

# Contradictory Theology: An Introduction

Jonathan C. Rutledge & Jc Beall

In stereotypical analytic style, I find it easiest to define contradictory theology by first breaking it apart into its two conceptual components.

First, contradictory theology is *theology*. That is, it is the study of God and all things in relation to God.<sup>i</sup> Granted, the study of God (and all things in relation to God) might include a variety of practices—e.g., meditation on scripture, prayer, morning devotional readings through the Church Fathers and Mothers, taking of the eucharist, etc.—but if such study includes *theorizing* about divine reality, then it will involve claims (sentences or propositions) about God that can be true or false.<sup>ii</sup> And once we have the possibility of speaking truly or falsely of God, we have before us the ingredients necessary for talking about theology, secondly, as *contradictory*.

Theology is contradictory when it affirms the truth of any sentence of the form ‘**A** &  $\neg$ **A**’ (where ‘**A**’ is a variable ranging over declarative sentences; that is, sentences that can be (at least) true or false). In other words, whether something is contradictory is a matter of its logical form, and anything other than a *sentence* that is said to be contradictory—such as a contradictory *action* or *object*—will be contradictory in a derivative sense: namely, by being such that a sentence of the form ‘**A** &  $\neg$ **A**’ is *true* of it.

*Discussion Question 1 – Does this match what you have understood a contradiction to be? How might analogical predication relate to this idea that a contradiction involving God—or any sentence about God for that matter—might be true (or false)?*

I just introduced some logical notation above, so perhaps it is worth commenting a bit on it. Logicians introduce formal languages as models to articulate a given theory in a way that makes the logical relations between different parts of the theory more perspicuous. That is, such formal languages allow us more clearly to see what follows from what in a given theory.

For our purposes, let us briefly put some aspects of a formal language on the table. First, let the smallest parts (i.e., the atomic parts) of our language be declarative sentences (represented by upper case Roman letters: ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’, etc.). Atomic sentences are all (at least) true or false, but they can be connected to other atomic sentences to form molecular (complex) sentences via our various logical connectives—e.g., ‘&’ for *and*, ‘**V**’ for *or*, ‘ $\neg$ ’ for *negation*, and ‘ $\rightarrow$ ’ for *if-then* (i.e., the material conditional). Let ‘A’ be *the Father is unbegotten* and ‘B’ be *the Son is begotten*. Then, ‘A & B’ can be stated in normal theologically-informed English as *The Father is unbegotten and the Son is begotten*.<sup>iii</sup>

Once we have our syntactic elements, we can turn to the semantics of our language. That is, we can explain how to work out the truth and falsity conditions of the sentences in our language. On classical models of logic the only possible truth-values are *true* or *false*, and for any sentence in the language it must be either true or false and never both. In other words, classical models of logic exclude the possibility of *gaps* and *gluts* (i.e., sentences that are, respectively, *neither true nor false* or *both true and*

false).<sup>iv</sup> For theologies governed by a classical consequence relation, then, there are no true contradictions.

*Discussion Question 2 – We are here to discuss contradictory (i.e., glutty) theology, but what about gappy theology? Also, in the presentation so far, I have assumed that truth and falsity determine whether or not a given sentence belongs to a theory. Suppose instead we say that a sentence belongs to a theory only if it is deemed (at least) assertible by the theory. Does this change in semantics make glutty or gappy theology more or less attractive?*

Sometimes scholars are under the impression that there is a logical “law” called the *Law of Non-Contradiction* such that it is impossible for a contradiction to be true. The strongest argument in favor of this law seems to be its intuitiveness. Lots of people, so the argument goes, think it is obviously and necessarily the case that there can be no true contradictions; therefore, contradictions are impossible. Or perhaps a slightly different way of ruling out contradictions is to say that contradictions could be true only if we could imagine or conceive of what it would mean to say they are true. But we cannot imagine or conceive of what it means for a contradiction to be true. So, true contradictions are impossible.

