Place, History, and Incarnation:

On the Subjective Aspects of Christology

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The discipline of Christology can be seen as an attempt to clarify the grammar and uncover the internal logic of how we speak about and live within the mystery of Jesus Christ, who many consider to be both the foundation and norm of a distinctively Christian theology.[1] The title of this paper echoes Thomas F. Torrance's landmark work *Space, Time, and Incarnation* (1969). In reflecting on the self-communication of God in space and time, Torrance sought to correct what he considered to be some important misunderstandings that had crept into Christian reflection on the nature of the incarnation. What does it mean for God to enter into space-time? And what is the significance of the incarnation?

In exploring this question, Torrance mounts a particularly significant criticism of what he terms "a *receptacle* or a *container* notion of space,"[2] which results in the incarnation being understood

[1] For a recent elaboration of this theme, see Rowan Williams, *Christ, the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

[2] Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 4. See further his discussion in his Christology lectures, given at New College Edinburgh over the period 1952 to 1978: Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 181–235, especially 217–219. For good assessments of Torrance's approach to the incarnation, see Tapio Luoma, *Incarnation and Physics: Natural Science in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Paul D. Molnar,

in an unhelpful manner as a temporary divine relocation. For Torrance, God cannot be said to be contained by anything.[3] The Incarnation is about Christ becoming for us "the 'place' where the Father is to be known and believed," in that Christ is "the *topos* or *locus* where God is to be found."[4] Torrance finds this view articulated with particular clarity in Athanasius of Alexandria, and notes in particular Athanasius's recognition of the need for the theological recalibration of the notion of "place".

> This forces theology into the construction of a sort of *topological* language in order to express the dispositional and dynamic inter-connection between *topos* and *topos* or place and place. The fact that this requires a differential use of concepts in which the ordinary and natural concept of place or space had to be adapted and changed, did not trouble Athanasius, for that, he held, is what must happen when we use terms and concepts rightly in accordance with the nature of the subjects they are employed to denote.[5]

Torrance's analysis in this landmark work is of considerable theological significance, not least on account of his informed engagement with Einstein's theory of relativity.[6] Torrance rightly notes that Einstein's approach entails the rejection of the "notion of absolute space and time,"[7]

Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 124–135; Myk Habets, *Theology in Transposition: A Constructive Appraisal of T. F. Torrance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 163–195.

[3] Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 11. For a defence of Torrance's "objective trinitarian participationism," see Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation: An Entry into the Theology of T. F. Torrance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

[4] Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 16.

[5] Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 16.

[6] See also T. F. Torrance, "Newton, Einstein and Scientific Theology", *Religious Studies* 8 (1971): 233–250. For Torrance, scientists such as James Clerk Maxwell and Albert Einstein help theology to rediscover its ontological basis in the Incarnation and the Trinity: Luoma, *Incarnation and Physics*, 107–108.

[7] Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 58.

thus opening the way to recovering a more authentic approach to the incarnation which he considers to have been compromised by Newton's introduction of the notion of "absolute space."[8] Yet Torrance's primary concern is how we are to envisage the incarnation as occurring objectively in the physical world of space and time. At times, Torrance's overtly physicalist or ontological analysis seemed to concern how a transcendent God could be positioned using the four coordinates *x*, *y*, *z*, and *t*. While this is undoubtedly a theologically interesting and significant question,[9] it seems to stand at a certain distance from the concerns of biblical writers, especially their hope that God would enter into the lives and history of the people of Israel.[10] Where Torrance spoke of *space* and *time*, the Bible seems much more concerned with what many would now describe as *place* and *history*.

Torrance's approach is both important and defensible, not least in that he offers an objective Trinitarian participationism which represents an important correction to more subjective approaches to moral and spiritual formation.[11] Torrance here echoes a consensus that has existed since the early eighteenth century – namely, that "objectivity" is to be seen as an epistemic

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[8] For the origins of this notion, see Ori Belkind, "Newton's Conceptual Argument for Absolute Space", *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 21, no. 3 (2007): 271–293.

