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## Divine Pedagogy as Skilful Means: Theological Pluralism in the Early Church

DAMIEN CASEY

**ABSTRACT:** The concept of ‘Skillful means’ is at the very heart of Mahayana Buddhism. Michael Pye suggests that the concept can be usefully applied more generally in the study of religion and to Christianity in particular. In order to test the appropriateness of applying the concept of skilful means to the Christian tradition I will explore the logic of three dominant theological paradigms. I will then use these paradigms to explore how an exclusive text was understood and interpreted by some key figures in the early church, in order to ascertain whether such strong claims to exclusivity would seem to count against the sort of tolerance that the concept of skilful means engenders. Finally I will follow the logic of skilful means to its conclusion with an examination of the idea of divine deception, or its Japanese equivalent: 嘘も方便. I conclude that the concept of skilful means can indeed be a useful concept in understanding the structure of the Christian tradition, although Christianity finds its own unique expression of the concept in terms of the personal dimension of truth.

The concept of ‘Skilful means’ or *upaya* (Sanskrit) is at the very heart of Mahayana Buddhism. First articulated in the *Lotus Sutra* it describes the various devices, strategies and interventions by which the Buddha leads people towards enlightenment. In his masterful study of skilful means Michael Pye suggests that the concept can be usefully applied more generally in the study of religion and to Christianity in particular. ‘A concept articulated in one tradition may be helpful in understanding a state of affairs or a process that is less explicitly understood in another tradition but that nevertheless turns out to be similar in structure.’<sup>1</sup> The value of looking for analogues for skilful means within the Christian tradition goes beyond what it might have to offer Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Rather, Pye suggests, ‘thinking about skilful means takes us to the heart of the matter’<sup>2</sup> of religion itself.

<sup>1</sup> M. Pye, ‘Skillful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity’, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10 (1990) 17–22 at 17.

<sup>2</sup> M. Pye, *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*, 2nd edn. (London and New York 2003) x.

The Buddhist concept of skillful means suggests that it is of the nature of a developed religious teaching to be extended through a series of forms building upon each other and even criticizing each other, while sharing an inner consistency that cannot be directly stated. It suggests that absoluteness should be ascribed to the teaching of no one sect, even though Buddhists sometimes forget this themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In applying the concept of skilful means to the interpretation of Christianity Michael Pye suggests that:

the philosophical analysis of religious language has increasingly worked on the assumption that there are many different types of language and that each type has its own rationale, or, as some would say, its own 'logic'. The concept of skillful means can be considered a far-reaching hint for the philosophy of religion, and especially the philosophy of religious language. It suggests that religious language is always inadequate to its subject and yet that some kind of inadequate language is always necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity, I will argue, has its own variety of skilful means, although there is not a single term that captures it. I will use the term divine pedagogy, although other terms such as *συγκατάβασις* (*sunkatabasis*) or divine adaptation would do equally well.<sup>5</sup>

One obvious point of contact between the two traditions would be to examine the apophatic tradition exemplified by Pseudo-Dionysius. For example, in explaining the use of positive poetic images in the scriptures Pseudo-Dionysius writes:

The Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences . . . it does so not for the sake of art, but as a concession to the nature of our own mind. It uses scriptural passages in an uplifting fashion as a way, provided for us from the first, to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature.<sup>6</sup>

But while the apophatic approach provides a necessary caution about the limits of religious language it does not provide any insight as to the 'logic' of religious language itself. Although I believe that Pye is correct in seeing the Christian doctrine of the incarnation 'as a complete accommodation to the untidiness of cultural history' and as such, 'a critical presence within provisionally

<sup>3</sup> Pye, 'Skillful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity', 19. One can also ask whether Christians tend to forget this. In his *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY 2001) 282, Jacques Dupuis argues: 'That Jesus Christ is "universal" savior does not make him the "Absolute Saviour"—who is God himself.' As John Paul II has written, 'God alone is absolute' (*Fides et Ratio* § 80).

<sup>4</sup> Pye, 'Skillful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity', 20.

<sup>5</sup> See D. M. Rylaarsdam, 'The Adaptability of Divine Pedagogy: John Chrysostom's Rhetorical Theology', PhD diss. (University of Notre Dame 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Theologia mystica*. Eng. trans. in C. Luibheid, *The Mystical Theology in the Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius* (New York 1987) 148.

accepted culture',<sup>7</sup> the incarnation also testifies to a genuine self-revelation of the ineffable God who in becoming fully human deigned to be circumscribed by this same untidiness. Christians believe that Jesus is the Word made Flesh and for this reason understand positive statements about God as having a real referent.

In order to test the appropriateness of applying the concept of skilful means to the Christian tradition I will explore the logic of three dominant theological paradigms. I will then use these paradigms to explore how an exclusive text was understood and interpreted by some key figures in the early church. The text that I will explore is John 14:6: 'Jesus said: I am the Way; I am Truth and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me', as well as its ecclesiological corollary: that there is no salvation outside of the church. I think it important to look at such texts as such strong claims to exclusivity would seem to count against the sort of tolerance that the concept of skilful means engenders.