*Discussion Question 3 – What’s wrong with these arguments as stated? What better arguments against the possibility of true contradictions (or gaps, for that matter) can you think of?*

Let us suspend our suspicions (if we have them) of the possibility of true contradictions, however, and consider where such contradictions might be found in theology—with extra emphasis on ‘might’ as this is all inevitably controversial.

One of the most prominent places at which contradictions are to be found is the Incarnation. According to that doctrine, Jesus Christ is both human and divine such that a litany of contradictions arguably follow from his existence (e.g., Jesus is immutable and Jesus is mutable; Jesus is omniscient and Jesus is not omniscient). In recent memory, the typical response to such contradictions has been to *consistentize* them; that is, to find ways to explain how they do not involve contradictions when rightly understood.

One way to consistentize—to ward off the threat of contradiction in one’s theology—involves embracing anathema. One might, for example, deny Christ’s full humanity or divinity such that his existence does not entail that any contradictory predicates are true of him. If we assume one wishes to affirm Chalcedonian Christology, this is not an appealing option.<sup>v</sup>

Another way to consistentize is to replace ‘Jesus’ in claims such as ‘Jesus is mutable’ with new, more precise referential terms. For instance, someone might say that ‘Jesus-*qua*-human is mutable’ and ‘Jesus-*qua*-divine is immutable’, but since Jesus-*qua*-human and Jesus-*qua*-divine are not identical, no contradiction is forthcoming.

Yet another option for consistentizing is to alter the meanings of the predicates involved in allegedly contradictory claims of Christology. For instance, perhaps ‘*x* is mutable’ doesn’t mean that *x* can change, but rather, that *x* has a nature that can change. If so, then saying ‘Jesus is mutable and immutable’ just *means* that Jesus has a nature that can change and a nature that cannot change. So long

as those two natures are not the same nature (e.g., one human and the other divine), no contradiction lies beneath the conciliar propositions.

*Discussion Question 4 – Are these consistentizing attempts plausible? Do you have misgivings with any of them?*

In contrast with the consistentizing approach, someone advancing a contradictory theology need not see the Christological contradictions as absurdities at all. Only if a given contradiction of the theory were explosive (i.e., only if it entailed all propositions whatsoever) would there be a problem.<sup>vi</sup> But by the contradictory theologian's lights the true contradictions of Christ do not explode into triviality. The solution, as a matter of fact, is simple. It is to accept...unwaveringly...the apparently contradictory claims made of Christ as actually contradictory; i.e., both true and false, in the same respect, full stop.

Another spot at which contradiction has often been reported involves the doctrine of the Trinity. If we take the Athanasian Creed, for instance, we are told that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are identical to God while none of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are identical to each other. But, even so, monotheism is true (i.e., there is one God, not three gods). The conjunction of all of these claims, however, involves contradiction if we assume that the identity claims therein involve all and only equivalence relations. For given the substitutability of identicals involved with classical equivalence relations, the identity of the Father to the Son—a claim explicitly denounced in the Athanasian Creed—straightforwardly follows from God's identity to both the Father and the Son. What this signals, at the very least, is that in the Athanasian Creed, either we are dealing with an equivocation about the identity relation involved *or* there is no equivocation but the identity relation involved in the case of the Trinity is not an equivalence relation.

Jc Beall has recently shown that the so-called logical problem of the Trinity can really be divided into two separate problems.

First, if it is supposed to be a *logical* problem, then one would expect to find that the Trinitarian claims are ruled out by logic. If one allows for gluts and gaps in logic—i.e., if one affirms a paraconsistent account of logical consequence—then it is unlikely that logic, properly understood, undermines the Athanasian claims. For if there is a contradiction involved—e.g., that the Father is and is not identical to the Son—logic does not prohibit it. Theological considerations—i.e., the truths included in (and excluded from) theology—are the real source of difficulty, and in this particular instance the missing theory-specific element is an articulation of the trinitarian identity relation.

