

**Impeccability amid the Principalities:  
Christ's Sinlessness in a Culture of Sinful Systems**  
by Andrew Van't Land

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”*  
[Romans 12:2, NIV]

*“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses,  
but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”*  
[Hebrews 4:15, NIV]

## **Introduction**

The last century has broadened significantly our understanding of the range, forms and impacts of sin on creation. Sensitive to ecological awareness, we have realized that humans have a far greater impact—often negative—upon the environment than could have been previously imagined. The blossoming of the social sciences have shown myriad ways in which human group behavior (including what can only be called social evil) is conditioned and normatized. Psychology has demonstrated that the very seat of the human self—once thought to be the absolute locus of moral choice and action—is contingent upon factors ranging from chemical intakes to domestic conditions to one's genetic background. All of these systemic complexities offer a far wider arena for evil, sin and death to go to work on God's creation than had been previously thought. This should make us simultaneously tremble at how much more power we have than we had thought, and also marvel at how powerless we truly are beneath the forces of these structures.

This new definition of sin as systemic as well as individual threatens to deconstruct the neatly-theorized christology which all major branches of the faith have long taken for granted. Orthodox Christianity has held as a theological litmus test the contention that Christ was absolutely sinless—and not only factually sinless, but by nature *impeccable*: unable to sin.<sup>1</sup> The christological impact of this

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1 William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology: Volume II* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1888), 396; Hebrews 4:15, NIV.

broadened hamartiology, however, has not been adequately explored. If Christ was fully human, then he participated in all the structures which humans are naturally involved in: economics, politics, religion, family, psychology, the environment, etc. But all of these Powers—these systemic dimensions of creation—are (in this postlapsarian epoch) corrupt and fallen. How then are we to maintain simultaneously the seemingly opposed facts of *both* Christ’s impeccable divinity *and* his full humanity (which is peccable insofar as any individual is immersed in social systems complicit in evil)? How can we understand the “temptation to sin” in a systemic sense? How did Christ avoid and even resist systemic sin while living amidst and within it?

To pose a few tentative answers to these questions, I will employ the theological works of John Howard Yoder, Walter Wink, Gustavo Gutierrez, and others to tease out the implications of systemic sin—and goodness—upon christology. I will debate William G.T. Shedd and the Reformed tradition over Christ’s (im)peccability. I will draw upon the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics to sketch a portrait of how Christ’s human identity, shaped by fallen systems, might have grown teleologically from the gifted state of *imago Dei* (the retentive human quality of bearing the image of God) into the promised *similitudo Dei* (the actualized human quality of achieving developmentally the perfected likeness of God), thereby securing through his being and life-narrative the possibility of sanctification for all of humanity, and thus the ability to resist creation’s domination systems. In this, I will engage with Irenaeus and the Eastern Orthodox church with regard to christology, hamartiology, atonement, and philosophical anthropology. By employing Irenaeus’ recapitulation christology, I will suggest that Christ’s *habitus* was fully human and malleable by the Powers; however, I will argue that Christ’s divine nature empowered his human will to resist the Powers by dying to his own contingent identity while pursuing growth toward his true nature, his *telic* flourishing, his embodied actualization of the *likeness* (or *similitudo*) of God. In Adam’s stead, I will suggest, Christ teleologically grew—in spite of systemic evils—out of the habitus of *posse non peccare* into the condition of *non posse peccare*. This

achieved state is ontologically a gift to humanity, who are thereby freed to live into the fully human essence which we were always meant to inhabit.<sup>2</sup> Such developmental redemption promises to restore the Powers—the systemic patternedness of life—to their right function of assisting (not hindering) creaturely flourishing.

## **Temptation**

Reformed theologian William G.T. Shedd claims that the first Adam was able to avoid sinning (“*posse non peccare*”), but Christ the second Adam was *impeccable*, unable to sin (“*non posse peccare*”).<sup>3</sup> Whereas it was possible but logically unnecessary and uncertain that Adam would resist the temptation to commit evil, it is logically necessary and certain that Christ’s will would obediently defy the temptation to sin. However, this is problematic, because it digs a broad, ugly ditch between Adam’s *peccability* and Christ’s *impeccability*, suggesting that Christ was not fully human in the same sense as was the archetypal Adam (who represents our own humanity).<sup>4</sup> I will attempt to resolve this problem by retuning the traditional notion of original sin in a systemic key. I will then sketch a metaphysical possibility of how the identity patterns of Christ’s self-sacrificial way of being (in the face of fallen systemic Powers) may have enabled the reworking of the patterns of the systemic conditioning of creaturely life.

