

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Contemporary Roman Catholicism: A contrast and comparison of Catholic and
Protestant Doctrines

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Survey of Theology

by

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Thesis Statement

Even the most basic study of Catholic and Protestant Christian doctrines will show that there are differences. Yet despite these differences in beliefs, Catholics and Protestants can, and should, consider one another to be united under one belief and faith in Jesus Christ and both faith traditions are accurately described as Christian.

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Introduction

Since the very beginnings of the Christian faith, there have been disputes and disagreements regarding core Christian teachings and doctrine. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century represented the great split between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism. It was the “faith-works controversy that sparked the Protestant Reformation [which] was due largely to an equivocation on the worth *faith*.”¹ As Catholic and Protestant doctrines are studied, the enviable question arises: Do Catholics consider Protestants to be Christians and do Protestants consider Catholics to be Christians? An accurate answer to this question is important. Christianity is the largest faith tradition in the United States, with roughly 52 percent of the population identifying themselves as Protestant and 28 percent of the population identifying themselves as Catholic.² Worldwide, the Catholic Church is the “largest of the Christian denominations, with approaching a billion members.”³ This paper will explore the similarities and differences between Catholic and Protestant Christian doctrines and will show that, despite some superficial differences in beliefs, Catholics and Protestants can, and should, consider one another to be united under one belief and one faith in Jesus Christ and both faith traditions are accurately described as *Christian*. The different beliefs between Catholicism and Protestantism are not core, essential Christian doctrines; but rather are peripheral and non-essential.

1 Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 31.

2 Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 17.

3 John Boker, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v. "Roman Catholic Church," accessed April 5, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/view/10.1093/acref/9780192800947.001.0001/acref-9780192800947-e-6136#>.

The Nature of God

Perhaps the most important question that human beings can answer is: Is God real? A close second is: What is the nature of God? It has often been said, “religion is man’s attempt to reach God, and Christianity is God reaching man”.⁴ In the study of the religious traditions of Catholicism and Protestantism, knowing how each view the nature of God is of primary importance. How one views God, understands how he interacts with his creation, and understands how he has communicated with his creatures informs almost all other aspects of one’s worldview.

Protestant Doctrine

Mainstream protestant churches, such as the Southern Baptist, United Methodist Church, and others hold several key attributes of God. The United Methodist Church’s official website states that, “When we say the Apostles' Creed, we join with millions of Christians through the ages in an understanding of God as a Trinity—three persons in one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁵ Likewise, the Southern Baptist profess a similar belief, in that “[the] eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.”⁶ These descriptions show that Protestants believe in a triune God that is one with three natures.

⁴ Matt Slick, “I Am Already Religious,” 2014, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://carm.org/i-am-already-religious>.

⁵ “Our Christian Roots: God,” United Methodist Church, 2014, accessed May 3 2014, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-christian-roots-god>.

⁶ “The Baptist Faith and Message,” Southern Baptist Convention, 2014, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

Another key attribute of God from the Protestant view is God's eternal, self-existent nature. "God is the source of being, or existence, for all things."⁷ The United Methodist Church describes God as "transcended...omnipresent...omnipotent...and omniscient."⁸ Additionally, God is, according to Methodist, "absolute, infinite, righteous, just, loving, merciful...and more."⁹ The Protestant view of God is in alignment with how God described himself to Moses: "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.' (Exodus 3:14)."¹⁰ The high view of God that Protestants hold is consistent with Biblical teaching.

Catholic Doctrine

Similar to Protestants, Catholics also believe in the triune nature of God. The Catholic Church teaches, "Our profession of faith begins with God, for God is the First and the Last, the beginning and the end of everything. The Credo begins with God the Father, for *the Father is the first divine person of the Most Holy Trinity...*"(emphasis added).¹¹ Further, "Catholic belief is succinctly expressed in the profession of faith" of the Nicene Creed¹², which holds to the triune nature of God whose nature consist of God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This is even more clearly stated with the Catholic teaching, "We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the 'consubstantial Trinity'" which was expressed in the Council of

7 Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 91.

8 "Our Christian Roots: God," United Methodist Church.

9 Ibid.

10 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

11 "Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 198," The Holy See-The Official Website of the Roman Catholic Church, 2014, accessed May 3, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/pls2c1p1.htm.

