

# Orthodoxy and Incarnation: A Reply to Mullins

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**Abstract:** R. T. Mullins's "Flint's Molinism and the Incarnation is too Radical," published by this journal in 2015, attempts to summarize some speculations I have offered regarding Christology and eschatology, to show that these speculations are independently implausible, and to demonstrate that they are at odds with the pronouncements of the Fifth Ecumenical Council and hence incompatible with orthodox Christianity. In this reply, I argue that Mullins's essay fails in all three of these endeavors: its summaries are inaccurate, its arguments for implausibility are unconvincing, and its ascriptions of heresy are baseless.

## I. Introduction

"Flint's Molinism and the Incarnation is too Radical," by R. T. Mullins (2015) is a remarkable example of philosophical criticism. From its strange title<sup>1</sup> to its concluding plea for a discussion regarding creedal authority, it is a plucky and ambitious paper. Indeed, to say that it is ambitious is to belittle its aspirations. For in the space of only a few pages, the essay attempts to summarize some speculations I have offered regarding Christology and eschatology, to show that these speculations are independently implausible, and to demonstrate that they are at odds with the pronouncements of the Fifth Ecumenical Council (held at Constantinople in 553) and hence incompatible with orthodox Christianity. As I see it, though, the paper fails in all three of these endeavors: the attempts at summarization are inaccurate, the arguments for implausibility are unconvincing, and the claims of heresy are baseless. There may well be problems with the Christological and eschatological views I have discussed, but Mullins's essay gives us no reason to think so.

The paper begins with a sentence that is, alas, multiply misleading.<sup>2</sup> It then quickly moves to an alleged summarization of positions I have discussed regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Surely a plural subject requires a plural verb, even in a postmodern world?

<sup>2</sup> The sentence in question reads: "Thomas P. Flint maintains that any human person could become incarnate, and that one day all of redeemed humanity will become incarnate" (Mullins 2015, 1). The "become" is puzzling, since many of us would think that we human beings are *incarnate* from the start. Given the overall context, though, perhaps Mullins should be understood as using "become incarnate" as shorthand for "become incarnations of the Son" (i.e., be assumed by the Son). Even if we read the sentence in this way, though, neither of the two assertions contained in the sentence is one that I "maintain," if by "maintain" we mean something in the neighborhood of "affirm." I do argue, in

the Incarnation and the possibility of multiple incarnations. This summary, though, is frequently imprecise in matters large and small.<sup>3</sup> Rather than go through Mullins's presentation and note its misrepresentations, let me instead briefly describe the views in question accurately.<sup>4</sup> We can then consider the reasons Mullins offers for thinking them implausible and unorthodox.

## II. Some Molinist Conjectures on Incarnation

It's reasonable (though at least arguably not mandatory) for a Christian to endorse what I call The Metaphysical Presupposition, or TMP for short:

**TMP:** In becoming incarnate, the Son united to himself a complete concrete created human nature. What he brought into union with himself was a concrete created thing that had, so to speak, all the parts and all the faculties that we ordinary human beings have—a thing that would itself have been a human person had it not been assumed by a divine person. (Flint 2011a, 189)

If we humans are (as many though not all in the tradition have thought, and as I'll assume for the rest of this essay<sup>5</sup>) body/soul composites, then what the Son took on in the Incarnation was a created body/soul composite. Call the concrete human nature assumed by the Son "CHN."

Thinking of the Incarnation as involving the uniting of CHN with the Son allows us, if we're Molinists, to offer an intriguing solution to a classic Christological puzzle.<sup>6</sup> If CHN is united to an essentially sinless divine person, it seems CHN must also necessarily be sinless. On the other hand, if CHN not only *doesn't* but *can't* sin, CHN's actions seem to lack the freedom and merit we would naturally wish to ascribe to them. The way out of this quandary, Molina suggested, is to recognize that there are

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(Flint 2001b), that the former claim (read as "any human person could be assumed") is, if properly understood, one for which "a strong case" can be offered (314), one which "is well worth the Molinist's serious attention" (318). But nowhere in that paper, or in any subsequent paper, do I say that this claim is true. As for the latter claim (read as "one day all of redeemed humanity will be assumed"), I do discuss it extensively in (Flint 2011a). But my conclusion there is that in all likelihood "we have no way of determining for sure whether or not [it] is correct" (205). To say that I maintain either claim, then, is to misrepresent what I have actually said about them.

