepts of Spirit Christology

Given the various limitations of Chalcedonian Christology outlined before, alternatives were sought. Primarily in the 20th century, the general concept of Spirit Christology emerged, with a great variety of approaches. Whilst some aimed at providing deeper and extended understanding (section 2.1), others were designed as substitutions, intended to replace the formula of Chalcedon (section 2.2). The differences between the two

4 On the term's history, cf. Seils 2004.



approaches are considerable, especially in terms of Trinitarian theology. Whenever Christology is rewritten with a pneumatological orientation, emphasizing the Holy Spirit's part in the constitution of the personhood, the notion of three distinct centres of action or »persons« remains in force. However, when God as a whole is defined as Spirit, Jesus is characterized as a symbol or representative of God. Therefore, it makes sense to distinguish between genuine Spirit Christologies and more general Spirit Theologies (Dahlke 2022; Woditsch 2022). The latter start with the relationship between God and world, incorporating Christology as a mode of explicating this relationship.

2.1 Concepts providing deeper and extended understanding

Within Catholic dogmatics, increased attention to pneumatological topics did not occur until the 20th century. Important impulses were provided by figures such as Heribert Mühlen (1927–2006), to whom pneumatology as a whole was important, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) and Walter Kasper (b. 1933). All of them were far from considering the formula of the early church as obsolete. Rather, they were concerned with deepening what had already been dogmatized.

After long preparatory work, Walter Kasper published a textbook-like monograph in 1974, which has been reprinted again and again ever since (Kasper 1974).⁵ The Tübingen Professor for Dogmatics saw the necessity for a new orientation of Christology. In the future, Christology should be historically situated, universally founded and soteriologically oriented. Kasper himself provided considerations to that end. With respect to the personhood of Jesus Christ, he regarded the definition of Chalcedon as fundamental, but at the same time saw the necessity for a biblical approach, because the formula itself claimed to be an interpretation of scripture. In his view, the personal communion between the Father and Jesus attested in the New Testament is a communion of essence, which is to be understood as a personal act and thus relational. Therefore, pneumatology should be given greater weight in Christology, since, according to the

5 For an English translation, cf. Kasper 2011. In addition, cf. 1985. For an overview, cf. Stice 2008.



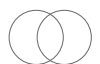
testimony of the New Testament, there is an extremely close connection between Jesus and the Spirit of God from conception to resurrection.

But although Kasper called for a Spirit Christology, he himself did not present a comprehensive design but turned to other fields of dogmatics instead. Nevertheless, he recently referred to the potential of what he named »Pneuma-Christology« (Kasper 2021, 85–93). At least Kasper put the topic on the agenda back then and it has not disappeared since. Furthermore, Hans Urs von Balthasar is worth mentioning. Trained with neo-scholastic manuals, which regarded Chalcedon the absolute norm, he considered the previous treatment of Christology to be deficient in several ways: for one, the works of God should always be considered Trinitarian in nature; secondly, the Holy Spirit prepared the appearance of Jesus Christ and then later unfolded it; thirdly, the personhood of Jesus Christ could not be understood without a pneumatic dimension.⁶ His goal was to develop his own Spirit Christology. Here, the idea that the triune God always acts in favour of humankind is important to him. This is shown by the fact that, in the New Testament, the incarnate Son carries out the Father's plan of salvation, with whom he is permanently united through the Spirit. Hence, Jesus acts in the spirit, from which he is genuinely different. Considering the complex ideas that he additionally develops about the Trinity, Balthasar warns against an oversimplified Spirit Christology, i.e. the notion of an indwelling of the Logos in the human being Jesus of Nazareth that is pneumatologically understood. Such a notion is faced with the difficulty of convincingly demonstrating a unity of persons rather than merely claiming it. This already shows that the Spirit Christology that Balthasar has in mind remains within the traditional framework. He both presupposes the doctrine of the Trinity and also attaches importance to an ontologically sound concept of divine-human unity.

2.2 Concepts of replacement

While some theologians viewed Spirit Christology as deepening or extending what had been expressed by the formula of Chalcedon, others

6 On the following, cf. Balthasar 1998, 167–185 (for an English translation, cf. 1992a, 183–202) and 1987, 28–53 (for an English translation, cf. 1992b, 34–61).



wanted to understand it as a substitute for classical Christology. For them, considering pneumatology promised solutions to otherwise notorious problems of the concept of the hypostatic union. Therefore, one Christology should replace another. American Jesuit Roger Haight (b. 1936) is worth mentioning here. In 1999 he presented his monograph *Jesus Symbol of God*, making a contribution that is still discussed today. He develops his Spirit Christology as a complementary alternative to the conventional Logos Christology considered orthodox – and which reflects on the connection of the Son of God with human nature (Haight 1999, 458–464).⁷ In Haight’s opinion, however, it is precisely this connection that leads to many speculative problems. Furthermore, he thinks that, based on biblical testimony, other conclusions are possible. The assumption that Jesus became ever more human the closer he got involved with God seems more promising to him. Quite obviously, this alludes to Karl Rahner’s (1904–1984) concept of direct proportionality of divine salvific action and human freedom, by which a competitive relationship of both is to be excluded. At least Haight mentions his German colleague, while he himself speaks of *empowerment* (Haight 1999, 455). Thus, he wants to emphasize that Jesus represents God by God being present in him without his humanity suffering from it – quite the contrary is true. To Haight, such a Spirit Christology seems to be more plausible than the definition of the early councils, which finds it extremely difficult to think of Godhead and humankind really interweaving in Jesus Christ.

