Patipassianism, theopaschitism and the suffering of God

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Some Historical and Systematic Considerations

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1. Introduction

In contemporary theology the doctrine of divine impassibility is a hot issue. The doubts about this doctrine in the present century have their earliest roots in British theology, where we can trace the passibilist tendency back to the last ten years of the nineteenth century. It received a powerful impetus from the First World War, and by the time the Second World War broke out it was almost generally accepted in British theology that God suffered. Since then this

1The research for this paper was supported by the Dutch Research Foundation for Theology and Religious Studies (STEGON), and funded by the Netherlands Organisation for the Advancement of Research (NWO).


4Typical of the British situation at that time is the following remark, made by E.S. Waterhouse in a review of H.Wheeler Robinson's Suffering Human and Divine: "...he insists that God suffers, but that is no longer a heresy." (Journal of Theological Studies 42(1941)114); Cf. Doctrine in the Church of England: The Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922 (London 1938), pp.55-56. The most comprehensive survey of the passibilist tendency in pre-war British theology is still that by Mozley, The Impassibility of God, pp.127-166.
tendency has spread to the rest of Europe, notably to France and Germany, to the United States and to Asia. Although it cannot be denied that most of the theologians who explicitly state their views on divine impassibility, hold that this doctrine is to a greater or lesser degree false, the debate over this issue is far from closed. Recently Richard Creel published a thorough study in defence of divine impassibility, which, I expect, will prove quite influential. Apart from him some other theologians defend the doctrine as well. Moreover, the fact that many authors consider it necessary at present to write books and articles in defence of divine passibility also indicates that the truth of the passibilist position is not yet taken for granted by everyone.

The contribution to the debate that I want to make in this article, does not consist of (an) argument(s) in favour of either divine impassibility or divine passibility. Instead, I would like to focus my attention on some preliminary terminological issues and present some observations on the terms that are employed in this debate. It may seem strange that I propose to discuss terminological issues preliminary to a debate which is already in full swing, but I hope to show that the present debate about divine impassibility suffers from a lack of attention to these issues. It happens too often that authors are not clear about the meanings of their key terms, and when they are, it often appears that they give such idiosyncratic definitions that they are sure to create misunderstanding. As it is neither possible nor useful to pay attention to all words and concepts employed, I will concentrate my attention on three of them, which are of central importance in


discussions concerning divine impassibility: impassibility, theopaschitism and patripassianism. These three terms and their derivatives are the technical terms most frequently used by modern theologians to describe the theological position according to which God can(not) suffer, feel, etc.

I will proceed as follows. In the three sections following I will in turn discuss each of these terms. One of the things they have in common is that they are not only used to designate positions in contemporary debates, but are also used to designate positions which were taken in the first centuries of Christianity. This fact imposes some restrictions on the meanings we may ascribe to these terms, because it is highly undesirable that they should bear different meanings in the context of the history of doctrine and in that of contemporary theology. For this reason I intend firstly to make a few brief remarks on their etymology, secondly to provide a survey of the meaning(s) ascribed to them in early Christian doctrine, thirdly to provide a survey of their contemporary use - which will make clear how and why the contemporary discussion is blurred by an imprecise and wrong use of these terms - and fourthly to make some proposals for a proper use in the future.

2. Divine Impassibility

The English terms "impassibility - impassible" are derived from Latin "impassibilitas - impassibilis", which is in turn a literal translation of Greek "apatheia - apathès". The original meaning of "impassible" is "incapable of being acted upon by an outside force". This meaning is easily extended to "incapable of being acted upon by an outside or inside force", which

9There is a categorical difference between "impassibility" on the one hand and "theopaschitism" and "patripassianism" on the other hand: "impassibility" is used to denote a property of God, whereas "theopaschitism" and "patripassianism" are used to denote currents in theology. Someone who holds that God is impassible is - with a word less frequently employed - an "impassibilist"; the trend in theology holding that God is impassible is called "impassibilism".