<sup>3</sup> Let me offer just a few examples here to substantiate the point. *Pace* Mullins, I nowhere have said that a human nature "consists of a concrete soul and body" (Mullins 2015, 2); I never claim that "the doctrine of the incarnation needs to hold to The Metaphysical Presupposition" (2)—indeed, how a *doctrine* could hold to a proposition is puzzling; I never "propose" (if by "propose" we mean something akin to "explicitly endorse") the "6 Radical Theses" regarding the Incarnation (3); I never even hint that "all human persons . . . will one day be assumed by God the Son" (4); and my notion of assumability can apply to individuals even in worlds where the individual in question *does* sin. There are more problems of misrepresentation not listed here, but the general point should be clear.

<sup>4</sup> The summary contained in the next section will necessarily be extremely condensed. For fuller presentations, see (Flint 2001a), (Flint 2001b), and (Flint 2011a).

<sup>5</sup> Readers should note that this is *only* an assumption made to allow the ensuing discussion to be somewhat more concrete. I am not claiming that human persons are in fact body/soul composites.

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive discussion of Molinism, see (Flint 1998).

counterfactuals of freedom about CHN.<sup>7</sup> Given his knowledge of these counterfactuals, God saw that CHN was *assumable*—“that is, that there was a lifelong set of significant-freedom-retaining circumstances in which CHN could be placed such that CHN would never sin” (Flint 2011a, 191). By assuming CHN and placing CHN in precisely such situations, God left CHN with genuine freedom, but knew with certainty that this freedom would never be misused. And so the significant freedom of CHN and the essential impeccability of the Son are both maintained.

Once this path is taken, Molinists will naturally start wondering whether God’s middle knowledge might have offered him other alternatives regarding incarnation. Indeed, I argue (in Flint 2001b, 311-314) that it’s plausible (though not mandatory) for a Molinist to think that each of the following “Six Radical Theses” is true:

**Thesis 1:** Necessarily, being assumable is a contingent feature of any assumable human nature.

**Thesis 2:** It’s possible that CHN was neither assumed nor assumable.

**Thesis 3:** It’s possible that there be an individual human nature distinct from CHN that was both assumable and assumed.

**Thesis 4:** It’s possible that CHN exist as an independent, unassumed suppositum.

**Thesis 5:** There are in the actual world individual human natures distinct from CHN that were assumable.

**Thesis 6:** Necessarily, every human nature is possibly assumed.

Now, many Christians would balk at one or another of these theses; so would many Molinists. If one *has* accepted them, though, it’s natural to wonder whether there might be some human natures *other* than CHN that are *in fact* assumed. In particular, it’s natural to wonder about what I call the Theory of Final Assumptions (TFA for short):

**TFA:** The ultimate end of all human beings who attain salvation is to be assumed by the Son. (Flint 2011a, 198)

For it’s plausible to think that part of what’s involved in the sanctification of the elect is their *becoming* assumable—their coming to a stage where God sees (perhaps via middle knowledge) that he can put them in situations where they will henceforth always freely refrain from sin. According to the TFA, the Son assumes those who have indeed become assumable. He unites them to himself in the same (admittedly mysterious) way in which CHN was always (i.e. from the moment CHN came to be) united to him. As a result of such an assumption, they would no longer have the independence and autonomy necessary to rank as separate persons on their own, just as CHN is not a person distinct from the Son. But the “loss” of personhood would be

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<sup>7</sup> Technically, the counterfactuals should refer to CHN’s essence, since to be providentially useful they would have to be available to God independently of his decision to create CHN. This is a technicality that can be largely ignored in the ensuing discussion. Ignoring it *completely*, though, can lead to problems; see the penultimate paragraph of Section IV below.

no true loss at all. They would remain the fully functioning body/soul composites they have always been, with the full range of human thoughts, feelings and actions they have always had.<sup>8</sup> Odds are good, I say, that we on earth can never know for sure whether the Theory of Final Assumptions is true. But if we sincerely think of union with God as a good thing for us, and the closest of all possible unions as the very best thing for us, then the TFA proposes what is truly “a consummation devoutly to be wished” (Flint 2011a, 205).