This again clearly shows that the interest in a Christology taking pneumatology into account – no matter how such a concept may be conceived – stems to a large extent from the perceived weaknesses or limitations of the Chalcedonian formula. Of course, any such attempt must allow the question of how far it is able to explain the unity of the persons, if that is still the aim at all. In this context, Haight’s interreligious component is important, which, while always present in his thinking, has become particularly prominent in his most recent publications. Initially interested in Spirit Christology, his interest has shifted to Spirit Theology, which regards

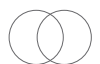
7 One reason for Haight being barred from teaching Catholic theology in 2005 was his Christology – cf. *Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei* 2005. For background, as well for a critique of the Jesuit’s position, cf. Dahlke 2013. Also in recent times, Haight continues to highlight Chalcedon’s weaknesses – cf. Haight 2019, 195–197.



Christology as a mode of explicating the general relationship of God and the world. Together with Paul Knitter (b. 1939), one of the best-known representatives of religious pluralism, he has pointed out intersecting areas of Christianity and Buddhism. As the Jesuit and the former Divine Word Missionary state, both religions aim to ensure that people do not focus on themselves but become active for the benefit of others. What they have in common, then, is a concern for human flourishing. According to Haight, this is precisely what can be seen in Jesus, because by opening himself up to that power and energy which the Bible calls Spirit of God and which is nothing other than the one God who, as Creator, is in relation to his creation, he advocated for those in need (Knitter and Haight 2015, 143–144). The discussion of the Chalcedonian formula understandably no longer plays a role here. Instead, the focus is on aspects of anthropology or the doctrine of creation. Whether this constitutes a meaningful advancement of Spirit Christology or whether Spirit Theology might indeed point in a different direction is certainly open for discussion. At the very least, this could be used in the context of interreligious dialogue – a very relevant topic for Modern societies, which must be considered by Christology as well (Min and Schwöbel 2014; D’Costa 2015; Bernhardt 2021).

Concluding remarks

Pneumatologically oriented Christologies have garnered some attention in more recent times. This is for one likely due to the increased significance that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit now holds within dogmatics. Their attractiveness can be attributed also to the promise of offering a better explanation of the personhood of Jesus Christ than a Christology based solely on the council of Chalcedon, as they conceive the relationship between God and humanity as dynamic. Jesus can be called the Son of God because he originates from God; he is called holy because of the Holy Spirit, who stands at the beginning of his being and his ministry (Mk 1,10; Lk 1,35). Speaking of two natures seems static in contrast. Conversely, incorporating pneumatology creates a much more dynamic perspective. According to the testimony of the New Testament, Jesus and the *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* are in a continuous relationship throughout Jesus’ life. From this vantage point, the Hypostatic Union, for which no consensus on interpretation has been reached to this day, could be understood as a highly



vibrant relationship between God and humanity, mediated and sustained by the Spirit. As Jesus is continually filled with and sustained by the Spirit he can be the self-expression of God, or the Logos. God does communicate himself not only *by means of* but *as* a human being (Balthasar 1990). Therefore, Christologies that embrace and develop this perspective offer a meaningful and promising continuation or elaboration of the ancient and conciliar doctrines (Del Colle 1994; Coffey 1999; Stubenrauch 2023). Certainly, it needs to be discussed whether or not they move beyond the *homo assumptus*-theory – a line of thought that can be traced back to the Patristic period, and the Middle Ages. In order to recover the full humanity of Christ without leaving the framework provided by Chalcedon, in the 20th century Catholic theologians have taken up again this theory, with mixed results (Müller 1993). Thus, every attempt to develop a Spirit Christology has to be aware of the danger to simply slip into the *homo assumptus*-theory, as it causes problems with regard to soteriology: How can Jesus rightly be called Revealer and Redeemer if God only dwells into his life? Can God really be encountered, if present only occasionally in Jesus?

Nevertheless, the potential of Spirit Christology is far from exhausted. In fact, there is a need to draft a comprehensive framework that consolidates existing exegetical, historical, and systematic endeavors. Besides Protestant and Catholic theology, other denominational traditions ought to be incorporated, for instance Pentecostalism, given its emphasis on pneumatological considerations (Stephenson 2019; Macchia 2023, 199–208). Ecumenically and systematically, it would be beneficial to engage in cross-denominational and collaborative discussions about Jesus Christ. To do that, however, it is necessary to determine whether the formula of Chalcedon should be supplemented or replaced, as differing approaches in this regard lead to quite different concepts of Spirit Christology.



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8 I hearby thank my student assistant, Kristin Hubert, for her help with the translation.



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