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2 While ‘essence’ connotes a timeless soul-state in the ancient Greek metaphysical paradigm, I suggest that the concept may be validly re-appropriated in a postmodern key, emphasizing the importance of relationality, context and change upon identity. Nature, or essence, thus becomes a way of teleologically envisioning the shape of God’s promise of symbiotic relationships, proper contexts and healthy growth over time for individuals and groups in the new creation.

3 Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 330.

4 Despite some scriptural passages which may suggest the contrary, Shedd claims, temptation never issues from God but only from within creation itself (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 331). According to Shedd, Christ’s wills (finite and infinite, human and divine) could never conflict; Christ remained impeccable because his *will* actively resisted the temptations of his *susceptibility* (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 335-6). I agree with Shedd that divinely-graced human will can overpower temptation; however, I will show how all human wills and identities—including that of Christ the God-man—are always-already influenced by the life-patterning systems of the Powers, for good or for evil.

## Systems and Powers

The notion of a systemic 'Power' can be applied to economies, political structures, ecosystems, gender roles and relations, race relations, health and other dimensions of shared human existence. What each realm has in common is an inability to be reduced to an aggregate of individual agents; instead, each of these systems is driven by *synergic patternedness*.<sup>5</sup> The parasitic, privative force of evil is *systemic* precisely because its host, creational goodness, is also synergic and systemic.<sup>6</sup> There are numerous Powers, institutions or systems which have emerged from patterns of human behavior, ossified and subsequently guide and regulate that behavior for good or for evil.<sup>7</sup> These ideas all convey a sense of synergy, connoting a sense of complex regularities—"patternedness"—which exceeds and is irreducible to individual instantiations of a given phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

Yoder emphasizes that the Powers (patternedness, or systemic structures) were created *good* as the vehicles for regularizing and rightly ordering all of creation. Human life would be impossible without the mediating force of institutions and systems (psychological, ecological, aesthetic, ethical, economic, etc.) which cannot be reduced to the "mere sum total of the individuals composing them."<sup>9</sup> Walter Wink similarly emphasizes that the spiritual Powers are "the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power" which manifest in the immanent creation in either good or sinful ways.<sup>10</sup> This

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5 I realize that this contradicts my use of Irenaeus elsewhere throughout this paper: whereas Irenaeus highlights human individual free will (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I.*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson and trans. A. Cleveland Coxe [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], V.xxix), my exploration of systemic sin delimits the scope of human free agency. Similarly, my use of Wink and Yoder (who stress the interdependence of humanity and creational systems) contradicts Irenaeus's notion that creation was meant to serve humanity, not vice versa (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxix).

6 This is not to suggest that goodness and evil are located primarily in the social as opposed to the individual realm of human life; instead, both sites are morally significant. I am highlighting the social-systemic mode only because Christian morality, theological anthropology, and atonementology have often erroneously privileged the individual mode.

7 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Paternoster) 1972), 137. Acknowledging that "power" and "structure" are modern notions which might not be easily mapped onto first century Jewish understandings, Yoder nonetheless claims that the scriptural language of *powers, principalities, law, throne and dominions* all convey similar meanings to our contemporary sense of "power structures."

8 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 138.

9 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 143.

10 Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 103-5.

spiritual nature of systemic power, morally charged in a positive or negative direction, is only ever cultivated through concrete social structures.<sup>11</sup>

Systemic sin is the negative direction such structures can display: sin cannot therefore be reduced to any given immoral action, but is rather complexly anthropological—even ontological—in nature. Walter Wink emphasizes that the language of “power” in the New Testament never refers to evil *per se*, but only to those Powers which serve evil ends.<sup>12</sup> Power is part of the good structure of a good creation... but it is part of that haywire creation which has also malfunctioned. Yoder likewise notes that the majority of New Testament allusions to structures or systems (powers, dominions, etc.) assume the fallenness of these synergic complexes.<sup>13</sup> Yoder claims that sin has led to the absolutization of these systems. The very structures and systems meant to facilitate human thriving end up (under conditions of death and sin) brokering misery and enslavement.<sup>14</sup> Zuidervaart suggests that insufficient theological attention is paid to the way in which the fall has affected both the structure and direction of contemporary institutions (e.g. businesses, schools, churches, etc.).<sup>15</sup> This slavery to structures and powers (malfunctioning in idolatrous modes) can make the fallen human condition of subservience to systems of domination seem natural, when in fact it is tragically unnatural—it impedes the development of humanity's *telic* nature.