In the main body of this paper I will describe three distinct theological models or paradigms that arise in the early church and which have continued to shape the Christian imagination. The three models that I will explore can be encapsulated by the root metaphors of law, history and truth. What we find is that although the paradigm of law tends to read such exclusive texts at face value, it nevertheless can leave room for God's mercy within such exclusivity. The paradigm of history will tend to universalize statements like John 14:6 by linking them to the pre-incarnate Word. The paradigm of truth, however, can be seen to understand such exclusive statements as a Christian equivalent of skilful means, that is, as divine pedagogy. Finally I will follow the logic of skilful means to its conclusion with an examination of the idea of divine deception and its reception, or otherwise.

## 1 INTERPRETING CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Christianity has its source in the Easter experience. Those who encountered the Risen Christ experienced the sort of forgiveness and reconciliation, wholeness and peace that only God could offer. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed in his earthly ministry had become fully realised in the risen Christ. The first Christians were convinced that the fullness of life that Jesus now enjoyed in God was also being offered to them. But how was this fullness of life, this offer of redemption, to be understood?

From the outset there emerged a plurality of interpretations of the Easter experience as the first Christians sought to understand that experience in terms of the cultural models and philosophical categories that they had available to

<sup>7</sup> Pye, 'Skillful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity', 21.

them. That a certain plurality is not only tolerated within Christianity but is in fact canonical is evidenced by the fourfold plurality of the Gospels themselves, regardless of attempts—such as Tatian's *Diatesseron*—to resolve the contradictions that inevitably arose.

Different metaphors were employed which became paradigms for the varieties of theology that developed out of them. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder identify three basic types of theology operating under the three distinct paradigms of law, history and truth, which have shaped the theological enterprise and how the Christian understanding of salvation has been articulated.<sup>8</sup> Following Justo L. González<sup>9</sup> they have situated these three types of theology as emerging out of distinct cultural milieux within the Greco-Roman world, identified with the cities of Carthage, Alexandria and Antioch.

These paradigms are not always exclusive as different theologians operating primarily within one paradigm may draw upon aspects of another. However, I would consider such exceptions to support the argument for the necessity of theological plurality due to the necessary limitations of religious language rather than counting against it.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, since two out of three of these models lend themselves naturally to a pedagogical understanding of the process of revelation and of salvation, I will use these three models to explore the diversity of Christian theological approaches and to suggest that the idea of divine pedagogy, understood as a Christian analogue to the concept of skilful means, occupies a prominent place in the tradition of the early Church. I will describe these models in very broad brushstrokes before examining specific instances of how these approaches have been applied to the problematic of reading an exclusive text such as John 14:6.

### 1.1 The Theological Paradigm of Law

The first and best known model is associated with Tertullian as its founding figure.<sup>11</sup> It operates primarily out of the legal and institutional paradigm, whereby salvation is understood in terms of Christ having won our freedom by paying the price for our sins. The philosophical presuppositions of this model are drawn from Stoicism which holds that there is a fundamental order to the universe and that happiness consists in submitting oneself to that order. In line with the first creation account in the first chapter of Genesis, creation

<sup>8</sup> S. B. Bevans and R. P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY 2004) 35.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. González, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology*, rev. edn. (Maryknoll, NY 1999). Apart from González, Bevans and Schroeder in describing these three models also draw upon the work of Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (London 1990).

<sup>10</sup> See for example n. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 36–49. Cf. J. L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 1: *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York 2010) 91–93.

is ordered, and sin consists in going against that order. Within this framework salvation is understood in terms of correcting what has gone wrong. It assumes that if Adam had not sinned there would have been no need for a redeemer.

The ideal is the natural God-given order of things originally established in the Garden of Eden. As expressed in Anselm's theory of Satisfaction, the order and good of the universe are dependent upon people knowing their place and respecting the order of creation. God's position as creator is related to the image of God as lawgiver and judge whereby the integrity of creation is guaranteed. The Church is about saving souls and bringing people into the Church, which is understood institutionally. There is an emphasis on creeds and doctrinal descriptions as definitive and final. Ecclesiologically, its temptation has always been to identify the Church with the Kingdom of God, rather than the Church being at the service of the Kingdom. The world and history are relatively unimportant in themselves as what matters is the judgement of individual souls. Hence there is a tendency towards a dualistic anthropology. Culture itself has no religious significance, but is simply a vehicle for conveying the Gospel. This has been the most dominant model and has substantially shaped Christian thinking in the second millennium.