Second, there is an issue of how to arrive at the correct *counts* involved with predicates such as '...is a divine person', '...is God', '...is begotten', etc. All I'll note here is that whenever one's domain of objects involves names of identicals and contradictory beings, the issue of double counting arises. Supergirl and Kara Zorel should not count as two Kryptonians simply because the single Kryptonian goes by two different names. Similarly, contradictory beings should not be counted twice either. For details, see (Beall 2023).

*Discussion Question 5 – In what other areas of Christian theology might you suspect to find contradiction? (some half-baked examples off the top of my head: divine ineffability, eucharist, identity of justified persons)*

Of course, contradictory theology does not have to merely focus on Christian theology (though the motivation for a natural fit with Christian theology should by now be fairly clear). Non-classical approaches to logic have engaged with, and even been inspired by, the Buddhist tradition (Deguchi, Garfield, Priest 2008), and recent work in Islamic theology has explored contradictory approaches as well (Abbas Ahsan 2021). Traditional philosophical problems regarding the coherence of the very concept of God, moreover, have received non-classical treatments: for instance, the paradox of the stone, concerns regarding the possibility of an omniscient being, the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge, the problem of evil, etc. In all such cases, the approach is very similar. One begins by identifying the target problem (e.g., whether an omnipotent being can create a stone that is too heavy for them to lift). Next, one considers how treating elements of the target problem as gappy or glutty might undermine the argument for the target conclusion. Lastly, one determines whether there is any reason to think that a gappy or glutty approach is independently motivated; for instance, are there independent reasons to think one of the predicates used in the argument admits of gaps? Is there an entity involved in the argument—e.g., God—that is contradictory? If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, then exploring a non-classical approach might yet yield fruit.

---

<sup>i</sup> I'm aware this is controversial. Perhaps theology might be the study of divine revelation rather than God (properly speaking). Maybe it is better to think of theology as a set of religious practices rather than a study at bottom. However, so long as theology (however one conceives it) includes propositional contents, we have what we need to describe one form of that theology as *contradictory*.

<sup>ii</sup> Of course, it will also involve predicates that might be *true of* or *false of* God (and all things in relation to God) as well. I stick to propositional claims above for ease of presentation. I'll add commentary for first-order logic (also called 'predicate logic') claims involving contradictions in these endnotes.

<sup>iii</sup> Now we can give our syntax simply where bold Roman upper-case letters represent sentence-variables: (i) all atomic sentences are sentences; (ii) if '**A**' is a sentence, then ' $\neg \mathbf{A}$ ' is a sentence; if '**A**' and '**B**' are sentences, then '**A** & **B**', '**A**  $\vee$  **B**', and '**A**  $\rightarrow$  **B**' are sentences; (iii) nothing else is a sentence.

<sup>iv</sup> For completion, here is a quick statement of basic semantics. '**A**' is true *iff* A is true; '**A** & **B**' is true *iff* A is true and B is true; '**A**  $\vee$  **B**' is true *iff* A is true or B is true; '**A**  $\rightarrow$  **B**' is true *iff* either A is false or B is true.

<sup>v</sup> I'll mention here that one could deny that theology is closed under (i.e., governed by) any entailment relations at all—e.g., it is not closed under any logical or theological consequence relation—in which case Jesus's humanity and divinity literally entail nothing. This might avoid contradiction but does so by rendering the use of theology completely opaque.

<sup>vi</sup> The proof in a classically governed system of logic for explosion is straightforward. In a natural deduction system, the proof relies on an iteration of the formal inference *modus ponens*. That inference is invalid in any system of logic that admits of gluts, however, for there will be possibilities at which a contradiction is true but the conclusion is untrue (i.e., either just false or, in the case of glutty-and-gappy logics like FDE, neither-true-nor-false). *Disjunctive syllogism* and *modus tollens* are likewise invalid on glut-permissive logics (e.g., K3 or FDE).