12 "Beliefs and Teachings-What We Believe," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014, accessed April 5, 2014, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/index.cfm>.

Constantinople II in 553 A.D.¹³ Catholics also hold that the two General Councils, the Second Council of Lyons and the Council of Florence established and pronounced the Doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁴

As with Protestants, Catholics also hold to a high view of God. Catholics believe that God is the infinite creator of the Universe¹⁵, who created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing)¹⁶, and who is transcendent and beyond his creation.¹⁷ Further, Catholics also confess God's transcendent nature in a manner similar to Protestants. "The revelation of the ineffable name 'I AM WHO AM' contains then the truth that God alone IS...God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is."¹⁸ God is the transcendent, uncaused, first cause of all of creation.

The Nature of Man

As important as an accurate understanding of the nature of God is, it is also vital that one has an accurate understanding of the nature of man. Is man a product of the blind processes of naturalistic evolution? Is man simply a more highly developed animal? Or do human beings have intrinsic worth by virtue of being created in the image of God? The answer to these questions also informs one's worldview. A clear understanding of the nature of man informs us

13 "Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 253," http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/pls2c1p2.htm

14 Dermot Cassidy, "The Logical Deduction of Doctrine", *The Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 2 (03/2013): 212.

15 "Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 279, 290"

16 *Ibid.*, No. 296.

17 *Ibid.*, No. 300.

18 *Ibid.*, No. 213.

of how we should act, how we treat others, and ultimately points to (or away from) our sinful nature and need for a savior.

Protestant Doctrine

Protestants believe, by in large, that “man is a special creation of God, made in His own image.”¹⁹ There is some debate within protestant circles regarding the issue of evolution, with some accepting the idea of God-directed theistic evolution. However, mainstream Protestant churches all generally believe that God had a hand in man’s creation or development. Human beings are free creatures, with free will, who unfortunately have within us the capacity to disobey God’s commandments through sin. “Sin is breaking the covenant [with God], and separating ourselves from the One who is our origin and destiny.”²⁰

Catholic Doctrine

Catholic teaching on the nature of man is similar to Protestant teaching. Catholics believe that “every person bears the dignity of being made in the image of God.”²¹ The Church teaches that “[m]an occupies a unique place in creation... he is "in the image of God.”²² Catholic teaching goes into additional detail through the Catechism on the nature of man, including that creation was for man; humans are dualistic in nature with both a body and soul; our immortal souls are created by God and not by parents; and that man has a sin nature that separates him from God.²³ The Catholic Church also recognizes the profound negative impacts

19 "The Baptist Faith and Message, "Southern Baptist Convention.

20 "We Confess Our Sin," United Methodist Church, 2006, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/we-confess-our-sin>.

21 "What We Believe-Morality," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014, accessed May 09, 2014, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/morality/index.cfm>.

22 "Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 355"

23 Ibid., No. 358, 362, 366, 396.

of sin in our lives. When we deny the reality of sin, “it can result in spiritual and psychological damage because it is ultimately a denial of the truth about ourselves.”²⁴

Soteriology and the Person of Christ

When we truly understand the nature of God and our own nature, we realize that we have fallen short of God’s standards. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).” What then are we to do? How can we become reconciled back to the perfect, holy, creator of the universe? Our beliefs on soteriology and the person of Jesus Christ are vital to our understanding of faith and salvation. This is perhaps an area of perceived difference between Catholics and Protestants, and was one of the primary catalysts for the Protestant Reformation. At its core the Protestant Reformation “discredited the authority of the pope and traditional Catholicism by emphasizing the importance of an individual relationship with God.”²⁵

Protestant Doctrine

Protestant’s teach that salvation is a redemptive act by God and is “offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour...There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.”²⁶ Protestant churches also teach that Jesus was fully man and fully God, and that he is “God’s pre-existing Word who ‘became flesh and lived among us.’”²⁷ This concept

24 “What We Believe-Morality,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website.

25 "Protestant Ethic." In *World of Sociology*, Gale. Farmington: Gale, 2001. http://www.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/content/entry/worldsocs/protestant_ethic/0 (accessed May 9, 2014.)

26 "The Baptist Faith and Message", Southern Baptist Convention.