[9] Philosophical theology, for example, often engages significant ahistorical conceptual questions relating to the incarnation and space-time: see, for example, Emily Paul, "Incarnation, Divine Timelessness, and Modality", *TheoLogica* 3, no. 1 (2019): 88–112.

[10] Major recent studies of this issue include Larry W. Hurtado, *Ancient Jewish Monotheism and Early Christian Jesus-Devotion: The Context and Character of Christological Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

[11] See, for example, Geordie W. Ziegler, "Is It Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation? Recovering Ontology", *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 11, no. 1 (2018): 74–92, especially 77–80. Ziegler here draws extensively on Torrance.

virtue, allowing critical thinking to be distanced and disengaged from vested interests and personal biases.[12]

Yet recent analysis of this point has raised a concern: namely, that this quest for objectivity might lead to the suppression or denial of legitimate subjective human concerns and interests.[13] This laudable desire to exorcise personal bias can – but need not – result in a disengagement from the subjective world of meaning and value, in which individuals come to attach significance to certain events and places, which often come to evoke emotions and feelings on account of these interpretations, associations, and memories.[14] Simeon Zahl's recent criticisms of Torrance's "objectivism" will serve as a helpful starting point for reflection on such concerns.

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[12] On this important point, see Robert Markley, "Objectivity as Ideology: Boyle, Newton, and the Languages of Science", *Genre* 16 (1983): 355–372; Lorraine J. Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective", *Social Studies of Science* 44, no. 2 (1992): 597–618; Evandro Agazzi, *Scientific Objectivity and Its Contexts* (New York: Springer, 2014); Peter Galison, "The Journalist, the Scientist, and Objectivity", in *Objectivity in Science: New Perspectives from Science and Technology Studies,* ed. Flavia Padovani, Alan Richardson and Jonathan Y. Tsou (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2015), 57–75.

[13] Gerhard Ebeling's criticism of the "experiential deficit" in theology arising from what he considered to be an excessive objectivism should be noted here: Gerhard Ebeling, "Schrift und Erfahrung als Quelle theologischer Ausagen." *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 75, no. 1 (1978): 99–116.

[14] As Jeff Malpas notes, the idea of "place" provides a "framework within which the complex interconnections of both subjective and objective spatiality" can be understood: Jeff E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 70. See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-Word* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Edward S. Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena", in Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 13–52; John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 59–122; Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 231–252.

On the Affective Salience of the Incarnation

Zahl has recently highlighted a potential deficiency in existing accounts of Christian doctrine – namely, a failure to consider "how they help foster and regulate more positive, theologically legitimated emotions."[15] In exploring this question, Zahl draws on the psychological notion of "affective salience."[16] The question relates to how a particular account of a doctrine, when allowed to shape religious practice, will lead people to "experience the right sort of emotional outcome in their piety and practice and avoid some problematic emotional outcome."[17] Zahl's intervention is an important stimulus to think about Christian doctrines in a more affective manner, complementing a growing literature on the affective and emotional dimensions of core themes in theology.[18]

In exploring this point, Zahl comments critically on Torrance's theological project, highlighting what he considers to be its failure to move beyond an essentially cognitive or intellectual account

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[15] Simeon Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines", *Modern Theology* 31, no. 3 (2015): 428–444; quote at 430. Zahl here refers to the tradition of reflection originating with George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SCM Press, 1984), including works such as James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), and Medi Ann Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). This approach is elaborated more extensively in Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[16] Zahl notes in particular the study of Adam T. Biggs et al., "Semantic and Affective Salience: The Role of Meaning and Preference in Attentional Capture and Disengagement", *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 38, no. 2 (2012): 531–541. Zahl notes some parallels between his approach and that set out in Mark R. Wynn*, Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[17] Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," 431.