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11 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 109.

12 Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 12.

13 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 141.

14 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 143.

15 Lambert Zuidervaart, “Earth’s Lament: Suffering, Hope, and Wisdom” (Inaugural Address, Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto: 2004), 5. One possible problem with a systemic rendering of sin is that it overemphasizes the social construction of evil to the point where it is assumed that because sin is (in McDougall’s words) “a cultural production; it is a man-made reality that can be overturned” (Joy Ann McDougall, “Feminist Theology,” 670-687 in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, Iain Torrance [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 674). While any theology of redemption surely needs to theorize how humanity can participate in redemptive restoration, it seems spiritually irresponsible to utterly immanentize both the problem and the solution—God needs to enter the picture in a substantial way. I suggest that traditional christological doctrines (concerning Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, etc.) already offer us the resources with which to flesh out this systemic conception of sin.

## Fallenness

Irenaeus viewed Adam's original sin not merely as transgression of absolute divine command, but rather (in Minns' words) as "impatience with the timing of the divine economy."<sup>16</sup> Humanity was meant to develop into the likeness of God.<sup>17</sup> However, the Fall short-circuited that *process* of training-in-righteousness: humanity tried to grasp too soon the *telos* which only character formation over time could prepare them to obtain.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that human *identity* is the immanent condition of an individual *vis-a-vis* the ecosystem of Powers shaping human life; conversely, human *nature* is the *telic* flourishing which humans are meant to grow into, aided by the identity-forming Powers when those systems are rightly-ordered.

Sin is portrayed by Gustavo Gutierrez as both a "personal and social intrahistorical reality" whose function is to pose "an obstacle to life's reaching the fullness we call salvation."<sup>19</sup> The individualistic portrait of sin might find attractive Christ's call to gouge out or chop off a misbehaving body part, because it assumes that sin is reducible to an individual's desires and choices—simply remove the malfunctioning element, and goodness will ensue. But if our Orthodox brothers and sisters are correct in their view that sin works more like a disease, then sin's affect on an "organism" will be *systemic*, permeating the whole in a way which cannot be treated by hacking off a single infected limb

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16 Minns, *Irenaeus*, 98. Irenaeus writes that humanity was created "ripening for immortality" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxix.1).

17 Irenaeus and other church fathers distinguish between the divine image (*imago dei*, a God-gifted potentiality) and the divine likeness (*similitudo Dei*, the actualization of God's promise of sanctification). For instance, Irenaeus writes, "But when the spirit here blended with the soul is united to [God's] handiwork, the man is rendered spiritual and perfect because of the outpouring of the Spirit, and this is he who was made in the image and likeness of God. But if the Spirit be wanting [lacking] to the soul, he who is such is indeed of an animal nature, and being left carnal, shall be an imperfect being, possessing indeed the *image* [of God] in his formation (in plasmate), but not receiving the similitude [*likeness*] through the Spirit; and thus is this being imperfect" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.vi.1, emphasis mine).

18 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxxviii.1, 3. He writes that "created things must be inferior to Him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But inasmuch as they are not uncreated, for this very reason do they come short of the perfect. Because, as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline... man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant... 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 [from the disease of sin]; and having recovered, should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord."

19 Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1973), 152.

or organ. Because of the interconnectivity and integration of all facets of an originally good creation, sin in any creational sector ripples out to upset the order of the rest of creation. Such metastasizing, systemic evil cannot be simply excised, Boscaljon suggests, because this privative brokenness is “*dis-integration...a dissembling whose rupture denies wholeness*” by alienating a person from her home institutions (i.e. health, family, politics, ecology, etc.). Insofar as an individual’s *identity* is interconnected with and defined in relation to these complexes, she is alienated by this dis-integration both from herself, from others, from creation and from God.<sup>20</sup> Such dis-integration can lead have exponential repercussions, often negative, culminating (in Wendell Berry’s words) in a “hellish symbiosis”<sup>21</sup> as deprived systems re-calibrate and re-order into a false equilibrium. It is this malfunctioning re-order which can often be taken to be natural and thus considered morally neutral or even good.<sup>22</sup> As Darby Ray suggests, while Augustine accords evil “no metaphysical standing, [yet] it nevertheless can and does take on a life of its own” in opposing God-given goodness.<sup>23</sup> Evil is thus a force privative upon prior goodness. Similarly, the Eastern Orthodox church understands sin less as *crime* against law which stands in need of retributive punishment, but rather as more of a *sickness* needing to be healed to permit one’s flourishing. The sacraments (including confession, absolution and Eucharist) are understood to be medicinal, in a sense, cleansing sinners of their disease.<sup>24</sup> The end purpose of the sacraments is therefore *healing*, referred to by the Orthodox church by the ancient Greek term *iasis*.<sup>25</sup> Healing is not merely the restoration of a prior perfect state, but is instead the restoration

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20 Daniel Boscaljon. “Dis-Integration as a Model for Identifying Systemic Evil.” April 10, 2012. *The Other Journal*. Online resource.