### III. Mullins’s Arguments Against these Molinist Conjectures

Before turning to his charge that this assortment of views is incompatible with orthodox Christianity, Mullins first offers two independent reasons to think them “wildly implausible” (4).<sup>9</sup> First, he says, consider the fate of the human race if the TFA is correct. All of those who attain salvation will be assumed and consequently no longer qualify as individual persons. Those who fail to attain salvation will carry their personhood with them into hell. “So the fate of human persons seems bleak. Human persons will either cease to exist, or burn in hell. Not much for human persons to look forward to” (4).

This is, to be sure, an entertaining argument. Is it, though, a cogent one? I think not. Allow me to offer a parody which I hope points to its weakness. At most universities, new tenure-track faculty are typically hired as assistant professors. After a set period of time, a decision is made: they are given tenure and promoted to associate professor, or they are denied tenure and no longer employed by the university. And now consider the following Mullinsian argument: “If *that’s* how things are, then the fate of assistant professors seems bleak. Assistant professors either cease to exist, or burn in the hell of unemployment. Not much for assistant professors to look forward to.”

The risible nature of this argument should be apparent. Assistant professors who receive tenure, we want to say, *do* cease to exist *as assistant professors*, but they don’t cease to exist full stop. Rather, they continue to exist, but now in an exalted position, as associate professors. So there is indeed something for assistant professors to look forward to. But, for parallel reasons, there’s something for human persons to look forward to as well (if the TFA is correct). For human persons who are

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<sup>8</sup> Experience has taught me that the idea that personhood is not necessarily something to be grasped—that we need not think that shedding our status as separate persons would in any real way diminish us if we are brought into union with the Son—is difficult for many to contemplate. To some extent, I suspect, this difficulty is a function of not really understanding what the TFA is proposing (e.g., of mashing it into Eastern or New Age or Mormon eschatologies to which it is, when properly understood, by no means committed). And to some extent the difficulty might follow from a failure to see that the saved, if the TFA were true, could never become truly *non*-personal, since they could exist only as persons or as humans intimately united to the person of the Son. For an extended discussion of these issues, see (Flint 2011a, 199-205).

<sup>9</sup> As the previous section makes clear, many of the views Mullins discusses and ascribes to me are ones that I entertain without embracing—ones that I see as intriguing, perhaps even as plausible, but ones to which I am explicitly not committed. Readers should keep in mind throughout the rest of this paper that my defense of these views against Mullins’s criticism is still not to be confused with an endorsement of those views.

assumed by the Son, we want to say, *do* cease to exist *as human persons*, but they don't cease to exist full stop. Rather, they continue to exist, but now in an exalted position, as body/soul composites united with the Son in the unfathomably rich and complete way that CHN was always united with him.

In each of these cases, what's at issue, of course, is the identification of an individual via a non-essential characteristic. Assistant professors, we all want to say, are not *essentially* assistant professors, and hence can survive (yea, thrive) upon being promoted from that status. In a parallel way, human persons, the advocate of the TFA wants to say, are not *essentially* persons, and hence can survive (yea, thrive) upon being promoted from that status. Admittedly, to think of personhood as non-essential is considerably more controversial than to think of assistant professorhood as non-essential. Even most advocates of the Theory would grant, I suspect, that there is something a *bit* odd, at least initially, in thinking of personhood as something we need to leave behind us once we attain the fullness of bliss in heaven. But it's not as if the oddity of the view has never been noticed before or never been discussed. On the contrary, I have argued extensively that the charge of oddity is much less potent than it might at first appear, and Mullins nowhere even attempts to grapple with these considerations.<sup>10</sup> The "fate of human persons seems bleak" argument, then, is rhetorically rich but philosophically feeble.

The second argument against the Theory is also inadequate. Suppose, Mullins says, you and I are both in heaven, and both have been assumed by the Son. Suppose further that you kick me, and I kick you in return. Who has kicked, and who has been kicked, in this situation? The answer to each question, says Mullins, would have to be the Son. For "the Son is the ultimate bearer of the properties of His human and divine natures. This is called the *communicatio idiomatum*—the communication of the properties onto the one person" (5). Since, in our kicking case, the only person involved, given the truth of the TFA, would be the Son, it follows that "Christ will have kicked Christ, and Christ will have responded to this kick by kicking Christ" (5). And that, says Mullins, "seems ludicrous" (5).