[18] For example, Stephen C. Barton, "Eschatology and the Emotions in Early Christianity", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 3 (2011): 571–91. As Barton comments, there has been until quite recently a failure to "take seriously the expressive and cognitive resources of the emotions and the realm of the experiential" (572).

of the significance of Christ, or the work of the Holy Spirit.[19] Zahl's concern is that Torrance's account of Christ's work is essentially ontological, focusing on what this "accomplishes for Christians in their 'being' rather than anything that might happen in bodies and in time."[20] Why, Zahl asks, is Torrance's soteriology "so oriented towards the 'objective,' and so devoid of reference to Christian experience?"[21]

While Zahl focusses on Torrance's soteriology, his concerns can be extended to Torrance's account of the conceptual framework within which the incarnation is to be located. Torrance here uses strongly objectively language and categories, and virtually excludes any reference to the subjective impact of Christ on embodied humanity. This paper aims to honour Torrance's concerns, while exploring how his approach might be expanded to engage the more subjective concerns which are expressed both in Zahl's notion of "affective salience", and the wider interest in the correlation of systematic theology with experiential concerns.[22]

From "Time and Space" to "History and Place"

From a theological perspective, it is impossible to appreciate the significance of many passages and episodes in the Old Testament without an awareness of the importance of "history" and

[19] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 97. In fairness to Torrance, some of these more subjective issues are addressed in his published sermons, such as Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1994).

[20] Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 97.

[21] *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 99.

[22] Note especially the discussion of "incarnation and subjectivity" in Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 92–148.

"place" in framing Israel's account of the identity and agency of its God.[23] The language of "time" and "space" is increasingly recognized to be inadequate to account for many subjective aspects of human existence; using the alternative concepts of "history" and "place" capture the fact that both are domains of human habitation and construction, and hence are linked with a series of existentially significant issues (such as the shaping of personal and cultural identity) which affect the way we feel about and act within the world. An excellent cultural example lies in the relationship of Australian aboriginal populations to their landscapes, which simply cannot be understood using objective and depersonalizing approaches to natural features which fail to recognize the meaning that individuals and communities attach to them.[24]

At the theological level, there is no way in which a responsible theology can overlook the significance of the history and place of Israel,[25] especially in attempting to articulate the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth.[26] A classical Christology cannot, and must not be allowed to, devalue or deny the cultural embeddedness and physical embodiment of Jesus of Nazareth, and reflect on their importance. Such a Christology is best seen as an attempt to *see* something of

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[23] See especially Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith.* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002).

[24] Rob Paton, "The Mutability of Time and Space as a Means of Healing History in an Australian Aboriginal Community", in *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*, ed. Ann McGrath and Mary Anne Jebb (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 67–82.

[25] See especially Brueggemann, *The Land*. More recently, see Salim Munayer and Lisa Loden, *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012); Aron Engberg, *Walking on the Pages of the Word of God: Self, Land, and Text among Evangelical Volunteers in Jerusalem* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

[26] Torrance himself shows what some of his critics consider to be a surprising lack of interest in recognizing the history of Israel in shaping Christological reflection: Martin M. Davis, "The pre-history of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in the Christology of T. F. Torrance", *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi*, 50, no. 1, a2045 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2045

the meaning of Christ, while recognizing that it cannot hope to offer an exhaustive account of that significance. Yet the process of "seeing," like the process of thinking, is itself shaped by our historical and cultural location[27] – a matter to which we now turn.

Place as a Special Kind of Space

For Aristotle, a "place (*topos*)" was an inert container, an abstract point no different from any other point.[28] Yet for Jewish and New Testament writers, the term possesses a sense of purpose rather than emptiness, designating a location where something has happened or where someone belongs.[29] "Jerusalem" thus designates far more than a geographical location; it represents a nexus of theological, historical, cultural and cultic themes, of both historic and ongoing importance.[30] Walter Brueggemann captured this entanglement of history and place in his

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[27] A point explored in Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009). The concept of "theory-laden observation" is important in this context: we may *think* we see things as they actually are, where we actually see them through an unconscious or unacknowledged theoretical lens, which is usually socially mediated. See Matthias Adam, *Theoriebeladenheit und Objektivität. Zur Rolle von Beobachtungen in den Naturwissenschafte* (Frankfurt am Main: Ontos Verlag, 2002).

[28] Henry Mendell, "Topoi on Topos: The Development of Aristotle's Concept of Place", *Phronesis* 32, no. 2 (1987): 206–231; Benjamin Morison, *On Location: Aristotle's Concept of Place* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). For the notion in Plato's works, see Eleni Papamichael, "The Concept of Place in Platonic Ontology", *Agathos: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2016): 7–33.