It is the paradigm most at odds with any ideas of divine pedagogy and one that lends itself to the most rigorist, exclusive and literal reading of John 14:6. Such an understanding of Jesus as 'the way, the truth and the life' might find its ecclesial formulation in the axiom '*extra ecclesia nulla salus*'. Although this dictum is most closely identified with the metaphor of law, it originally emerged out of a different paradigm as we shall see below. It is typically traced back to Cyprian the rigorist Bishop of Carthage in whose writings the axiom occurs repeatedly. However, Cyprian's concern is not with non-Christians so much as against schismatics.

Let them not think that the way of salvation exists for them, if they have refused to obey the bishops or priest . . . they cannot live outside since there is only one house of God, and there can be no salvation for anyone except in the Church.<sup>12</sup>

But even as the axiom was used by theologians operating out of a legal, institutional understanding of the nature of the Church, a distinction was often maintained between the visible and the invisible Church based on the foreknowledge of God concerning who will be saved. Hence Augustine writes that 'many who seem to be on the outside are really inside, and many who seem to be inside are outside'.<sup>13</sup>

It did come to be assumed, however, that even if, by trusting in God's

<sup>12</sup> Cyprian, Ep. 4.4. Cited by Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Aug., *De baptismo* 5.27.38. Cited by Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 90.

mercy, 'anyone who is vigilant in seeking the truth'<sup>14</sup> would not be condemned by God, now that the Gospel had been proclaimed to all within the known world, any who remained outside of the Church were clearly culpable and deserved condemnation. Eventually this strict exclusivist interpretation of the axiom found its way into the magisterial pronouncements of the medieval Roman Church where the Church was strictly identified with its institutional and hierarchical expressions. But with the increasing awareness of the world outside of Christendom it soon became clear that the Gospel had not been proclaimed to all and the teaching of the necessity of explicit faith and membership of the institutional church came to be questioned once more. What was sought was what Jacques Dupuis has called 'substitutes for the Gospel'<sup>15</sup> whereby the legal requirements for salvation were reconciled with God's mercy. The necessity of baptism and faith for salvation were maintained, but 'the power of Christ, which is sufficient for the salvation of the whole human race'<sup>16</sup> could supply what was lacking through implicit faith, the baptism of desire, or inner inspiration. This possibility was affirmed at the Council of Trent. For most of its history, the magisterium of the Catholic Church has affirmed the possibility of grace and salvation to those outside of the visible church even while it continued to affirm that the Church was its exclusive vehicle.

## 1.2 The Theological Paradigm of History

Within the legal paradigm there is little room for the idea of divine pedagogy except at the margins. It might be the exception arising out of God's mercy, but it is for the most part foreign to the paradigm. In the next model the idea of divine pedagogy is central, even if it is not identified as such. The next model that I will discuss takes history as its symbolic locus. History is salvation history, the place in which God's providence and grace brings creation to its completion and fulfilment. Although this model has a modern feel to it with its emphasis on history, development and evolution, it is in fact the oldest of the three models with Irenaeus as its founding figure.

According to this paradigm the historical development of humanity was intended by God from the beginning, not as a fall from some static eternal state of perfection or contemplation, but as part of the necessary process of growth and maturation. And so Irenaeus argues that God could have endowed humanity with perfection from the beginning but that we would not have been able to receive it.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> John Chry., *In Ep. ad Rom. hom.* 26:4. Cited by Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 89.

<sup>15</sup> See Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 110–129.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, qu. 8, art. 2, ad 1. See Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 114ff.

<sup>17</sup> See Iren., *Adv. haer.* 4.38.2: 'God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but

The growth and development of humanity, nourished by the Spirit and fulfilled in the Son, is a growth towards the perfection of God. The sin of Adam is not the catastrophe that the previous model considered it to be. The sin of Adam and Eve was one of immaturity rather than malice. The incarnation was not a remedy for the Fall, as it was always God's intention to become human in order that humanity might have full communion with the divine.

The ideal, therefore, is not to be found in the beginning as in the legal paradigm or even in eternity as in the truth paradigm that I will discuss below, but in the eschatological future. It is to be found in Christ who is the sum and completion of all human history and who reveals to us our own divine destiny. The Church according to this model is a sign and instrument of the unity between God and Humanity, and men and women with each other. 'Humanity is created good, but not yet complete, perfectible, not yet perfect.'<sup>18</sup> The particularities of culture and history are essential to God's plan, not merely incidental, as they are the place where the drama of salvation is played out. Culture is basically good, but in need of transformation. The mission of the church according to this model is understood in terms of the commitment to the liberation and transformation of humanity *in* the world. Salvation is salvation *of* the world, not *from* the world.

Now it is of the nature of God's intended gift to humanity to share in God's own life that it could not be received complete and whole. Humanity needed to grow in order to receive it.<sup>19</sup> Adam's mistake was trying to grasp what could only be given and graciously received. One needs to wait patiently for the appropriate time according to the will of the Creator. This necessary patience Irenaeus contrasts with the haste which he considers to be the characteristic error of the Gnostics. And so Irenaeus asks 'How, then, shall he be a God, who has not as yet been made a man? Or how can he be perfect who was but lately created?' Rather, we should wait upon the hand of our maker to finish his work, offering him our 'heart in a soft and tractable state' so that God may finish his work and bring us to perfection.<sup>20</sup>

as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.' Eng. trans. in A. Roberts and W. Rambaut, ANF 1 (repr. Grand Rapids, MI 1956). Finite creatures in other words cannot contain the infinite.