That we are in the land of the ludicrous here seems correct, but not, I fear, for the reasons Mullins implies. The curious picture of the saved in heaven spending their time kicking one another is surely lame to begin with. But this is hardly the most bruising objection to Mullins's argument. For Mullins seems to understand the notion of *communicatio idiomatum* in far too unsophisticated a way. And we can recognize the naïve nature of his approach whether or not we endorse the TFA. The idea behind the traditional notion of *communicatio idiomatum* surely cannot be that *any* property or *any* relation ascribable to an assumed nature can without hesitation and without qualification be ascribed straightforwardly to the Son. Take, for example, the property of *being a created human nature*. This is a property that CHN clearly has, for CHN simply *is* a created human nature. Does it follow, then, that we can say, unhesitatingly and unqualifiedly, that the Son *is* a created human nature? One would think not. Or consider the relation of creation. Most Christians affirm that, as divine, the Son ("through whom all things were made," as the Nicene Creed professes) is as involved in the process of creation as is either of the other persons in the Trinity. So,

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<sup>10</sup> See (Flint 2011a, 201-205).

one might think, it's true to say that the Son created CHN, and that CHN was created by the Son. Does the *communiatio* doctrine, then, commit us to saying that the Son created the Son, or that the Son was created by the Son? One would hope not; such claims, we might say, are surely (at best) misleading (and odd-sounding) means of expressing the relation between the Son and CHN.<sup>11</sup> But the same goes, one would think, for Mullins's example: saying that Christ kicked Christ is simply (at best) a misleading (and odd-sounding) means of expressing the relation between the relevant two human natures. The point should be obvious: careless application of the concept of *communicatio* will lead Christians to say seemingly ludicrous things, whether or not they endorse TFA. So the "Christ kicks Christ" objection, suitably enough, doesn't have a leg to stand on.

There is more that could be said about Mullins's two arguments,<sup>12</sup> but let me stop here. What's clear, I think, is that, if TFA is to be rejected, it had better be for reasons more substantial than these.

#### IV. Are These Views Unorthodox? Mullins on the Fifth Ecumenical Council

Mullins, of course, thinks that the pronouncements of the Fifth Ecumenical Council offer us such additional reasons. As he sees it, one who accepts the authority of the Council must deny TMP, must reject at least three of the Six Radical Theses, and must renounce the TFA. Let's consider the case he makes for these three claims in turn.

Why does Mullins think that the Council is at odds with TMP? In all honesty, it's difficult to tell. Mullins talks much about the *anhypostasia/enhypostasia* distinction (very roughly, the distinction between the claims that Christ's human nature does not constitute a separate person itself, and that his nature exists only in the person of the Son). And he also discusses what several recent scholars have to say about this distinction, claiming that many of them implicitly see it as casting TMP into doubt. But he never cites a single pronouncement of the Council itself that, employing this distinction, says anything at odds with TMP. Indeed, in his discussion of TMP, he never quotes or refers directly to *anything at all* from the Conciliar record. There is a reason for this, I think: nothing that the Council says is clearly relevant to TMP. The fourteen anathemas issued by the Council do declare many views heretical, but (so far as I can see) none of these heretical views is identical with, entails, or depends

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<sup>11</sup> Creation is at least *akin* to a causal relation of the sort we have in the Christ-kicked-Christ story, but it's easy to offer other examples where the relations are *clearly* causal. If the Son bestows certain graces upon CHN so as to assist CHN in acting well, should we be prepared to describe the situation by saying that the Son has bestowed graces upon the Son so as to assist the Son in acting well? Not, one would think, in most contexts, unless obfuscation is our goal!

<sup>12</sup> For example, one might contend that even if the *communicatio* doctrine *were* to commit us to saying that "Christ kicks Christ" is literally true in Mullins's scenario, there's nothing obviously ludicrous in making such a statement, even if there are less misleading ways to state the relevant truth. That is, one might challenge Mullins to present us with *reasons* for thinking that the sentence in question is *actually* unacceptable, not just odd-sounding. I thank Tim Pawl for emphasizing this point in comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

upon TMP. If Mullins thinks otherwise, he should cite chapter and verse. In the absence of such substantiation, his charges ring hollow.

Indeed, even his use of secondary scholarship to support his claims is questionable. For example, Mullins claims that one prominent scholar who endorses his assertion that the thesis of *anhypostasia* is at odds with TMP is David Brown. As Mullins puts it, purporting to paraphrase Brown, “The human nature is not, nor could have been, a person independent of the Son’s assumption” (Brown 2011, 24). Since TMP says that CHN would have been a person had it not been assumed, TMP has to be rejected, Mullins implies, if Brown is right about the ramifications of the *anhypostasia* claim.