[29] The Hebrew word *māqôm* is best translated as "place," often referring to a locus of divine revelation such as Bethel (Gen 28.11) or the burning bush (Exod 3.5). See the important analysis in David Vanderhooft, "Dwelling beneath the Sacred Place: A Proposal for Reading 2 Samuel 7:10", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 4 (1999): 62–33. More generally, see Johann Gamberoni, "*māqôm*", in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (16 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973–2018), vol. 8, 532–544.

[30] See, for example, Donald J. Verseput, "Jesus' Pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Encounter in the Temple: A Geographical Motif in Matthew's Gospel", *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994): 105–121; Mikeal C. Parsons, "The Place of Jerusalem on the Lukan Landscape: An Exercise in Symbolic Cartography." In *Literary Studies in Luke-*

landmark work *The Land*, arguing that to make sense of the theological and territorial preoccupations of ancient Israel, a fundamental distinction had to be made between "space" and "place".

> Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.[31]

Brueggemann's analysis of the history of Israel rightly emphasized the manner in which specific *places* play a critically important place in human life, not least in that they function as anchor points for memory, identity, and aspiration.

> The land for which Israel yearns and which it remembers is never unclaimed space but is always *a place with Yahweh*, a place well filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him. It is land that provides the central assurance to Israel

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Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson, ed. Richard P. Thompson and Thomas E. Phillips (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 155–171. For the wider theme of the importance of place in John's gospel, see Jerome Neyrey, "Spaces and Places, Whence and Whither, Homes and Rooms: "Territoriality" in the Fourth Gospel", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (2002): 60–74.

[31] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002), 1–13; quote at 5.

> of its historicality, that it will be and always must be concerned with actual rootage in a place which is a repository for commitment and therefore identity.[32]

On this reading of things, all places are spaces; but not all spaces are places. This point is developed by the anthropologist Marc Augé, who draws a distinction between "place (*lieu*)," which is associated with historical memories and able to sustain a meaningful social life, and "non-places (*non-lieux*)," which are physical locations with no historical memories in which no meaningful social life is possible (such as airport departure lounges or supermarkets).[33] These, Augé argues, are ephemeral places of individual transition and passage, not places of habitation and communal significance.[34] Augé's reflections reinforce the line of argument pursued by Brueggeman: a "place" is somewhere in which we feel we *belong*.

To suggest that the incarnation is simply (or even primarily) about God entering into space-time offers at best a partial truth that is imaginatively, existentially, and theologically deficient, failing to capture the entanglement of a spatial location with its associated memories, expectations, and dominant ways of thinking. The notion of "place" holds these elements together, colligating the concept of incarnation with the specifics of a cultural and historical location, shaped by a way of thinking which in turn shapes the *interpretation* of this event. For the historically attentive

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[32] Brueggemann, *The Land*, 5–6.

[33] Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992). See further the useful discussion of such "lieux anthropologiques" in Emer O'Beirne, "Mapping the *Non-Lieu* in Marc Augé's Writings", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42, no. 1 (2006): 38–50. O'Beirne notes that Augé's critera for distinguishing *lieux* and *non-lieux* seem impressionistic, unclear, and unstable.

[34] Edward Welch, "Marc Augé, Jean Rolin and the Mapping of (Non-)Place in Modern France", *Irish Journal of French Studies* 9 (2009): 49–68.

theologian, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth have to be understood within the mindset of first century Palestinian Judaism, and cannot be interpreted within a "normative" worldview imported from another "place" – such as late eighteenth-century German rationalism.[35]

This does not, however, call into question the practice of translating (or transposing) the understandings of Christ found in the New Testament into the conceptualities of another "place". The classic example of this is generally agreed to be the emergence of the Nicene Christology, in which the language and conceptualities of the New Testament are partly transposed into those of Greek metaphysics.[36] Nevertheless, a clear line of theological continuity can be discerned within this process of transposition.[37]

History as a Special Kind of Time

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[35] The importance of this point is clearly demonstrated by recent works of New Testament scholarship, even if the outcome of this exploration remains contested: see, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation.* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Darina Staudt, *Der eine und einzige Gott: Monotheistische Formeln im Urchristentum und ihre Vorgeschichte bei Griechen und Juden* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013).