<sup>18</sup> Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> 'Now it was necessary that man should in the first instance be created; and having been created, should receive growth; and having received growth, should be strengthened; and having been strengthened, should abound; and having abounded, should recover; and having recovered, should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord' (Iren., *Adv. haer.* 4.38.3). A similar observation was made by Augustine who argued that 'by withholding the vision God extends the longing, through longing he makes the soul extend, by extending it he makes more room in it. So, brethren, let us long, because we are to be filled.' (Aug., *In ep. Ioh. tr.* 4.6. Eng. trans. in J. Burnaby, *Augustine: Later Works*, LCC 8 (Philadelphia, PA 1955) 290).

<sup>20</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 4.39.2.

What Christ restores to us in the incarnation is the capacity to receive and to grow in the likeness of God that was damaged in the fall.<sup>21</sup> But he does so in Irenaeus' view not simply by becoming human, or performing a single saving act, but by entering wholly into the human condition, 'by entering into the flow of time' and 'waiting on God for his own increase.'<sup>22</sup> 'With him [the Son], nothing is incomplete or out of due season, . . . but the Son works them out at the proper time in perfect order and sequence'.<sup>23</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it succinctly:

God intended man to have *all* good, but in his, God's time; and therefore all disobedience, all sin, consists essentially in breaking out of time. Hence the restoration of order by the Son of God had to be the annulment of that premature snatching at knowledge, the beating down of the hand outstretched toward eternity, the repentant return from a false, swift transfer into eternity to a true, slow confinement in time.<sup>24</sup>

In waiting upon God, Christ is able to receive the full possession of the Spirit. 'The Lord, receiving this as a gift from his Father does himself also confer it upon those who are partakers of himself, sending the Holy Spirit upon all the earth'.<sup>25</sup> One advantage of this approach is that it explains the delay of the *parousia*—what Christ restores in our salvation is our capacity to learn and to grow in the Spirit. Divinisation requires patience, and waiting for the appropriate time. 'But we do now receive a certain portion of his Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, foreshadowing Gregory of Nyssa, this is not a process that will ever be complete. 'For as God is always the same, so the human person in God will always progress towards God. God will never cease to benefit and enrich the human person, and the human person will never cease from receiving benefit and enrichment from God'.<sup>27</sup>

There is for Irenaeus continuity between creation and salvation. Creation itself is the first salvific act. Returning then to our touchstone of John 14:6, Christ as the Way is not limited to the incarnate Word. 'For by means of the creation itself, the Word reveals God the Creator'.<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus goes on:

'No man knows the Son, but the Father; nor the Father, save the Son, and those to

<sup>21</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 3.17.2.

<sup>22</sup> J. Vogel, 'The Haste of Sin, the Slowness of Salvation: An Interpretation of Irenaeus on the Fall and Redemption', *Anglican Theological Review* 89.3 (2007) 443–59 at 451–52. My own reading of Irenaeus owes a substantial debt to Vogel.

<sup>23</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 3.16.7.

<sup>24</sup> H. U. v. Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco 1994) 37. Cited by Vogel, 'The Haste of Sin', 451.

<sup>25</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 3.17.2.

<sup>26</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 5.8.1.

<sup>27</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 4.11.2.

<sup>28</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 4.6.6.

whomsoever the Son shall reveal'. For 'shall reveal' was said not with reference to the future alone, as if then [only] the Word had begun to manifest the Father when He was born of Mary, but it applies indifferently throughout all time. For the Son, being present with His own handiwork from the beginning, reveals the Father to all; to whom He wills, and when He wills, and as the Father wills. Wherefore, then, in all things, and through all things, there is one God, the Father, and one Word, and one Son, and one Spirit, and one salvation to all who believe in Him.<sup>29</sup>

Before the incarnation, those who responded in faith to the seeds of the Logos revealed throughout creation were saved. History reached its climax in Christ who recapitulates, or sums up all that has gone before and brings to it to completion. But after the ascension of Christ into heaven Irenaeus believed salvation to be restricted to members of the institutional Church. However, Irenaeus believed that the Gospel had already in his own time been proclaimed to all nations and was not aware that the majority of the world remained unevangelised.<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus would also have had no inkling of the many theological issues that had yet to be resolved as many of the implications of what was revealed in Christ still needed to worked out.

Hence in the fourth century, Gregory Nazianzen, in arguing for the divinity of the Holy Spirit, claimed that the process of revelation did not cease with Christ.