But matters are not as simple as Mullins makes them appear. What does Brown actually say that Mullins sees as supporting his claims here? The relevant sentence from Brown (2011, 24) reads as follows:

So, for example, in its [Chalcedon’s] immediate aftermath further exploration of the role of Christ’s human nature was attempted, which led to the conclusion that the human nature could not possibly constitute a separate subject, since otherwise the inevitable result would be two persons rather than one.

Is Brown in this passage asserting that the thesis of *anhypostasia* entails that CHN “could not have been a person independent of the Son’s assumption,” and thus that TMP is false? Not obviously. Mullins seems here to ignore the much-loved medieval distinction between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the consequent. One can easily read Brown as affirming merely the necessity of the conditional “If there is only one person in the Incarnation, then the human nature is not a separate subject or person.” And clearly one can affirm the necessity of this conditional without saying that the truth of the antecedent renders the consequent *itself* necessary. So Brown offers scant support for Mullins’s claim.<sup>13</sup>

Though obvious, one point here needs to be stressed: what Brown and other contemporary scholars say about the implications of the *anhypostasia* thesis is really a sideshow. For Mullins’s charge is that TMP is at odds *with the Fifth Ecumenical*

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<sup>13</sup> There is much more that could be said here. For example, it could well be that Brown actually would *agree* with Mullins with respect to TMP. My point is only that Mullins has done little to show that this is the case. I should also point to two infelicities regarding TMP. First, the real issue with regard to its second sentence is its claim that CHN, *had it existed* but not been assumed, would have been a human person. The “had it existed” is, I think, implicit in TMP, but it might have been clearer were it explicit. For example, suppose someone thinks that, though CHN surely could exist unassumed, and would have been a full human person had it so existed, the fact of the matter is that, in the nearest world in which CHN isn’t assumed, it doesn’t exist at all. My intention was that such a person should be seen as an advocate of TMP, but its language, without the “had it existed” clause being explicit, might suggest otherwise. Second, though I previously pointed out (in Flint 2011b, 67, fn. 1) that one could endorse TMP even if one thinks its concluding conditional is a counterpossible, the point was apparently offered in too subtle a way. As a result, Mullins’s discussion in the second paragraph of his Section II is confusing, since it improperly presupposes that an advocate of TMP would have to agree that there are possible worlds in which CHN is not assumed but exists as “a human person that is a completely distinct person from God the Son” (5).

*Council*, not that it is at odds with current theological thought about concepts circulating at the time of the Council. And, as I noted above, Mullins offers us no evidence whatsoever that embracing the Council's pronouncements commits one to rejecting TMP. His charge, then, is without merit.

And the same goes for his charge regarding the Six Radical Theses. Mullins highlights three of these (Theses 1, 2 and 4) as questionable given the Council (2015, 7). With Thesis 1, his claim is only that it is "not clearly consistent with the Christology of the Fifth Ecumenical Council." Theses 2 and 4, though, are in even sorrier shape, according to Mullins: the former "must be rejected" by those who wish to abide by the Council's teachings, and the Council "outright denies" the latter. Now, Mullins's musings on these three theses is rather muddled. He presents Theses 1 and 2 as if they depend upon Thesis 4, which they clearly do not.<sup>14</sup> Properly understood, neither Thesis 1 nor Thesis 2 is very controversial, and it would be astonishing if the Council were to have refuted them. And the fact is, Mullins gives us no reason to think that it does. As for Thesis 4 (the claim that it's possible that CHN exist as an independent, unassumed suppositum), Mullins merely repeats his earlier unsubstantiated assertion that the Council rejects such a claim. Not a single sentence from the Council itself is offered in defense of his assertion. Again, having read the Council's documents, I think there's a good reason for this lacuna: the Council is concerned with other matters, not with Thesis 4. Once again, Mullins has engaged in accusation without evidence.

When we turn to Mullins's case for TFA's being inconsistent with the Council, much the same *modus operandi* swiftly becomes apparent. Mullins claims that the Council denounced Origenism, and that the grounds of that denunciation show that TFA is also heretical. Neither claim is accurate. Let me explain.