meaning is found already in Plato\(^\text{12}\) and was taken over by early Christian theology (e.g., Clement of Alexandria\(^\text{13}\)). In this sense "impassible" is used synonymously with "immutable", which is confusing, because "impassible" in early Christian theology also had two more specific meanings. The first of these is "incapable of experiencing emotions"\(^\text{14}\) and the second, still more specific meaning is "incapable of suffering"\(^\text{15}\). In fact, both these meanings are qualifications of the original meaning, since "emotions" (passions, affections) were seen as essentially passive, as states of the soul aroused by an outside force\(^\text{16}\). On this view the experiencing of emotions

12See Frohnhofen, *Loc.Cit.*, for the most important texts from Plato.


weakens reason and will\textsuperscript{17}, which explains why some definitions of impassibility stress the moral freedom of God or His insusceptibility to distraction from resolve\textsuperscript{18}.

In his study on divine impassibility, Richard Creel presents a representative selection of ancient and modern quotations on this issue and concludes that, apart from minor differences in wording, he has found eight different definitions of "impassible"\textsuperscript{19}. On the basis of these definitions he proposes a core definition and four applications. According to his core definition, "impassibility is imperviousness to causal influence from external factors"; the four applications are the following: "an incorporeal being could conceivably be impassible with regard to his nature, his will, his knowledge, or his feelings\textsuperscript{20}. Creel stipulates the following distinction between impassibility and immutability: an immutable being is unchangeable simpliciter, whereas an impassible being is not subject to change or influence by external factors. An impassible being is not necessarily immutable - it might change itself -, whereas an immutable being is necessarily impassible\textsuperscript{21}.

I think there are three related objections to be made to Creel's definition of "impassibility" and consequently to the distinction between "impassibility" and "immutability" that he makes with the help of it: (1) they are one-sided, (2) they are confusing and (3) they are therefore unfit for use. Let me explain these objections. To start with, I want to take a closer look at Creel's definition. He states: "It seems, then, that the most consistent element of meaning across these definitions of impassibility is that which cannot be affected by an outside force. Hence, impassibility is imperviousness to causal influence from external factors."\textsuperscript{22} Notice how

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17}For examples I refer to Heschel, \textit{Loc.Cit.}; Mozley, \textit{Op.Cit.}, pp.44-45, 81, 104, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{18}G.L. Prestige, \textit{God in Patristic Thought} (London 1936), pp.6-7.
\item \textsuperscript{19}Creel, \textit{Op.Cit.}, pp.3-9. The eight definitions are: "lacking all emotions", "in a state of mind that is imperturbable", "insusceptible to distraction from resolve", "having a will determined entirely by oneself", "cannot be affected by an outside force", "cannot be prevented from achieving one's purpose", "has no susceptibility to negative emotions" and "cannot be affected by an outside force or changed by oneself".
\item \textsuperscript{20}Creel, \textit{Op.Cit.}, p.11 (italics his).
\item \textsuperscript{21}Creel, \textit{Loc.Cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{22}Creel, \textit{Loc.Cit.}
\end{itemize}
his definition shifts from "cannot be affected by" to "causal influence" without any supplementary argumentation. Creel seems to think that "to be affected by" and "to be causally influenced" are the same. But this is not true at all! If something or someone is causally influenced, it does not have the choice to react or not. It just has to do what the causal influence makes it do. In this sense I can causally influence my cycle-bell in order to make it ring, just by pulling the trigger. And perhaps I even am able, as a competent hypnotist, to hypnotize you and to make you jump out of the window while you are in a hypnotic trance. In that case I would be able to influence you causally; you would not have any chance of resisting! Now it is certainly true that when I causally influence something or someone, it or he is affected by me. But the converse does not hold: when someone is affected by me, this does not undeniably imply that I causally influence him! Suppose that I am not as competent a hypnotist as I just suggested, and that I did not succeed in hypnotizing you. And suppose that I still want to make you jump out of the window, and try to make you do this by imploring you in a heart-breaking way to do this for me. Now I am sure that you will be affected by me. You might, for instance, become very irritated, and decide you would try never to meet me again. But it would highly surprise me if you really would jump out of the window. And this is because you can, at least to a certain extent, choose in what way you let yourself be affected by me. This means that you are influenced by me not in a causal way, but in a personal way.