The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the Deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit Himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of Himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further (if I may use so bold an expression) with the Holy Ghost; lest perhaps people might, like men loaded with food beyond their strength, and presenting eyes as yet too weak to bear it to the sun's light, risk the loss even of that which was within the reach of their powers.<sup>31</sup>

Gregory Nazianzen's argument for the development of doctrine acknowledges the human condition as being situated in history, and the limitations of our capacity to receive and understand the content of revelation. One might compare Gregory's argument for the development of doctrine with Irenaeus' observation that the prelapsarian Adam was unable to receive the fullness of perfection, being as yet still a child. The messianic secret in the synoptic Gospels is another prime instance where Jesus knows more than he says. Jesus does

<sup>29</sup> Iren., *Adv. haer.* 4.6.7.

<sup>30</sup> T. L. Tiessen, *Irenaeus on the Salvation of the Unevangelised* (Metuchen, NJ and London 1993) 281.

<sup>31</sup> Greg. Naz., *Oratio* 31.26. Eng. trans. in C. G. Browne and J. E. Swallow, NPNF 2.7 (repr. Grand Rapids, MI 1976).

not openly declare himself the Messiah because he knows such a claim will be misunderstood and misinterpreted. In the Gospel of John, Jesus withholds the fullness of truth from his disciples, explaining to them that:

I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of divine pedagogy as a heuristic for understanding God's dealings with the world, already present in theological model of history, is further elaborated in the model of truth.

### 1.3 The Theological Paradigm of Truth

Since the Second Vatican Council it has been the third model, whose principle symbol is that of truth, that has been in the ascendant. Jesus is understood as the Sacrament of God, the human face of God who reveals to humanity who God is. Its founding figure is Origen and the philosophical background to this model is Neo-Platonism which understands God as absolutely transcendent. Human beings are in essence spiritual creatures who have fallen by straying from the spiritual contemplation of the One. God is rational, and creates through reason, the Logos. 'Both reason and revelation are the means given by God to humanity to recover our original holiness.'<sup>33</sup>

Whereas the ideal for first model was located in the beginning of creation, and for the second model in the eschatological future, here the ideal is eternity which is manifest in time. The Christian community is characterised as those who *know*, manifesting in this life and in this world the ultimate reality of salvation. As the church learns from Christ and makes Christ present, the Church is called to teach the world, and make Christ present to the world. If Christ is the door to union with God, then the Church is the door to union with Christ.

Salvation is the liberation and transformation of the individual and can be conceived in terms of enlightenment from ignorance and learning to see the world as God sees the world. Humanity is educable, and on the whole this model tends to be optimistic about the world and the universality of salvation. Because God has already been active in the world, we are called to discern the movement of the Spirit within culture. We are called to dialogue, to attentive listening, to be attentive to the *logoi spermatikoi* in creation.

The gradual education of humanity understood as a divine pedagogy receives definitive expression in the thought of Clement of Alexandria who at the beginning of his *Paedagogus* suggests that this is an appropriate name for

<sup>32</sup> John 16:12–13.

<sup>33</sup> Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 50.

the divine Word.<sup>34</sup> The divine Word is our educator because all true knowledge has its source in him. For example, Clement describes philosophy as the 'investigation into the nature of the universe (the truth of which the Lord himself says, "I am the truth")'. Those who discover truth have received it from 'Truth herself'.<sup>35</sup> For Clement, Jesus' claim to be 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' is to be understood within the context of the Johannine prologue where all things come into being through the Word, 'the true light, which enlightens everyone'.<sup>36</sup>

The divine pedagogy is about much more than teaching certain truths. Clement in his *Paedagogus* describes the plan of our effective education by the Logos in stages: 'first He exhorts, then He trains, and finally He teaches'.<sup>37</sup> Even error, Clement teaches, can lead to truth.<sup>38</sup> Clement offers the example of those who worship heavenly bodies, which, although clearly an error, 'can be a means of rising to God'.<sup>39</sup> Especially significant however is Clement's proposition that truth is a person.

Origen, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, also sees a clear symmetry between the Johannine prologue and John 14:6. They are two sides of the same coin; the one pertaining to a description of the Word in eternity and the other in relation to us in the economy of salvation.<sup>40</sup> Far from being an exclusive term, the designation of the Son as 'the way' is relative in keeping with what Origen sees as the essential plurality of the Gospel. The Son of God is called many names because Jesus is many good things. Life, light and truth are all good things. 'Our Saviour teaches that he himself is all these when he says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."' <sup>41</sup>

The many things that Christ is are not simply figures of speech but directly related to what is required by the individual to achieve salvation. So Christ is indeed the way, but for Origen this is a provisional description.<sup>42</sup> Origen continued: 'He is the light, because people are in the darkness of wickedness.

<sup>34</sup> Clem., *Paed.* 1.1.1.

<sup>35</sup> Clem., *Strom.* 1.5.32. Eng. trans. in J. Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria: Stromateis, Books 1–3*, FC 85 (1991).

<sup>36</sup> John 1:9.