27 “Our Christian Roots: Jesus” United Methodist Church, 2006, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-christian-roots-jesus>.

is called the hypostatic union.²⁸ Protestants teach that Jesus' death on the cross was a substitution for us for the penalty for our own sins, and that he rose from the dead in an act that frees us from spiritual death and separation from God. Salvation requires more than just "belief that" Jesus died and was raised. Salvation requires "belief in" or "trust in" Jesus for our salvation. "Salvation cannot be earned...Rather, it is the gift of a gracious God."²⁹

Catholic Doctrine

Catholic doctrine regarding the person of Jesus Christ is similar in many respects to that of Protestants. Catholic Catechism does point out that there are many aspects of Christ's life that are a mystery. "Many things about Jesus of interest to human curiosity do not figure in the Gospels. Almost nothing is said about his hidden life at Nazareth, and even a great part of his public life is not recounted."³⁰ The Church teaches that Christ is fully human (515), born of a virgin (Article 3), divinely perfect (436), and fully God (242).³¹ Catholics describe "the man Christ who walked around in Galilee was and is identical...with the Second Person of the Trinity."³² Further, Catholic teaching is that Jesus' very name means "God saves", and he was given his name "for he will save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21)."³³

The Catholic views on soteriology has often, and mistakenly, been viewed as being different than Protestant doctrine. "The official teaching of Catholicism...is that salvation is a

28 John Lamont, "The Nature of the Hypostatic Union", *The Heythrop Journal* 47, no. 1 (January 2006): 16.

29 "We Are Saved" United Methodist Church, 2006, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/we-are-saved>.

30 "Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 514."

31 *Ibid.*, No. 515, Article 3, 436, 242.

32 Lamont, "Hypostatic Union", 16.

33 "Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 452."

totally free gift that we can do nothing to ‘buy’ or produce.”³⁴ Catholics believe that sin is an “offence against God, only he can forgive it.”³⁵ Where Catholic and Protestant doctrines differ is in who has the power to forgive sins. The church teaches, “The [Apostles] Creed links ‘the forgiveness of sins’ with the profession of faith in the Holy Spirit, for the risen Christ *entrusted to the apostles the power to forgive sins* when he gave them the Holy Spirit (emphasis added).”³⁶ Further, the Church’s position is that, “The Apostles Creed associates faith in the forgiveness of sins *not only with faith in the Holy Spirit, but also with faith in the Church and in the communion of saints* (emphasis added).”³⁷

Conclusions

An examination of key Protestant and Catholic doctrines shows there are many similarities. Both Catholics and Protestants believe in one, triune God, represented in the natures of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both also believe that God is the uncaused, eternal, all loving, all-powerful, creator of the universe. Catholics and Protestants believe that man is created in the image of God, with free will, and the capacity to choose to do good; but humanity has a sin nature that has separated us from relationship with God. The savior Jesus Christ is preeminent in Catholic and Protestant soteriology and both believe that only through faith in the work of Christ through his death, burial, and resurrection, can one receive salvation. Faith is not conditional on works. One cannot “earn” salvation nor can good works provide the necessary condition for salvation. Indeed, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church states, “Together we confess: By grace

34 Kreeft and Tacelli, *Christian Apologetics*, 321.

35 “Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 431.”

36 Ibid., No. 984.

37 Ibid., No. 976.

alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”³⁸ However, Catholic doctrine vis-à-vis the Catholic Catechisms seems to show that in addition to faith in the Holy Spirit, believers should also have faith in the Catholic Church. This doctrine does appear to be counter to the teachings of Protestant faiths. Yet, the admonishment that “we are called as Christians to the confession of sin” and “[p]rincipally...we are bound to confess our own sins and not those of others”³⁹ should always be kept in mind when discussing doctrinal differences. Despite some differences, Catholics and Protestants can, and should, consider one another to be united under one belief and faith in Jesus Christ and both faith traditions are accurately described as Christian.

38 “Joint Declaration On the Doctrine of Justification,” The Holy See, 1999, accessed May 10, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

39 William H. Petersen, "The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration On the Doctrine of Justification: Soteriological and Ecclesiological Implications from an Anglican Perspective", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38, no. 1 (Wint 2001): 62.

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