This tells against Creel's distinction between impassibility and immutability. This distinction would be clear if we talked about the relation between God and us in terms of a causal relationship. In that case it can always, at least in principle, be decided if a thing is changed by outside influence or by itself. If my car moves, and there is no outside influence - no one is pushing it, etc. - then its movement comes "from inside". But when we talk about the relation between God and us in terms of a personal relation, things are more complicate. Even when we drop the adjective "causal" and talk about personal influence, it will be very difficult in all cases to distinguish clearly between influence by external factors and the person's own influence on his own changes. In most cases there will be both influence by external factors and free decision, both "outside influence" and "inside influence".

As many passibilist theologians emphasize, this holds true of God even more than of human beings, because God in a supreme way is master of Himself. God can be influenced in a personal way only, and never in a causal way. As Abraham Heschel has it:

The divine reaction to human conduct does not operate automatically. Man's deeds do not necessitate but only occasion divine pathos. Man is not the immediate but merely the incidental cause of pathos in God, the "ocasio" or "causa occasionalis", which freely calls forth a pathetic state in God. There is no nexus of causality, but only one of contingence between human and divine attitudes, between human character and divine pathos. The decisive fact is that of divine freedom.»

23On the distinction between causal relations and personal relations, see Vincent Brümmer, Over een Persoonlijke God Gesproken: Studies in de Wijsgerige Theologie, Kampen 1988, pp.86-119, 156-163.

When theologians view the relation between God and man as a personal relation and emphasize the freedom of God in this way, they never can say that God is "subject to change or influence by external factors" only, and they always have to say too that God changes Himself - in a free reaction to human actions. In this way Creel's distinction between impassibility and immutability breaks down when we talk about the relationship between God and man as personal, which Creel in fact does not do, but which most theologians who call themselves "passibilists" do. We can conclude now (1) that Creel's definition of impassibility is one-sided, because it cannot account for divine passibility in the context of a personal relation between God and man; (2) that this makes his definition confusing, because it suggests that it is possible that God be causally influenced by man - which most "passibilists" deny - and blurs the distinction between impassibility and immutability; and (3) that this makes his definition practically unfit for use. Does this mean that we should not distinguish between divine impassibility and divine immutability? Should we hold that both impassibility and immutability mean unchangeability simpliciter? Then we had better drop the term "impassibility" altogether! I think, however, that Creel's analysis of the concept of impassibility suggests a better solution. He has explained how God could conceivably be immutable with regard to his nature, his will, his knowledge, or his feelings. I think it would be best to reserve the word "impossible" for the last application only, so that a person is impassible when he is immutable with respect to his feelings. My reasons for this stipulation are the following. Given that we do not want to use impassibility and immutability synonymously, this stipulation is most in line with the history of the term "impassibility" as we have outlined it above. Moreover, the history of this term provides an indication that there is more need for a separate term for immutability with regard to feelings than there is for immutability with regard to nature, knowledge and will. The term "impassibility" has seldom been used in the sense of "immutability with regard to will only", "immutability with regard to nature only" or "immutability with regard to knowledge only", while it is commonly used in the sense of "immutability with regard to feeling". This indication is corroborated by the fact that in modern theology passibility is mostly connected with feelings, suffering, emotions and the like, and not with nature, will and knowledge. Creel's position in this respect - as in some others - is exceptional.

One final remark concerning the definition of "feelings" in this context. For two reasons

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25Creel, Loc.Cit.
this term should be taken in a comprehensive sense. First, some theologians might hold that God has no "feelings" at all, so that there is no sense in discussing the question whether His feelings are immutable or not. In order to draw these theologians - who will consider themselves as "impassibilists" - into the discussion, it seems to be best to extend the meaning of "feelings", so as to include "bliss" and "the quality of one's inner life." I cannot think of any theologian who holds that God is not (more or less) blissful or that His inner life has no quality. Second, some theologians - who consider themselves passibilists - hold that God cannot experience feeling, but can suffer, or be unhappy, or something like that. For this reason we should take "feeling" as a kind of super-concept or umbrella-concept, comprising emotions, suffering, (un)happiness, affections and the like as well.