<sup>37</sup> Clem., *Paed.* 1.3.3. Eng. trans. in W. Wilson, ANF 2 (repr. Grand Rapids, MI 1956) 209.

<sup>38</sup> 'For example, the worship of the heavenly bodies can be a means of rising to God'. (*Strom.* 6.14). Chrys Saldanha makes an interesting and important argument that the those preparations for the truth such as Greek philosophy or the Old Testament dispensation, that it was the whole and not simply the part that was 'given by Divine Providence as a preparatory discipline for the perfection which is in Christ' (*Strom.* 6.17). See C. Saldanha, *Divine Pedagogy: A Patristic View of Non-Christian Religions*, Biblioteca di scienze religiose 57 (Rome 1984) 171.

<sup>39</sup> Clem., *Strom.* 6.14; ANF 2,505.

<sup>40</sup> Orig., *Comm. in Ioh.* 1.111. Eng. trans. in R. Heine, *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1–10*, FC 80 (1989).

<sup>41</sup> Orig., *Comm. in Ioh.* 1.53.

<sup>42</sup> Orig., *Comm. in Ioh.* 1.119.

He is shepherd, because we have thrown our reason away and become like beasts, and hence are in need of a shepherd.<sup>43</sup>

But of the many titles conferred on Christ, Origen holds the best to be Wisdom. Citing the claim of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22 that 'God created me the beginning of his ways for his works', Origen argues for the primacy of Wisdom as the most appropriate description of the character of Christ 'in the beginning'. But within the plurality of creation itself, 'it is the Word which is received'.<sup>44</sup> Origen would agree that we all stand in need of the Son for our salvation, but that the manner of our need varies according to our circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

The tension between the exclusive claims of salvation through Christ and the universality of salvation finds peculiar expression in Origen as he is the first to articulate the negative formula that 'outside the Church, no one is saved'.<sup>46</sup> But Origen also identifies the Church and the Body of Christ with the whole of humanity and creation. Ultimately, Origen had confidence that God's desire that all be saved would be realised even if Christ and the Church were the exclusive vehicles of that salvation.

Basil of Caesarea, in his defence of the Nicene Creed, has his own reasons to want to relativise the idea of Christ as 'the way' because, when read as an absolute statement, it would seem to detract from the claim that Christ was fully divine. For Basil, the idea of Christ as the way is relative to the economy of salvation and the dispensation of grace. 'The way' is simply one of many Christ's titles. 'These titles do not describe his nature, but ... are concerned with his manifold energies, by which He satisfies the needs of each in His tenderheartedness to his own creation.'<sup>47</sup> These needs, and the way in which God meets them are also diverse. 'He bestows help on every creature according to its need. He measures individual requirements, and then distributes many different kinds of bounties'.<sup>48</sup>

The most significant conclusion that I draw from this study of divine pedagogy from within the theological paradigm of truth is that if truth is a person, then no application of abstract universal principles will do. The pedagogy of truth will be particular. As Origen observed, perhaps the most appropriate appellation of all for the divine Word is Wisdom. And sometimes, depending upon where the person is on their journey, this divine Wisdom may even seem to condone what from some abstract vantage point appears to be error.

<sup>43</sup> Orig., *Comm. in Ioh.* 1.121–123.

<sup>44</sup> Orig., *Comm. in Ioh.* 1.111. See also 1.223.

<sup>45</sup> Orig., *Comm. in Ioh.* 1.124.

<sup>46</sup> Orig., *Homiliae in Ioshua* 3.5. Cited by Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Basil, *De spiritu sancto* 8.17. Eng. trans. in D. Anderson, *St. Basil the Great: On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood, NY 1980).

<sup>48</sup> Basil, *De spiritu sancto* 8.19.

In order to appreciate the dynamics of the divine pedagogy and whether or not it is indeed the Christian equivalent to skilful means it will be necessary to consider some of the arguments about the possibility of divine deception.

## 2 DIVINE DECEPTION

There is a Japanese saying: 嘘も方便 (*uso mo hoben*) 'even a lie is skilful means'. According to the *Lotus Sutra*: 'there is only the Law of the one vehicle except when the Buddha preaches so as an expedient means, merely employing provisional names and terms in order to conduct and guide living beings and preach to them the Buddha wisdom'.<sup>49</sup> Similarly Clement argues that the true teacher 'thinks what is true and also speaks it, except, on occasion, in a medicinal way, as a doctor does to those who are sick, he will lie or speak an untruth—as the sophists say—for the deliverance of those who are ill'.<sup>50</sup> The *Lotus Sutra* also uses the example of the physician deceiving the patient in order to heal him as one 'skilled in the use of skilful means but free of "any falsehoods"'.<sup>51</sup>

This theme can also be found in Origen's *Homily on Jeremiah* 20.