[36] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011). For the concern that this process entails reduction and distortion, see John R. Morris, "Chalcedon and Contemporary Christology: A New Direction for an Ancient Christology", *Angelicum* 75, no. 1 (1998): 3–46.

[37] See especially the neglected study of Morna D. Hooker, "Chalcedon and the New Testament", in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 73–93.

One of the most influential works of Catholic spirituality, traditionally attributed to the French Jesuit writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade, speaks of the "sacrament of the present moment."[38] The present moment seems to us to be both real and significant, in comparison with a lost past and an unknown future.[39] There is something special about the "now", a decisive moment which cannot be captured or expressed using the coordinates of four-dimensional space-time.[40] Every human being has a set of such coordinates, expressed in the form (*x, y, z, t*), which can be correlated with the moments of their birth and death, as well as moments of significance between these two points. Yet identifying the coordinates of such an objectively-framed moment is simply incapable of naming and holding its perceived subjective importance for us.

To appreciate the significance of this point, we may consider an early concern raised about Einstein's use of Minkowski's category of four-dimensional space-time by Sir Arthur Eddington, who helped propel Einstein to fame in the years immediately following the First World War. In his 1928 classic *The Nature of the Physical World*, often credited with introducing the phrase "Time's Arrow," Eddington noted how there was a significant disparity between the pure objectivity of physics and the subjective experiential world of individuals. Referencing

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[38] For comment on this text and the problem of its authorship, see Dominique Salin, "The Treatise on Abandonment to Divine Providence", *The Way* 46, no. 2 (2007): 21–36.

[39] For a more philosophical reflection on this point, see the influential paper of Arthur N. Prior, "The Notion of the Present", *Studium Generale* 23 (1970): 245–248. For a defence of Prior's argument that the present is "the real", to be set against two realms of unreality (the past and the future), see David Jakobsen, "A. N. Prior's Notion of the Present", In *Multidisciplinary Aspects of Time and Time Perception*, ed. Argiro Vatakis, Anna Esposito, Maria Giagkou, Fred Cummins and Georgios Papadelis (New York: Springer, 2010), 36–45.

[40] Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the "Decisive Moment" in 19th and 20th century Western Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

Einstein's use of Minkowski,[41] Eddington suggested that this seemed to leave out some matters of importance. "Something must be added to the geometrical conceptions comprised in Minkowski's world before it becomes a complete picture of the world as we know it."[42] For Eddington, this "picture as it stands is entirely adequate to represent those primary laws of Nature;" it is not, however, adequate to engage our inner perceptions of the passage of time, or other subjective concerns.[43]

This is a significant issue. Einstein had a particular concern about the significance of the "Now" – the present moment, as distinguished from the past and future. A purely physical account of this could easily be offered; yet this fails to account for why human beings both consider the present to be distinct from the past and the future, and regard it as having special significance. Past, present and future can be represented *chronologically and spatially* using a world line. Yet their significance cannot be represented *existentially.* Einstein took the view that the "distinction between past, present and future has only the meaning of a persistent illusion".[44] Many, however, will take the view that it is difficult for human being to think neutrally and dispassionately about the transition from a past in which we did not exist, through a present in which we live and think, to a future in which we will no longer exist.

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[41] Hermann Minkowski, "Raum und Zeit", *Jahresbericht der deutschen Mathematiker-Vereinigung* 18 (1909): 75–88. For a good introduction to this concept, see Howard Stein, "On Einstein–Minkowski Space-Time", *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): 5–23.

[42] Arthur S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 34.

[43] For Merleau-Ponty's reflections on Eddington's views, see Jacques Merleau-Ponty, *Philosophie et théorie physique chez Eddington* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1965).

[44] Einstein, letter of 21 March 1955; *Albert Einstein – Michele Besso Correspondence, 1903–55,* ed. Pierre Speziali (Paris: Hermann, 1972), 537–538.