Summing up: the term "impassibility" should be used in the following meaning: immutability with regard to one's feelings, or the quality of one's inner life.

Above we have called theologians holding that God is possible "passibilists". The theological positions of these theologians is called the "passibilist position" and the tendency to hold this position is called the "passibilist tendency". Recently Warren McWilliams has introduced a new term, which he sometimes uses as a stylistic device to replace other terms. He writes about "propassibility theologians", "the propassibility position" and "the propassibility movement" , meaning thereby "theologians affirming divine passibility", "the theological position asserting divine passibility" and "the movement in favour of divine passibility".

Although it is quite clear what McWilliams means by "propassibility", there are two good reasons not to follow him in his use of this term. The first is that McWilliams's "propassibility" reminds us too much of Jerome's "propassio", by which Jerome meant the initial stage of a "passio", affecting the feelings but not the will. According to Jerome we may ascribe "propassiones" to Jesus, not "passiones": it would be entirely in his line to talk about the

26The expression is Creel's, who states: "To say that God is impassible with respect to his feelings would be to say that God's feelings, or the quality of his inner life, cannot be affected by an outside force." Loc.Cit.

(italics mine).


28Jerome makes his distinction between "passio" and "propassio" when commenting on Matthew 26:37 ("he ... began to be sorrowful") and concludes that only "propassiones" may be ascribed to Jesus. See Hieronymus, In Matheum Lib.Iv, Cap.XXVI, Vers.37; cf. Lib.I, Cap.V, Vers.28. As Max Pohlenz, Die Stoa: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung II (Göttingen 1949), p.154 has shown, Jerome was influenced by Origen, who in turn was influenced by Stoicist doctrines.
propassibility of Christ and at the same time to deny his passibility. Since "propassio" is a term already in use with a very specific meaning, I am of the opinion that one should have very good reasons to use the same term in another, more general sense. I think there are no such reasons; in any case McWilliams does not provide them. The second reason why I prefer not to use "propassibility" in the sense in which McWilliams uses it, is that it reminds us too much of the "proexistence" (existence for us) of Christ, a technical term current in German christology, and applied especially to Jesus' passion. To anyone acquainted with the concept of proexistence, "propassibility" suggests "passibility for us" which is not what McWilliams means by it.

Summing up: the word "propassibility" should not be used in the sense of "supporting divine passibility", because two other theological terms, "propassio" and "proexistence", suggest other meanings for "propassibility", as a result of which this use of "propassibility" is confusing.

3. Patripassianism

"Patripassianism" is the name given to the early Christian current of "modalism" or "(modalistic) monarchianism" by its opponents. Its etymology is clear: "patripassians" were accused of teaching that "Pater passus est", the Father Himself suffered on the cross. For us,

29McWilliams does not seem to be acquainted with Jerome's distinction.


31Modalism safeguarded the "monarchia" (unicity) of God by teaching that God simpliciter was incarnated in the Son; thus the Son was a mode of appearance (modus) of God simpliciter. Modalism flourished during the second half of the second and the first half of the third century.

32For this accusation, see, for instance, Tertullian, Adversus Praxean 1, 2 and 10. The nickname "patri-passianist" probably came into use under influence of this treatise. It is important to note that Tertullian attaches another meaning to "Pater" than did the modalists. Tertullian already means by "Pater" the first Person of the Trinity, whereas the modalists still use "Pater" in the more original meaning of "God simpliciter". Cf. John N.D.
however, it is easier to determine what their opponents accused them of teaching than what they in fact taught. To give an example: it is not clear if the formula "Pater passus est" has ever been used by a patrippassian, and if so, by whom. For all that, it is clear that patripassians agreed with their opponents that God simpliciter, or the divine nature in itself, is impassible. This becomes clear, for instance, from Tertullian’s *Adversus Praxean*. According to Tertullian Praxean and his followers, "while contending that the Father and the Son are one and the same”, "distinguish two, Father and Son, understanding the Son to be flesh, that is man, that is Jesus; and the Father to be spirit, that is God, that is Christ”,” adding that, since it is the Son indeed who suffers, the Father is only His fellow-sufferer”. Consequently, Praxean *cum suis* held that God in Himself, being spirit, is impassible and needed the flesh as *medium passionis*: the Son (= the flesh) suffered, the Father only "fellow-suffered". This means that it was not the intention of Praxean *cum suis* to deny the divine impassibility. Thus the distinguishing characteristic of patrippassianism cannot be that it denies the impassibility of God. What all modalists had in common, is that they refused to endorse the trinitarian distinction between Father and Son, which was newly introduced into theology in those days. They feared that such