As a father wishes to deceive a son in his own interest while he is still a boy, since he cannot be helped any other way unless the boy is deceived, as a healer makes it his business to deceive the patient who cannot be cured unless he receives words of deceit, so it is also for the God of the universe, since what is prescribed has to help the race of men.<sup>52</sup>

Nicholas P. Conostas observes that deception for therapeutic purposes was culturally acceptable in late antiquity and associates this acceptance with the popular Platonic distinction between the world of truth and the world of appearances.<sup>53</sup> That divine deception was widely accepted in one form or another can be shown by the popularity of the theology of ransom whereby the Saviour achieves our redemption through deceiving the devil.

This idea was first fully articulated by Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>54</sup> the immediate context of which was also therapeutic whereby 'our diseased nature needed a

<sup>49</sup> Eng. trans. in B. Watson, 'Chapter Two', in *The Lotus Sutra* (New York 1994) 35.

<sup>50</sup> Clem., *Strom.* 9.53.2. Cited by J. L. Kovacs, 'Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria', *JCS* 9.1 (2001) 3–25 at 18.

<sup>51</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 229.

<sup>52</sup> Orig., *Homiliae in Ieremiam* 20.2. Eng. trans. in J. C. Smith, *Origen: Homilies on Jeremiah; Homily on First Kings* 28, FC 97 (1998).

<sup>53</sup> N. P. Conostas, 'The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative', *HTR* 97 (2004) 139–163 at 142.

<sup>54</sup> Although it could be argued that the idea was implied by Ignatius of Antioch in his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 19.



healer'.<sup>55</sup> Anticipating the criticism as to why God would condescend to deal with the devil, Gregory argues for a divine pedagogy. Rather than exercise arbitrary power, God chose to lead us back to freedom through a just method. Power, apart from goodness and justice, Gregory argues, is not a virtue, but bestial and tyrannical, for it is the devil's own thirst for power that is the source of his evil deeds.<sup>56</sup> God pays the devil more than his due, but in doing so God uses the devices of the devil to defeat the devil, like a homeopathic remedy. Gregory argues that:

whereas he, the enemy, effected his deception for the ruin of our nature, He who is at once the just, and the good, and the wise one, used his device in which there was deception, for the salvation of him who had perished, and thus not only conferred benefit on the lost one, but on him, too, who had wrought our ruin.<sup>57</sup>

Not only is the deception of the original deceiver a just recompense, but the divine deception is further justified not only by the salvation of humanity as the victim of the devil's deception, but by the salvation of the devil himself. The divine deception is a mercy to the one deceived.

Although some like Gregory Nazianzen rejected the metaphor, considering it to be blasphemous, it was widely accepted by many prominent churchmen, including figures as Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor. The qualification that it was not so much a deception on God's part but rather the inability of the Prince of Lies to comprehend the extravagance of divine love, coming as it does out of the Platonic distinction between the worlds of truth and of appearances, could be seen as a move akin to the Buddhist doctrine of the two truths where ultimate truth is preserved by distinguishing it from conventional truth.

Joseph Trigg notes that the notion of divine deception was strongly opposed by Irenaeus and Augustine as a matter of principle. In their common concern to refute heretical opinions the possibility of divine deception could be seen to cut against the grain of their concern with authority. Trigg thinks it unfortunate that 'Augustine's frankly inerrantist approach' became normative for the Western tradition, which he contrasts with that taken by Origen:

Although he was a resolute opponent of heresy, Origen's primary commitment was to the Bible as an instrument for personal transformation; truth, for Origen, is not factual information but saving knowledge. Augustine's primary commitment, on the other hand, at least in his years as a bishop, was to the Bible as an instrument for maintaining institutional integrity.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Greg. Nys., *Or. Catech.* 15. Eng. trans. in W. Moore and H. A. Wilson, NPNF 2.5 (repr. Grand Rapids, MI 1979).

<sup>56</sup> Greg. Nys., *Or. Catech.* 23.

<sup>57</sup> Greg. Nys., *Or. Catech.* 26.

<sup>58</sup> Trigg, 'Divine Deception', 164.

Hermann J. Vogt similarly observes that for Origen, 'The Holy Spirit has woven into the biblical narratives such things as did not happen, or even cannot happen', the purpose of which is 'to prevent the reader from reading the Holy Scripture like' any other text. We are to "'Search the Scriptures!'" in order to grasp the real meaning of the Bible as a whole.<sup>59</sup>

But I would suggest that Augustine is also motivated by pedagogical concerns. Using a metaphor that might equally be at home in the Buddhist tradition, one might contrast Origen and Augustine in their respective interpretations of Matthew 14:22–33, where the disciples battling the heavy sea in their boat encounter Jesus walking across the lake.<sup>60</sup> Brian E. Daley comparing how Origen and Augustine approach this scene, explains that 'for Origen the familiar scene is a parable of human struggle with temptation, which providentially teaches us our need for the presence and instruction of the Logos in our lives.'<sup>61</sup> Augustine, on the other hand, reads the scene as a reminder that all of us are 'foreign travellers'.<sup>62</sup> Every voyage exposes one to storms: 'So it's essential we should stay in the boat'<sup>63</sup> which is the Church.