While it is true that the Council's Eleventh Anathema does mention Origen by name, no specific views are noted there. Obviously, the Council cannot plausibly be taken to be condemning *everything* that Origen said or wrote. By itself, then, this anathema gives us no reason to think that the condemnation of Origen amounts to a condemnation of TFA. There were, though, separate anathemas of Origen issued by Emperor Justinian prior to the Council, and it is to these anathemas that Mullins appeals in charging that TFA is heretical. But the status of the Justinian anathemas is less secure than Mullins implies. Tanner reports that he does not include these anathemas in his definitive collection of conciliar documents "since recent studies have shown that these anathemas cannot be attributed to this [the Fifth Ecumenical]

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<sup>14</sup>Thesis 1—that, necessarily, being assumable is a contingent feature of any assumable human nature—follows simply from the fact that the very notion of assumability is defined in terms of Molinist counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, which are one and all only contingently true. No Molinist worth her salt would deny Thesis 1; many would deny Thesis 4. So Thesis 1 cannot plausibly be seen as dependent upon Thesis 4. Thesis 2—the claim that it's possible that CHN was neither assumed nor assumable—is (as I pointed out in (Flint 2001b, 312)) all but undeniable once Thesis 1 is accepted. If assumability is a contingent feature of any assumable human nature, then it's a contingent feature of CHN. So there are worlds in which CHN isn't assumable, and thus isn't assumed—which is all that Thesis 2 says. Once again, Thesis 4 doesn't even enter into the picture in this justification of this earlier thesis. No presupposition of the truth of Thesis 4, then, undergirds either of these prior theses.



council” (1990, 106). Mullins, though, insists that “we have good evidence for the anathemas being decided upon at the beginning of the Council” (8) and cites Price (2009, 270-272) as supporting this claim. But Price’s conclusion is more modest than Mullins suggests, and not at all at odds with Tanner’s assessment. What he actually says is the following (271):

The favored solution among modern scholars is to attribute the condemnation of Origen and the Origenists to a meeting of the bishops who had assembled at Constantinople for the Council of 553, but prior to its formal opening.

The views of Price and Tanner, then, seem to be in accord with one another. The anathemas aimed specifically at Origenism were issued *prior* to the start of the Council, not *by* (and not, as Mullins say, “at the beginning of”) the Council, and thus do not have the same authoritative status as the decisions actually made at the Council.<sup>15</sup> Even if the anathemas against Origenism were explicitly (albeit anachronistically) to condemn the Theory of Final Assumptions, labelling that Theory as excluded by the decrees *of the Council* would be mistaken.

Suppose, though, we leave aside these ecclesiastical niceties and consider simply the condemnations of Origenism. Mullins claims that these condemnations amount to a condemnation of TFA. Do they? Well, that, of course, depends upon just what was being condemned. What was Origenism? Mullins describes it in this way:

The heresy of Origenism tells a story of pre-existent souls falling from grace and taking on bodies. One soul, however, remains faithful to God and never sins. The Logos unites Himself to this one soul that never sins, takes on a human nature, and redeems humanity. At the eschaton, all souls will be united to the Logos in such a way that they lose their identity and all become one hypostasis (person). (2015, 9)

As should be clear, the Originists’ rather fantastical story is hardly the same as the TFA. Even Mullins seems to recognize the difference. Though he initially claims that the Origenist tale “sounds strikingly like Flint’s Christology and eschatology” (9), he notes two paragraphs later that there are in fact striking differences between Origenism and the TFA. Despite these differences, though, he contends that “the core claims of Flint’s account are condemned” by the Origenist anathemas (9). What are these “core claims of Flint’s account,” and how do they succumb to the anathemas?

The first core claim, according to Mullins, is:

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<sup>15</sup> This is not, of course, to say that they have *no* weight. One would think that a Christian should be at least *somewhat* troubled if one of her beliefs were at odds with even non-binding but widely held and openly stated episcopal opinion. Determining just *how* troubled would be a pressing matter in this instance, though, only if it were the case that the TFA is in fact at odds with the Justinian anathemas. As we shall soon see, however, such is not the case.

the claim that all human persons are united to the Son in such a way that there is only the divine person . . . . Flint's account quite explicitly teaches what is being anathematized here. On Flint's eschatology, all human persons will be assumed, or hypostatically united to, God the Son. These human persons will lose their personhood in the identity of the Son. This is explicitly condemned in the 14<sup>th</sup> Anathema against Origen. (2015, 9-10)

Now, there is cause here both for rejoicing and for lamentation. First, the lament: Mullins has yet again misrepresented "Flint's eschatology." For the TFA simply does not teach that "all human persons will be assumed"; it claims only that all of those *who are saved* will be assumed. One *could*, of course, advocate the TFA and be a universalist. But nothing in the TFA itself *commits* one to universalism. So even if the claim that all will be assumed *were* at odds with the 14<sup>th</sup> Anathema, that would show only that one way of extending the TFA is in trouble. The TFA *itself* would seemingly be untouched.