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33On this question, see Adolf Harnack, "Monarchianismus", in: Albert Hauck (Ed.), *Realkylopaedia für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* XIII (Leipzig 1903), p.329.


a distinction would involve a division amounting to ditheism. I conclude, then, that the distinguishing characteristic of patripassianism is not that it denies the impassibility of God but that it refused to endorse the trinitarian distinction between Father and Son. Therefore the nickname "patripassianism" seems, to say the least, tendentious and therefore unfair.

In contemporary theology as far as I know the only theologian who claims to be a patripassianist is Geddes MacGregor. If he is, he is so for reasons quite unlike those of "classic" patripassianists. They, being impassibilists, did not see any other way to affirm that


39 It might be objected against this, that Praxeaes teaches a moderate modalism, and that other modalists, like Noë tus of Smyrna or Epigonus, have taken a passibilist stance. However, this is far from sure. A well-known historian of doctrine like Friedrich Loofs thinks that it is very well possible that all modalists distinguished between Father and Son in a way similar to that of Praxeaes. See his *Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte*, herausgegeben von Kurt Aland (Tübingen 1968), pp.144-146. But even if some modalists in fact were passibilists, this does not alter the conclusion that it is not this passibilism, but the refusal to endorse the trinitarian distinction between Father and Son that is the distinguishing characteristic of patripassianism.


43 It is difficult to tell whether he is, because MacGregor fails sufficiently to clarify his christology. Cf. the critique of McWilliams, *Op.Cit.*, p.93.
God really suffered in Jesus without implying ditheism. MacGregor on the other hand, holding that self-emptying is the very nature of God, does not see any reason to deny that the Father was incarnated in Jesus. That MacGregor is the only theologian who claims to be a patripassianist does not mean that "patripassianism" otherwise is not used as a label of contemporary theological positions. On the contrary, many theologians are labelled as "patripassianists" by others. In this connection the following paragraph from McWilliams' *The Passion of God* is instructive:

"... Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, Geddes MacGregor, Kazoh Kitamori, Daniel Day Williams and Jung Lee. Perhaps these men can be called, without too much distortion, the new patripassianists. Only one of the six (MacGregor) would explicitly allow the use of that label, and several disavow it. Certainly most would not agree with the exact formulation of the patripassianist position in the third century. They would insist on stronger trinitarian distinctions than the old patripassianists, yet in general they do agree that God suffers."  

In the light of what we have said about the original meaning of "patripassianism", this paragraph is simply astounding! McWilliams suggests that the essence of patripassianism was that it held "that God suffers", whereas we have seen that, in so far as we are able to reconstruct their views, at least most patripassianists would have rejected the view that God *simpliciter* suffered. The essence of their view was that they refused to distinguish between God the Father and God the Son. Our conclusion can only be that McWilliams fails to distinguish essentials from non-


essentials with regard to patripassianism, and uses the term "patripassianist" in an idiosyncratic and confusing way.

McWilliams' use of "patripassianism" is a clear example of how one should not use this term, and in this way a stimulus to produce directions for a correct use of "patripassianism". I suggest that this term, if one insists on using it to denote contemporary theological positions, should only be used for those theological positions which fail to distinguish between God the Father and God the Son and therefore hold that in the suffering of Jesus God simpliciter, and not God the Son, was involved. On this definition being a patripassianist does not determine whether one holds to the impassibility of God or not; in my view this is only correct, because divine impassibility was not the central issue in the patripassian controversy. This does not mean that I want to encourage the use of labels like "patripassianism", because I am of the opinion that terms of abuse should better not be used at all in theology.