21 Wendell Berry, “Solving for Pattern”, pages 134-148 in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: North Point Press: 1981), 136.

22 David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 144. Hart militates against the impulse toward theodicy which attempts to rationalize the existence of evil (thereby granting sin and suffering the status of ontological necessity). As horrifying as it is to recognize no greater spiritual purpose for creation’s tragic misery, Hart claims, it would be even more horrendous if such suffering were naturalized as necessary into the order of the cosmos.

23 Darby Ray, “Tracking the Tragic: Augustine, Global Capitalism, and a Theology of Struggle”, pages 135-143 in *Constructive Theology*, ed. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 137.

24 Palachovsky, V. *Sin in the Orthodox Church*, trans. Charles Schaldrenbrand (New York: Desclee & Cie, 1960), 20.

25 Palachovsky, *Sin in the Orthodox Church*, 23.

of the conditions of growth. The Christian notion of *sanctification*, the perfection of human character into the likeness of God, can be described as the gradual and habitual attainment of a new *habitus*, or condition of human life.

### ***Habitus: Virtue Ethics and Systemic Soul-Crafting***

*Habitus* is the Latin term employed by Aristotle's Scholastic successors to refer to a person's psychological 'ecosystem' within which humans both pattern their lives and have their lives patterned for them. Etymologically, *habitus* is closer to 'condition' or 'state' than to 'habit'.<sup>26</sup> Yet this dual connotation—*habit* and *habitat*—is helpful in connecting the systemic conditions of social reality to the habituating development of personal virtue. The life-habits marking the soul's condition, or *habitus*, can slowly be changed (for better or worse) by willing against and acting against one's present nature.<sup>27</sup> As N.T. Wright recounts, ancient philosophy and theology understood virtue as a potential or capacity, a possible state of being which must be actualized by persistent moral practice. This training or exercising of the virtues (which are as yet accidental to one's present state of being) helps one slowly attain essential aspects to one's teleological—or 'second'—nature. This *telos* must be developed, but once obtained it becomes an unalterable condition of one's soul, by which a person consistently desires, thinks, and acts rightly.<sup>28</sup>

Human growth is necessarily systemic: it proceeds only through habituation and patterns (through the Powers, as Wink would put it).<sup>29</sup> As Alistair MacIntyre notes, the *exercise* of a certain group of virtues (habits conducive to a certain *telos*) helps to reinforce the systemic patterns of

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26 Cary J. Nederman, "Nature, Ethics and the Doctrine of 'Habitus': Aristotelian Moral Psychology in the Twelfth Century," 87-110 in *Traditio* (Vol. 45, 1989-1990, Fordham University), 87.

27 Nederman, "Nature, Ethics, and the Doctrine of 'Habitus'", 90-2.

28 N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 31-36.

29 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 158.



behavior which one shares with others.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, the non-exercise of such virtues—or the substitution for different virtues—changes the social ‘ecosystem’, disrupting traditions and making the way for new patterns of life.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Powers must ideally assist the self instrumentally in revolving around God, instead of channeling the ego’s directionality toward themselves or the ego as misplaced ends. It seems that for Wink, dying to one’s self is equivalent to dying to the Powers, and vice versa—and both attitudes clear the space for the Spirit to move both through the self and through the complex Powers (social institutions, systemic patterns of behavior, etc.). This is what Christ’s life, death and resurrection accomplished: they enacted the paradigm shift *par excellence*, developing new human virtue-patterns inculcating another way of human flourishing in the face of systemic patternedness: namely, bearing on earth the likeness of the divine.<sup>32</sup> I will now turn to Irenaeus's theory of recapitulation to further develop a christology accounting for systemic evil.