The philosopher Rudolf Carnap, reflecting on his discussions with Einstein at Princeton during the late 1940s, suggested that Einstein realized that purely objective scientific accounts of reality cannot satisfy human existential needs.[45] Similar concerns were expressed earlier by Kierkegaard, who stressed the existential importance of the present moment for individuals.

> A moment as such is unique. To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is; it is passing, as the moment is, past, as the moment is in the next moment, and yet it is decisive, and yet it is filled with the eternal.[46]

There are parallels here with Bultmann's emphasis on the importance of the present moment in which an individual is confronted with the *kerygma* – a disclosure of the "special claim" and "special truth" of revelation that addresses us at this particular moment, illuminating our situation and enabling its transformation.[47]

In his discussion of the "present moment", Kierkegaard echoes what we might call an "intuitive" view of time, which could be argued to have the following three characteristics:[48]

> 1. The present moment is objectively distinguished from other moments.
> 2. Time has an objective direction; we can decide objectively which of two non-simultaneous events is the earlier and which the later.

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[45] P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1963), 37–38.

[46] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 18. Kierkegaard's allusion to the incarnation here can hardly be overlooked.

[47] For an excellent reflection on Bultmann's concept of *kerygma*, see Gerhard Ebeling, *Theologie und Verkündigung: Ein Gespräch mit Rudolf Bultmann* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962), 19–82; 109–114.

[48] Following Huw Price, "The Flow of Time", in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time,* ed. Craig Callender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 276–311, especially 277.

3. There is something objectively dynamic, flux-like about time, expressed in such phrases as the "flow of time."

To use the concepts first introduced by the Idealist philosopher J. M. E. McTaggart in 1908,[49] this represents an A-Theory of time, a "dynamic theory" which holds that the primary relations between events are the tensed temporal relations of past, present, and future. There is an objective privileged present moment (the "now"), which "moves" from past to future and is perceived as the flow of time. This may be contrasted with the B-Theory, a "block theory" which holds that the primary relations between events are the tenseless temporal relations of events. There is no "flow of time" or "objective present moment". Einstein's theory of general relativity is considered by many to eliminate any notion of a privileged present moment in time.[50] If this is

[49] J. M. E. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time", *Mind* 17 (1908): 456–74. McTaggart set out these two approaches a decade before Einstein's formulation of the general theory of relativity. For comment, see Kevin Falvey, "The View from Nowhen: The McTaggart–Dummett Argument for the Unreality of Time", *Philosophia* 38 (2010): 297–312. Falvey here draws on Michael Dummett's defence of McTaggart against the complaint of "indexical fallacy": Michael Dummett, "A Defense of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time", *Philosophical Review* 69, no. 4 (1960), 497–504.

[50] See Simon Saunders, "How Relativity contradicts Presentism", in *Time, Reality and Experience*, ed. Craig Callender (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 277–292; Christian Wüthrich, "The Fate of Presentism in Modern Physics", in *New Papers on the Present: Focus on Presentism,* ed. Roberto Ciunti, Kristie Miller and Giuliano Torrengo (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2013), 91–131. On this approach space-time is interpreted as being the totality of events (the "Block Universe"), within which all events have the same ontological status, being equally real irrespective of when they occur. For an alternative approach, see Tim Maudlin, *The Metaphysics within Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 104–142.

so, human experience of the "passing of time" thus does not correspond directly to a real external process.[51]

How might this affect thinking on the incarnation? One potential response is to speak of a "timeless incarnation", in which God the incarnation is to be understood as a modal, not a temporal, change in God.[52] Another is to point out that a theology of the incarnation is not actually dependent upon any specific philosophy of time. Augustine of Hippo, for example, develops a nuanced theology of the incarnation which is not ultimately dependent on any of the philosophies of time that he explored.[53] It seems Augustine did not see the notions of incarnation and time as being critically interrelated.