Jürgen Moltmann has coined the new term "patricompassianism". He employs this term to indicate the theological position which - in distinction from patripassianism - advocates a trinitarian understanding of the suffering of God, according to which "(t)he Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son." The suffering of the Father is not the same as that of the Son; it is a suffering on account of the suffering and death of the Son. Although it is perfectly clear what Moltmann means by the term "patricompassianism", I think that this terminological stipulation is not worthy of following. Moltmann wants to distinguish his own, trinitarian "patricompassianism" from patripassianism, which failed to emphasize the trinitarian distinctions sufficiently. As I indicated above, however, according to Tertullian Praxeas and his followers held that the Father "fellow-suffered", which means "had compassion". Thus the term "patricompassianism" is correctly applicable to Praxeas and his followers. Therefore it should not be used to distinguish another theological position from theirs: this only adds fresh fuel to current misunderstandings of the theological position of patripassians like Praxeas. In sum, the term "patricompassianism" should not be used to distinguish other theological positions from "patripassianism".

4. Theopaschitism

Obvious as the etymology of "theopaschite" may seem (Greek "theos", God; "paschoo", to suffer), it is too often forgotten that "theos" in "theopaschite" has the same meaning as "theos" in "theotokos": in both cases "theos" does not mean "God simpliciter", or "the divinity", 


but "God incarnate, the incarnate Logos."

The history of the theopaschite controversy is very complex. Theopaschite language has been used from the beginnings of Christianity, but fell into disrepute when it was defended by Apollinaris and other theologians who were condemned as heretics. It found a staunch defender in Cyril of Alexandria, who was vehemently opposed by Nestorius. Probably it was Nestorius, who also denied that Mary could be truly called "theotokos", who coined the abusive term "theopaschite". At the third general council (Ephesus 431) Nestorius was condemned and the term "theotokos" was approved, but no explicit decision on the legitimacy of theopaschite language was made. Many champions of theopaschitism were monophysites; one of them, Peter Fullo, Patriarch of Antioch, added the clause "who was crucified for us" to the Trisagion (± 470), which led to a revival of the debate on theopaschitism. In 519 a group of Scythian monks led by John Maxentius tried to get an authorization for the formula "Unus de trinitate passus est" in Constantinople. The proper theopaschite controversy begins here, and it ended only when, after many difficulties, the fifth general council (Constantinople 553) sanctioned the theopaschite formula.

It is important to recognize that the theopaschite formula is a christological and not a theological formula. It does not say that the God simpliciter "passus est" or that the Divinity "passus est"; the formula is about the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, who suffered "carne" or "secundum carnem". The formula allows us to say that the human nature of Jesus suffered, that the Second Person of the Trinity suffered, that the Logos incarnate suffered, but...
not that the divine nature of Jesus suffered\textsuperscript{54}. In fact the acceptance of the formula is nothing more than the logical consequence of the acceptance of the term "theotokos": if Mary was truly the mother of "Theos", than it was "Theos" who suffered\textsuperscript{55}.

In contemporary theology the term "theopaschitism" is frequently misunderstood. On the one hand it is sometimes taken to refer to the heretic doctrine that God \textit{simpliciter} or the divine nature suffered; it is mixed up with monophysitism. It is believed to have been condemned - which, in a sense, is true but one-sided: theopaschitism was condemned several times, but in the end it was accepted. It is, however, vehemently rejected by theologians whose own theological position logically entails theopaschitism and even passibilism. The following quotation provides an adequate illustration of some of these misunderstandings:

"A somewhat similar \textit{[to patripassianism - MS]} deviation arose in the sixth century in Constantinople, which came to be known as "theopaschitism" (the belief that God suffered). Its adherents rejected the definition of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) that Jesus, though one person, had two natures, being truly God and truly man. Instead, they were "Monophysites", teaching that Christ had only one composite nature (\textit{physis}, "nature"), which was essentially divine. Thus underplaying the humanity of Jesus, they naturally emphasized that God suffered in and through him. Although these controversies seem very remote to us in the twentieth century, we need to take warning from them. An over-emphasis on the sufferings of God on the cross may mislead us ... into denying that he \textit{[Christ - MS]} was one person in two natures, like the Monophysites or Theopaschites."\textsuperscript{56}