## Recapitulation

According to Irenaeus, Christ’s life, death and resurrection were a performative retelling of the Adamic tale of original sin.<sup>33</sup> *Similitudo Dei*—the *telos* of sanctified humanity as God’s likeness—was the flourishing which Adam and Eve (as the archetypes of humanity) were meant to achieve via a process of growth.<sup>34</sup> The Fall was the tragic attempt to shortcut that process, which arrested the

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30 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 223.

31 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 217-219.

32 According to Minns, Irenaeus thus saw Christ as facing the Satanic powers “as the same earth creature whom Satan had crushed, but now fully mature, now truly the image and likeness of God” (Denis Minns, *Irenaeus* [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994], 98).

33 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.xviii.7. Narrating Christ's life, death and resurrection, Irenaeus writes that “God *recapitulated* in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man.”

34 Irenaeus equates sanctification with human deification (*theosis*). He remarks, “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? How, again, can he be immortal, who in his mortal nature did not obey his Maker?” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.xxxix.2). I suggest that one need not be committed to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* to find wisdom in an Irenaeian anthropology, whereby humanity participates in the process of sanctification, slowly regaining the *similitudo Dei* in the wake of Christ's recapitulative earthwork.

couple's development unto perfection. Thus, evil entered the world only as a privation of a good *telos*. Where Adam had skipped over his training in righteousness to grasp at unripened *telic* fruit, Christ *qua* human patiently bore his earthly suffering and tempting as he grew into the sanctified shape of his full nature.<sup>35</sup> The typological parallel between Adam the fallen and Christ the redeemer, for Irenaeus, lies in the trope of *recapitulation*: Christ successfully 'sums up' in his own personal development the spiritual history of humanity's encounters with temptation.<sup>36</sup> For Irenaeus, Christ (as fully and enfleshedly human) underwent the length and breadth of the creaturely condition, including temptation and suffering. However, it was through embracing and embodying this suffering, temptable flesh that Christ conquered Satan, sin and death and thereby regained for human nature the possibility of sinlessness, immortality, and perfection.<sup>37</sup> Christ, in his obedience to the father, "cast sin and death out of the flesh he shared with Adam" thereby rightly embodying (*qua* whole human) both the *imago* and *similitudo* of God.<sup>38</sup> Irenaeus saw therefore Christ's obedient withstanding of the devil's temptations in the desert as a remix of the Adamic mistake:<sup>39</sup> Christ patiently bore the developmental process as he—fully human—grew even more deeply into the likeness of God. In Irenaeus' account, Jesus (as the "second Adam") undergoes the same fleshly trials and tribulations yet emerges victorious, thereby winning back for humanity health, wholeness and immortality. These conditions allow the unfolding of *sanctification*, the process of becoming fully human and therefore fully embodying God's likeness.<sup>40</sup> Irenaeus saw Christ's human growth—from newborn to adult—as the site of sanctification of the developmentality

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35 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.xxxviii.1-2; Minns, *Irenaeus*, 98.

36 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxxviii.1. He writes that "man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant. And for this cause our Lord in these last days...summed up all things into Himself."

37 Minns, *Irenaeus*, 91. As Irenaeus writes, "For it behoved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death" (Irenaeus, V.xvii.7). The righteous, proposes Irenaeus, will persist through and overcome tribulations in order to be "crowned with incorruption" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxix.1).

38 Minns, *Irenaeus*, 99; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxxviii.4.

39 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.xviii.7; Minns, *Irenaeus*, 99.

40 Minns, *Irenaeus*, 92-3.

of human nature.<sup>41</sup> People are meant to grow, but not age unto death—by conquering death, Christ *qua* whole human gave back to humanity the inherent goodness of the process of human growth. This Irenaean view deconstructs Shedd’s thesis that Christ’s human nature did not partake in original sin but was *already* perfected as the sinless and righteous, yet impeccably temptable, Second Adam.<sup>42</sup> For Christ to be fully human, he must have undergone the full depths of character development—that is, identity development. According to Irenaeus’ Adamic typology, Christ was not already perfected *qua* human, but instead his humanity *grew into* his divine likeness (*similitudo Dei*).