I mentioned above that Mullins's words here also give us cause for rejoicing. Why? Because Mullins has pointed to a specific passage (though not, again, one that in fact comes from the Council) against which to measure the TFA! Let us take a look at that passage, the 14<sup>th</sup> Anti-Origenist Anathema. I quote it in full:

If anyone says that there will be one henad of all rational beings, when the hypostases and numbers are annihilated together with bodies, and that knowledge about rational beings will be accompanied by the destruction of the universes, the shedding of bodies, and the abolition of names, and there will be identity of knowledge as of hypostases, and that in this mythical restoration there will be only pure spirits, as there were in their nonsensical notion of pre-existence, let him be anathema. (Price 2009, 286)

Now, it is difficult to see anything here that need trouble the advocate of the TFA. If one accepts this (non-canonical) anathema, one cannot believe that there will be one henad, or that all hypostases and numbers and bodies will be annihilated, or that there will be a destruction of universes, or an abolition of names, or a restoration of pure spirits, and so on.<sup>16</sup> But none of these claims is part of the TFA. The Theory of Final Assumptions claims *only* that the saved will be assumed by the Son. How *that* claim is ruled out by the 14<sup>th</sup> Anti-Origenist Anathema is hard to see.

Mullins is not completely unaware of the problem here. He thinks, though, that since the TFA, like the overall Origenist picture, "guts the uniqueness of the incarnation by expanding it to all of humanity" (10), we need to see it as at odds with

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<sup>16</sup> Technically it is only the *conjunction* of the relevant claims that is being explicitly anathematized, not those claims taken *individually*. To see the TFA as escaping the anathema because it doesn't commit one to endorsing *every* member of the conjunction, though, is at least potentially to harbor a warped view of the actual situation. The fact of the matter is that virtually no advocate of the TFA would endorse *any* member of the conjunction.

the Council. Mullins again misrepresents the TFA here; it is *not* essentially a universalist theory. Leaving that reminder aside, though, two other points need to be made in response. First, Mullins returns here to the familiar pattern: allegation with no visible means of support. Nothing in the 14<sup>th</sup> Anathema, and nothing in the actual Conciliar documents, explicitly (or, so far as I can see, even implicitly) states that any theory which allows for more than one incarnation is beyond the pale.<sup>17</sup> Second, there simply is no basis for thinking that the TFA needs to deny the unique status of CHN. Indeed, this is a point I made when first presenting the Theory:

Does the Theory recognize the distinct role and unequaled dignity possessed by CHN? Yes, it does. For the Theory suggests that CHN, and CHN alone, was at every moment of its existence united to the Son of God. Other human natures attain this status, if at all, only after a long and difficult period of independent existence. And, of course, those who do attain it do so only because of the grace made available to them through CHN's suffering and death. The Son incarnate in CHN remains the savior of all other human natures. Since they owe him everything and he owes them nothing, they can hardly claim equality with him. (Flint 2011a, 199)

So even if the Council had insisted on the uniqueness of the CHN's union with the Son, such insistence need not be seen as inimical to the TFA.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Two points are worthy of note here. First, Justinian, in his letter to the Council, does complain that on the Origenist view, "the devil himself and the other demons . . . [and] impious and godless human beings will be with godly and inspired men and the heavenly powers and will enjoy the same union with God that Christ too enjoys, just as in their pre-existence, with the result that there will be no difference at all between Christ and the remaining rational beings, neither in substance nor in knowledge nor in power nor in operation" (Price 2009, 282-283; quoted in part by Mullins 2015, 10). Clearly, or so it seems to me, the primary concern here is with the restorationist and universalist streaks Justinian sees in Origenism. A secondary concern, though, is clearly that those in heaven not be so united with the Son that there is no sensible distinction to be made between CHN and other human natures. But the TFA need not fall afoul of this concern; see the body of the paragraph above. Second, the 13<sup>th</sup> Anathema against the Origenists, no doubt in response to Justinian's letter, does insist that one cannot say "that there will not be a single difference at all between Christ and other rational beings" in heaven (Price 2009, 286; not quoted by Mullins). But, once again, it is fairly easy to understand the TFA in such a way that it is clearly in accord with this insistence.