Augustine as a pastor was primarily concerned for the souls in his care, to keep them on the main path lest they become lost. I believe that we find a clear statement of Augustine's pedagogical and hermeneutical priorities in Book 1 of *De Doctrina Christiana* where Augustine writes that '*the fulfilment and the end of the law* and of all the divine scriptures *is love* [my italics]'.<sup>64</sup> Augustine explains that:

anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by this understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for support of this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.<sup>65</sup>

If, as I began saying, he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> H. J. Vogt, 'Origen of Alexandria', in C. Kannengiesser (ed.), *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* 1 (Leiden 2004) 547.

<sup>60</sup> B. E. Daley, 'Word, Soul, and Flesh: Origen and Augustine on the Person of Christ', *AugStud* 36 (2005) 300–327.

<sup>61</sup> Daley, 'Word, Soul, and Flesh', 325.

<sup>62</sup> Aug., *Sermo* 75.2.

<sup>63</sup> Aug., *Sermo* 75.2–4. Eng. trans. in E. Hill, WSA 3.3 (1991).

<sup>64</sup> Aug., *De doct. chr.* 1.35.39. Eng. trans. in R. P. H. Green, *Augustine: De doctrina christiana*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Aug., *De doct. chr.* 1.36.40; Green, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Aug., *De doct. chr.* 1.41.88; Green, 51.

It is true that Augustine as a good pastor would prefer that his charges keep to the path, or stay in the boat, but these things would seem not to be ends in themselves. One might even say that, in effect, Augustine's literalism is also a kind of skilful means.

## CONCLUSION

This discussion has shown that the concept of skilful means can indeed be a useful concept in understanding the structure of the Christian tradition. It has also demonstrated the value of returning to early Christian sources. One insight that these sources reveal is the uniquely Christian expression of skilful means in terms of the personal dimension of truth. For Christians, Truth is a person. If this is so then one must conclude that truth is not a thing to be dogmatically claimed or possessed, but in Jesus Christ it is a person to be encountered. Truth has a personal and dialogical character. The Johannine vision of Truth as a person turns out not to be an obstacle for interfaith dialogue, but enables, empowers and perhaps even commands it. It resolves many of the contemporary tensions between the claims of objectivity and subjectivity. It is often feared that to admit relativity is deny the universal claims of truth or that truth is too subjective to be able to make any claims or demands. But if truth is a person, then naturally it will appear distinct according to each one who encounters it—if they encounter it truly—while always remaining the same. Indeed the only way to the universal is through the particular. With the Johannine vision of truth we have relativity, and indeed relation, without relativism. Salvation, ultimately, is not about possessing the truth, but the encounter with truth, and being transformed by it.

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## *Apatheia* and *Metriopatheia* in Basil of Caesarea's Consolatory Letters\*

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**ABSTRACT:** In Basil of Caesarea's writings, there are some impressive consolatory letters. His purpose in them is not reacting without emotion or feeling (*apathōs*), but assuaging one's grief. In monastic life, however, he regards freedom from emotion (*apatheia*) as the aim for monks. Thus, Basil's attitude toward one's pathos might seem paradoxical. In this article, I will explore the relationship of both concepts in his consolatory letters, Stoic *apatheia* and Peripatetic *metriopatheia*, against a background of Greek philosophy and Christian wisdom.

Basil of Caesarea's writings include a number of impressive consolatory letters.<sup>1</sup> A letter sent by Basil to the wife of Briso is a typical example of what is known as a consolatory epistle. Its proem begins as follows:

Why should we even mention how deeply we lamented at the tidings of the misfortune which has come upon the best of men, Briso? For surely no one has a heart so stony that he, having had experience of that man, and then having heard of his being suddenly snatched from among men, did not consider the removal of the man to be a common loss to life (κοινὴ ζημία τοῦ βίου). But straightway our grief was succeeded by solicitude for you ... your soul has most likely been deeply affected by the calamity ... (*Ep.* 302)<sup>2</sup>

Basil's purpose here is to assuage the deep grief of the bereaved through expressing sympathy, and not removing the emotion of grief. In monastic life, however, he regards freedom from emotion (*ἀπάθεια*) as the aim for himself and other monks. Thus, Basil's attitude toward one's *pathē*, or emotions, might seem paradoxical.

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<sup>1</sup> For a genre of consolatory letters in patristic studies, see C. Favez, *La Consolation Latine Chrétienne* (Paris 1937); M. M. Beyenka, *Consolation in Saint Augustine*, PhD diss. (Catholic University of America 1950); R. C. Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy: Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the Two Gregories*, Patristic Monograph Series 3 (Cambridge, MA 1975).

<sup>2</sup> I use the LCL edition; *Basil: Letters*, 3, ed. R. J. Defferrari, LCL 243 (Cambridge, MA 1934) 230f. Translations of Basil's letters are also taken (with some changes) from Defferrari's edition.