Because Wink sees the self as extending into the identity-forming matrices of the powers, he interprets Christ’s exhortation to relinquish life in order to gain it as the refusal to cling to one’s (perceived) autonomous selfhood: the ego must be replaced by God as the axis of one’s identity, or character.<sup>43</sup> According to Wink, Christ focused on precisely this “process of *dying to* the Powers as the central paradox of his ministry.”<sup>44</sup> Instead of portraying Christ (who willingly permits his own death at the hands of the Powers) as a slave of power, Yoder describes Christ as the first person in history “who is not the slave of any power...Not even to save his own life [at the hands of the domination system] will he let himself be made a slave of these Powers.”<sup>45</sup> It is precisely Jesus’ antithetical posture toward (contingently malfunctioning) evil structures which leads to his apparent submission to said Powers. This act performatively strips the Powers of their primary engine: the *illusion* that humans are the masters of their own fate.<sup>46</sup>

I suggest that Irenaeus’s christological notion of recapitulation can benefit from Yoder’s understanding of everything’s coherence in Christ. Yoder remarks that the passage “all things subsist in [Christ]” (Colossians 1:16-17) is etymologically tantamount to claiming that Christ (re-) *systematizes*

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41 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxxviii.1; Minns, *Irenaeus*, 91.

42 Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 443.

43 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 159.

44 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 159, my italics.

45 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 145.

46 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 147.

the powers of the world.<sup>47</sup> By recapitulating within his own being the human drama of evil's systematization, Christ (working through his peccable-though-sinless *accidental* condition to gain the impeccable *essential* condition of the likeness of God) gathers up unto himself all systems, orders and Powers, healing their diseased privations so that they themselves might healthily enable an abundance of life.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the type of evil which is the slipperiest to know and to combat is not individual moral sin, nor (so-called) natural evil, but rather systemic or "societal evil."<sup>48</sup> More importantly, I have suggested that Christian theology has inadequately theorized a christology which can account for Christ's sinlessness in the presence of such systemic sin. I have argued that the struggle for the spiritual and moral direction of a given system or institution inevitably exceeds the aggregate influence of individual actions—there is a negative synergy at work in the power of social institutions, which can never be fully traced to individual *loci* of power. New patterns of behavior, with new possibilities for good creational flourishing, are inevitably hijacked by sin at both the individual and structural levels. Systems incubate identity and character via habits or patterns, I have demonstrated, leading to actions which may grow an individual into his or her *telic* essence... or else away from it.

I have argued that systemic sin precedes creaturely being so that our desires, thoughts and practices are always-already mis-shapen. Thus, Christ as fully human, was also shaped by an evil, disordered environment marked by systems and Powers. The only way out of this is *sanctification*: the grace-led inculcating of a virtuous *habitus* (the soul's condition, marked by life-habits which naturally guide a person's actions). This process reorders one's environment, which in turn sustains right patterns of living. Christ already took on humanity's (anthropological) sin in the incarnation: not because matter

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<sup>47</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 141.

<sup>48</sup> Zuidervaart, "Earth's Lament", 141.

is evil, but because the world into which Christ was incarnated had already been poisoned by the historic effects of both individual and systemic sin. I have shown that Christ can indeed be considered fully human because even though systemic sin shapes one's will and identity, sin is utterly accidental to one's nature: systemic sin cannot change one's nature because one's essential nature (namely, the *similitudo Dei*) is a potential *telos* to *grow into* over time. I suggested that Christ's identity was properly cultivated because his lifestyle was willfully a perpetual death to the Powers and to himself, clearing soul-space for the Spirit to sanctify his humanity recapitulatively. The patternedness of this virtue-habit, whereby Christ practiced redemption by dying to the Powers and their grip upon his identity, exposed the patternedness of the systemic Powers as fallen. The God-man's life-pattern inaugurated hope that individual and social counter-practices might actually re-route the spiritual direction of fallen structures, creating complex conditions which enable (and no longer disable) virtuous habits of heart, mind and body. I have concluded that Christ gathered—*gathers*—up the systems and Powers unto himself, inviting creational life-patterns into teleological restoration. I have argued that Christ's human identity—contingent upon the life-patterning of the systemic Powers—*developed into* his teleological human nature. But this teleological nature is the *similitudo Dei*, embodying not only God's gifted image but also God's promised likeness. I suggest therefore that Christ's human nature shifted from aligning with his divine nature in a merely contingent manner to a necessary manner. That is, Christ's sinlessness changed from the fallen condition of *posse non peccare* (the possibility to not sin) to the redeemed condition of *non posse peccare* (the impossibility to sin). In recapitulating the fallen Adamic narrative of humanity, Christ takes the Powers upon himself and allows the world to form new life-patterns and organic systems aiding in creational redemption and flourishing. Christ, as fully human, obtains for humanity (summed up in his life) its originally-purposed *telos*, allowing humankind at last the ability to live as fully human—that is, as the perfected image of God.

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