Our concern in this paper, however, is not with chronology, but rather with the reflective inhabitation of what we call "history." An objective spatial chronology seems inadequate to accommodate the subjective aspects of human reflection on their place in history, the way they feel about their situation, and the decisions they must make. One option, of course, is to reject any such engagement with human subjectivity, and limit engagement to the objective aspects of

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[51] Donald Williams, "The Myth of Passage", *Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1951): 457-72. For reflection on this point, see Peter J. Riggs, "What do we Feel when we 'Feel' Time 'Passing'?", *Journal of Consciousness Exploration and Research* 3 (2012): 1064–1073; Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 37–55.

[52] For the argument, see Brian Leftow, "A Timeless God Incarnate", in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. Daniel Kendall, Stephen T. Davis, and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 273–299. See further Paul, "Incarnation, Divine Timelessness, and Modality."

[53] For the wide range of philosophies of time encountered in Augustine, see Jason W. Carter, "St. Augustine on Time, Time Numbers, and Enduring Objects", *Vivarium* 49, no. 4 (2011): 301–323 (correcting earlier works, such as Hugh M. Lacey, "Empiricism and Augustine's Problems about Time", *Review of Metaphysics* 22, no. 2 (1968): 219–245).

time. This approach is adopted by those sympathetic to "scientism", the systematic reduction of reality to what is disclosed by physics.[54] Others, however, would respond that scientific psychological studies of human nature show how important such subjective issues as the quest for meaning are to human beings.[55] Existentialist writers – such as Kierkegaard and Bultmann – would protest against a failure to take seriously the world of subjective human experience and reflection. The question is how to synthesize – or at least to hold together – the objective and subjective aspects of the process of existing in the world, integrating these into a grander vision of human identity and agency within the world.[56] Perhaps these are already held together in the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, interpreted within an appropriate intellectual framework.

Conclusion

This essay takes the form of a respectful conversation with Torrance, suggesting a constructive reframing of discussion of the incarnation in terms of "place and history" rather than "time and space". It is suggested that this move offers both the potential to recover the affective dimensions of Christology, while also to give a firmer grounding to the use of narratives in exploring the

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[54] See the restriction of reality to what is known by physics in Alexander Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011). See further Massimo Pigliucci, "New Atheism and the Scientistic Turn in the Atheism Movement", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2013): 142–153. For the theological aspects of Mary Midgley's important criticism of scientism, see Alister E. McGrath, "The Owl of Minerva: Reflections on the Theological Significance of Mary Midgley." *Heythrop Journal* 61, no. 5 (2020): 852–864.

[55] E.g., L. S. George and Crystal L. Park, "Existential Mattering: Bringing Attention to a Neglected but Central Aspect of Meaning." in Alexander Batthyany and Pninit Russo-Netzer, eds., *Meaning in Positive and Existential Psychology* (New York: Springer, 2014), 39–51.

[56] See Jordan B. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Crystal L. Park, Kristen E. Riley, and Leslie B. Snyder, "Meaning Making, Coping, Making Sense, and Posttraumatic Growth following the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks", *Journal of Positive Psychology* 7, no. 3 (2012): 198–207.

significance of Christ, and his cognitive and affective impact upon us.[57] So, returning to Simeon Zahl, how can the incarnation "help foster and regulate more positive, theologically legitimated emotions"?[58] Zahl himself noted one such affective outcome of the incarnation: "to believe rightly in the Incarnation is to be filled with the affection of love."[59] Yet it is clear that others could easily be added, and explored in greater depth – such as the affective aspects of the notion of the parental care of God, embodied in Christ.[60]

This paper proposes a changed framework within which the incarnation might be discussed, which seems to offer promise for discussing the full significance of the incarnation of the Son of God. Christ embodies the redeemed life, enacted in a specific place and moment of history yet capable of illuminating and transforming other places and histories. There is much more to explore.

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[57] There is an important interplay between the construction of narrative identity and human embodiment: Roy Dings, "The Dynamic and Recursive Interplay of Embodiment and Narrative Identity." *Philosophical Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 186–210.

[58] Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," 430.

[59] Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," 432.

[60] Joanna Collicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2015), 63–72. For theological reflections on the trope of attachment, see Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, 101–108; Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 58–105.