In the view which the author of the above quotation defends himself, the suffering of God is


\textsuperscript{55}Cf. Elert, \textit{Die Ausgang der altkirchlichen Christologie}, p.89: "Was Maria gebar, ist auch am Kreuz gestorben."

emphasized in a much more radical way than in that of sixth century theopaschites: he is a passibilist, who explicitly does not want to restrict God's suffering to that of the Second Person of the Trinity: "If God's full and final self-revelation was given in Jesus [as the author believes - MS], then his feelings and sufferings are an authentic reflection of the feelings and suffering of God himself." 57

On the other hand the term "theopaschite" is sometimes used in a loose way by proponents of passibilism as an equivalent for "passibilist" or as a comprehensive term, denoting, besides "theopaschitism", "patrpassianism" and "passibilism" as well. Here A. van Egmond provides an example in the English summary of his Ph.D. thesis which begins as follows:

"This study treats of Theopaschitism, the doctrine that God suffers. During the past few decades this view has gained general favour in theology. It raises problems, all circling round the one question whether the notion "God" does not exclude suffering and whether consequently "a suffering God" is not a "contradictio in terminis". It is generally known that there are four distinct theopaschitic periods in the Christian tradition. In the second and third centuries so-called "modalistic monarchianism" or "patrpassianism" ... manifested itself.... The second case of Theopaschitism is Luther's "theologia crucis".... The third time the theme of the "suffering God" becomes almost generally voiced is in British theology at the beginning of the twentieth century.... The fourth instance of Theopaschitism is found in "modern" theology in the German tongue. Barth, Bonhoeffer, Sölle, Moltmann and Jüngel use theopaschitic terminology." 58

It is clear that Van Egmond uses "theopaschitic" as a comprehensive term, denoting not only theopaschitism, but patrpassianism and passibilism as well 59,60. Furthermore, it is clear that he


59Van Egmond, Op.Cit., p.16n.10 refers to Elert, Die Ausgang der altkirchlichen Christologie, pp. 89, 123 to justify his anachronistic use of "theopaschitism". He overlooks, however, that Elert uses the term only to denote what since the days of Nestorius became known as "theopaschitism", and not to denote "patrpassianism" and "passibilism". Elert uses "theopaschitism" as a christological term, whereas Van Egmond uses it theologically. Further on in his study (p.18n.17) Van Egmond, following Feitsma, Op.Cit., pp.21f., distinguishes between both uses of this term, speaking of "absolute theopaschitism" (= theological theopaschitism) and "relative theopaschitism" (= christological theopaschitism). Though this distinction is clear in itself and calls attention to
does not intend "theopaschitic" as a term of abuse, because he supports theopaschitism. Summing up, both of these ways of misunderstanding "theopaschitism" should be avoided, and this term should be used only to denote the theological position according to which the incarnate Logos suffered.

5. Conclusion

In the above I have showed that contemporary discussion about the question of divine impassibility suffers from a lack of precision regarding the meaning of the terms "(im)passibility", "patripassianism" and "theopaschitism" and their derivatives, which are often used in ways that fail to do justice to the meaning these words have in the history of doctrine. On the basis of historical and systematical considerations I have stipulated the following definitions. "Impassibility" should be taken to mean "immutability with regard to one's feelings, or the quality of one's inner life". "Patripassianism" should be taken as "a theological position which fails to distinguish between God the Father and God the Son and therefore holds that in the suffering of Jesus God simpliciter, and not God the Son, was involved". "Theopaschitism" should be taken as "the theological position according to which the incarnate Logos suffered".

the fact that passibilism may be considered as a logical consequence of theopaschitism, it seems to me preferable to use "theopaschitism" only in a relative sense and to employ "passibilism" for the absolute sense. There is no reason to stretch the concept of "theopaschitism" to a synonym of "passibilism": this only leads to confusing usage as in the above quotation of Van Egmond.


61 He tries to show that the concept of a suffering God is not a "contradiction in terminis". (Van Egmond, De Lijdende God, pp.233-266).