<sup>18</sup> Some readers may still sense that the general tone of the Council was at odds with the TFA—that, given the obvious eagerness to condemn Origenism, or indeed any view that calls into question the unique status of CHN, the Council *would have* condemned the TFA had it been presented to them, even if in fact the documents say nothing explicitly against it. Needless to say, I have no problem with the Molinist assumption underlying the formulation of such an objection! But we enter here upon dark matters which we cannot adequately discuss. Let me offer just two brief comments. First, I see no reason whatsoever to think the Council would have anathematized the TFA had the view been considered. Those who see things differently should identify precisely what it is that the Council actually says that leads them to a different (hypothetical) conclusion. Secondly (and here matters get truly speculative), it may be that God in his providence sees to it that certain matters are not considered by certain Councils precisely because he sees that only unbecomingly blunt measures on his part would prevent those Councils from acting improperly. Had the Darwinian theory of evolution, or the Copernican heliocentric picture of the solar system, or the claim that Moses was not

The second core claim of “Flint’s account” that Mullins sees as succumbing to the Justinian anathemas is this: “the Son elects to be united to a person who is free from sin” (10). Mullins discussion of this point is difficult to follow, but he seems to feel that, for the Son to become incarnate in CHN, he would first need to examine worlds in which CHN is not assumed and thus is a person, then act so as to remove that personhood via incarnation. But advocates of the views Mullins is attacking would surely respond that such a picture is a muddled one. Most Molinists would insist that *all* of God’s choices as to which beings to create and which situations to create them in are based on his middle knowledge regarding creaturely essences (or something akin to creaturely essences), *not* regarding actual creatures, since his creative choices are logically prior to any creature’s existence. Hence, God’s choice to unite himself to CHN would be based on his middle knowledge regarding CHN’s essence (i.e. his knowledge that, if that essence were instantiated and its instantiation put in a certain lifelong set of freedom-retaining circumstances, that instantiation would remain free from sin). For such conditionals to be contingent, and thus of use to God as part of his middle knowledge, their antecedents could *not* include CHN’s being assumed. Now, none of this is exactly news; I have discussed it at length elsewhere (see (Flint 2001a, 12-16 and footnote 20), and (Flint 2001b, footnote 12)). But the point is that God does not need to look (as Mullins seems to think) at worlds where CHN is not assumed, and hence a person, in order to make a decision regarding CHN’s assumption, thereby in effect choosing a person to de-personify in order to achieve the Incarnation. Such a view, concedes Mullins, is not explicitly ruled out by the anti-Origenist anathemas, but it would be “close enough to be considered heretical . . . too close for comfort, as it looks too much like a refashioned Origenism” (2015, 11). Whether or not he’s right about this,<sup>19</sup> the view he ascribes to the advocate of the TFA is simply not one any Molinist worth her salt would accept. So the whole discussion of his second core claim is irrelevant, since that claim is not part of the TFA.

Mullins’s case against the TFA, then, is a failure. He gives us no reason whatsoever to think that advocates of the Theory need fear that their view is in any way at odds with the Council.

## V. Conclusion

We have, I believe, reached the end of Mullins’s arguments that both common sense and the acceptance of the Fifth Ecumenical Council force one to reject “Flint’s” Christology and eschatology. I have tried to show that none of these arguments stands up to careful scrutiny. Mullins claims that the views in question constitute “a

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the sole author of the Pentateuch, or the common contemporary position on the morality of owning slaves, been brought up for the bishops’ consideration in 553, can anyone say with confidence that such views would have been deemed compatible with Christian belief?

<sup>19</sup> Mullins seems to be suggesting that we amend the common saying: close counts only in horseshoes, hand grenades, *and accusations of heresy*. If one is anywhere within shouting distance of a heresy, he seems to feel, one is fair game for anathematization. I leave it to readers to judge the plausibility of the Mullinsian amendment.

heresy for a new generation" (2015, 11). From what we have seen, though, it seems it is the charge of heresy, not the views in question, that is truly worthy of our condemnation.<sup>20</sup>

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