

*Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status*, by James Anderson. Paternoster, 2007. (UK) \*\*\*\*\* , 2007. (US) 328pp. cloth/paper (UK), cloth/paper (US).

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As far as I know, this is the all-time most sophisticated, well developed, and plausible defense of the idea that Christians may rationally believe apparently contradictory doctrines. Theological literature on “mysteries” is too often marred with unclarity, epistemic carelessness and confusion, and even perverse delight in inconsistency (apparent and/or real). In contrast, this book by a philosophically informed and capable young theologian sparkles with Plantingian clarity, sobriety, intellectual honesty and courage, and analytic power (and also, with a lot of Plantingian epistemology, as we’ll see.)

Anderson’s ambitious project cuts against the grain of most contemporary philosophical theology. Consider the following inconsistent triad:

C: If some claim appears after careful reflection to be contradictory I shouldn’t believe it.

O: The orthodox Christian doctrine of X appears after careful reflection to be contradictory.

B: I should believe the orthodox Christian doctrine of X.

What to do in the face of such a conundrum? There are three popular responses.

Most prominent current-day philosophical theologians – or at any rate, many of the most prominent among them – habitually reject O (while affirming C and B), offering some plausible interpretation of X on which X comes out apparently consistent. Anderson, along with probably many theologians and other believers outside the profession of philosophy, rejects this move, as he holds that the reinterpreted X is always out of line with (1) the mainstream of the historic Christian tradition, (2) the ecumenical creeds, rightly interpreted according to the intentions of their framers, and (3) the Bible itself.

A second response is to reject the Orthodox version of doctrine X; that is, reject B (keeping C and O). Theology is inherently conservative, and in keeping with this tendency, Anderson will have none of it, equating it with an abandonment of Christianity.

The third response is to reject C (keeping B and O); this is Anderson’s position, which for lack of a better term I call “mysterian” stance. He attributes adherence to C to “rationalism”, to a prideful preference for our own intuitions over against the clear deliverances of scripture. What is surprising and refreshing is the epistemological sophistication he brings to play in asserting and defending this mysterian stance.

The book proceeds as follows. A “paradox” is an apparently contradictory claim. (5-6) The orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, according to Anderson, are paradoxes

in this sense. In the second and third chapters he sets out the development of these doctrines in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, and relentlessly swats away recent attempts to render these doctrines consistent, by the likes of Barth, Rahner, Cornelius Plantinga, Swinburne, Brown, Martinich, Rea, Brower, Feenstra, Davis, and Morris. He argues that “those interpretations purporting to avoid both paradox and heterodoxy inevitably fail on at least one of the two counts.” (105)

In the fourth chapter he (I think convincingly) argues against several alternatives to his mysterian stance: theological anti-realism, anti-deductivism (i.e. qualifying the laws of logic), dialetheism, doctrinal revisionism (i.e. my second response to the inconsistent triad above), what he calls semantic minimalism (claiming that the content of the doctrine in question is too vague to be even apparently contradictory), and the science-inspired theory of “complementarity”.

The long fifth chapter starts with a beautiful exposition of Alvin Plantinga’s epistemology. He locates an ambiguity in the role of the Bible in Plantinga’s epistemology of Christian belief, and suggests some fixes. (181-9) He points out that in his *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga is only trying to offer a model of how Christians might be warranted in believing what Plantinga calls “the main lines of the Christian story”. (189-90) Contrary to Anderson, Plantinga assumes that there are orthodox and apparently consistent versions of the Trinity and Incarnation doctrines. (215) Moreover, Plantinga’s “extended A/C” (Aquinas-Calvin) model covers only beliefs based on the explicit content of the Bible, and not creedal doctrines which are (in Anderson’s view) based on the explicit *and implicit* teachings therein. (190-1, 209) Anderson aims to fill this gap.

Anderson thus extends Plantinga’s theory further, in the fifth and sixth chapters, to cover how Christian beliefs may, if Christianity is true, be warranted, both for sophisticates and for ordinary believers. While this involves some Reformed assumptions about scripture and tradition, Anderson claims that these are not obviously essential to the success of the project. Basically, if Christianity is true, it’s plausible to think that a believer could be warranted in taking the Bible to be a reliable communication from God. And Christian beliefs may be directly or indirectly based on the Bible.

But, comes the objection, if a doctrine appears to be contradictory, shouldn’t that trump its claim to be part of a divine revelation? Even if, say, Chrissy Christian’s belief in the Trinity were warranted, wouldn’t the realization that the doctrine seems contradictory give Chrissy a “defeater” for her trinitarian belief? Anderson takes the bull by the horns here, deploying the whole machinery of undercutting vs. rebutting defeaters, defeater-defeaters, and defeater-insulators. In the end, he thinks that a warranted belief that theology will probably involve mysteries will prevent one’s beliefs regarding the Trinity and Incarnation from defeat by one’s belief that they seem inconsistent. (250-6)

In the sixth chapter, Anderson gives the heart of his account of “mysteries”, what he calls

his RAPT (Rational Affirmation of Paradoxical Theology) theory. He argues that we should take apparently contradictions in orthodox Christian theology to be MACRUEs (Merely Apparent Contradictions Resulting from Unarticulated Equivocation). When we can't find adequate terms to express some proposition, we're sometimes driven to assert what appears to be a contradiction, such as "I'm concerned about my wife's operation, and I'm not concerned about my wife's operation." (222) This is a MACRUE, and it in fact expresses a truth, hence a consistent proposition, despite appearances. The equivocation here is in the term "concerned"; he *is* concerned in that he cares about what happens to his wife, but he's *not* concerned in the sense of being worried about the outcome, as he knows the surgeon to be extremely competent. (223)

Here though, as Anderson points out, we can grasp both meanings of "concerned" which constitute the equivocation. But theological cases are more worrisome. One paradox he examines is: "God is one divine being and God is three divine beings." (226) None of those terms appear equivocal, and yet at least one must be, if that statement is to only *appear* to express a contradiction. Anderson tries out slapping subscript numbers on various of the terms (e.g. "God is one divine<sub>1</sub> being and God is three divine<sub>2</sub> beings."), but that seems *ad hoc*, and worse, it seems empty – the epitome of a merely formal or verbal solution to a very real difficulty.

Anderson argues that this move isn't *ad hoc* because if God is incomprehensible (as nearly all Christians grant), then we should expect apparent contradictions to arise in our thinking and speaking about him. (237-43) Moreover, all of this, Anderson argues, fits well with a doctrine of analogy, in light of which we can see that the disambiguated terms needn't be devoid of meaning. Rather, they each have a meaning which partially, but not completely, overlaps how we use those terms in ordinary contexts.

In sum, if Christianity were true, we'd expect that Christians would reasonably believe and know "mysteries", where a "mystery" is "*a metaphysical state of affairs the revelation of which appears implicitly contradictory to us on account of present limitations in our cognitive apparatus and thus resists systematic description in a perspicuously consistent manner.*" (245, original italics) Facts are mysterious in the primary sense, then, and doctrines are mysterious derivatively, insofar as they are about these sorts of facts. (246) Note that Anderson avoids the hard to justify claim that a "mystery" is permanently beyond human capacities. The seventh chapter tangles, somewhat less convincingly, with other objections to his mysterian position on the Trinity and Incarnation, and the eighth chapter briefly summarizes his project and suggests a few implications of it for biblical interpretation and apologetics.

Needless to say, a project this ambitious bristles with difficulties, but here I can only sketch out one central one. Christians may wonder if Anderson is doing them a favor by urging that their Book implicitly contains numerous apparent contradictions. Doesn't the principle of charity require finding an apparently consistent reading? He scorns all applications of

metaphysics to resolve the difficulties as landing one in heterodoxy. What, exactly, does he expect ordinary believers to do? What he seems to recommend is that believers become linguistic rather than metaphysical sophisticates, thinking as follows:

*The Book teaches that Jesus knows all, and that he doesn't know all. But it's God's book, so the preceding statement must be a MACRUE. The only term which could be equivocal is 'knows', so it must mean two different things there. I don't fully grasp that distinction, although the two meanings of 'know' there must overlap or be similar to the meaning of 'know' when applied to humans.' I grasp these terms enough for practical purposes, and may draw any inference from the two statements which doesn't contradict the rest of God's revelation. (see 297-306)*

It isn't clear that this move works. If the original source contains the original apparent contradiction, then won't it for that reason equally warrant contradictory inferences from the new sentences containing disambiguated terms? Thus, from "Jesus knows<sub>1</sub> all, and Jesus doesn't know<sub>2</sub> all", by Anderson's lights we may infer: "There's no fact of which Jesus is ignorant, and there's at least one such fact."

Anderson is aware of this problem, and seems to admit that the believer must simply live with inconsistent thoughts, deciding how to think at any given moment based on practical (and/or theological?) concerns. So for instance, when it comes to Chalcedonian christology,

"...a 'two minds' perspective should take the fore when reflecting on (say) the pastoral implications of Jesus' genuine humanity, while a 'one person' perspective ought to assume prominence when expounding Christ's mediatory role as the agent of reconciliation between God and humanity." (306)

In sum, after all the epistemological, logical, and linguistic fireworks (many of which I've not even mentioned here), it seems that on a practical level, Anderson is simply recommending inconsistency, albeit serial rather than simultaneous. Thus, it isn't clear that the mysterian response to my inconsistent triad above fares better than the other two.

This book deserves to be widely read by students of theology, philosophy of religion, and apologetics. It is nicely written, organized, and presented, and features a decent index, and only very few (insignificant) typographical errors. It would provide ideal material for graduate level seminars in any of the aforementioned fields. Some readers will, like this reviewer, take this book to show that the mysterian defense of Christian belief is a philosophical dead end, while others will take it as presenting an exciting, well-motivated, and genuinely different apologetic option. Either way, there's apt material for reflection here, whether one is trying to come up with a defeater-defeater-defeater, or trying to shore up the mysterian defenses.