

CHRIST AND CHURCH: A SPECTRUM OF VIEWS

J. PETER SCHINELLER, S.J.

Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago

REFERRING TO the present state of Catholicism, Langdon Gilkey writes: "Aggiornamento thus poses a quite new and much deeper problem: not what form of Catholicism [contemporary Catholics] will or wish to live within, but whether they wish to be Catholic or Christian at all."¹ He then expands his remark in a footnote, describing conversations with Catholic students and seminarians. At first the questions relate to how to reinterpret Catholic belief and identity, so as to be in harmony with modernity. But then, Gilkey adds, the more ultimate questions always appear: Why should we be Catholics or Christians at all, and not just humanistic and secular?² Clearly this type of questioning indicates a shift in the type of self-examination among Catholics today.

A similar way of seeing this shift might be found in the following suggested characterization of three phases in American Catholic attitudes. From the time of Vatican II until the present, the doctrine of the anonymous Christian has gained widespread familiarity and acceptance. In place of a Roman Church as the exclusive way of salvation, we begin to appreciate the grace-filled insights and experiences of non-Catholics. Yet we still interpret their experience in terms of our own Christian perspective. More recently we have entered a second and confusing phase, where we are re-examining our universal claims and, together with this, our self-identity as Christians. We ask: Why is a Christian Church or community necessary if God's salvific grace is available for all? Why any missionary effort?³ Perhaps a third phase, insofar as we have made progress in resolving the tensions of the previous phase, is this: Granted that God's love and grace is available to all, what is our distinct contribution to the human community as Christians? Is there mutual enrichment in the examination of the claims and actual life-style of Christians and non-Christians?

The cause of this new type of questioning referred to by Gilkey and experienced by Christians today seems to be the new context in which Christians must live. It is no longer possible (if it ever was) to live as a Christian, or to do Christian theology, without considering the questions

¹ Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (New York, 1975) p. 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

³ The question of the mission and goal of the Church will be taken up in the subsequent essays, especially those by Haight and Sears, exemplifying two different approaches and viewpoints.

asked of the Christian, and claims made, by non-Christians. When these questions and claims enter deeply into our framework of living and thinking, they cause us to examine our theological stances. Many of the older theories and positions simply do not fit the new experiences, and adjustments must be made.

Thus the problematic context for our discussion must be the Church in the modern world, or Christ and contemporary culture. The context is not an in-Church horizon, nor is it a secular-humanist horizon. It is precisely in the correlation of the two, in the recognition that the Church is in the world and the world in the Church, in the recognition that Christ and the Christian are always related to culture and influenced by it. The forces that affect our theologizing are as much outside as inside the Church.⁴

Indications of this are found in several recent theological trends: secular city, death of God, theology of hope, civil religions, liberation theology. In each of these we see an opening of the Christian problematic to data and forces from non-Christian sources. The theological discussion takes its problematic not so much from the horizon of thinkers such as Barth and Bultmann, but from the questions raised by theologians such as Troeltsch, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich in their continued questioning of the very foundations of Christian theology in relation to culture, social contexts, and the general history of religions.

We have been forced to move, as Rahner suggests, towards an open Catholicism, in dialogue not only with non-Catholic Christians but with non-Christians and even anti-Christians.⁵ In this coming to terms with the experience of modernity there have been reactions at both ends of the spectrum, right and left, liberal and conservative. Furthermore, I suggest that fundamental questions are involved in this encounter with modernity, questions of Christology and ecclesiology. An examination of the responses of Christians today to basic questions—"who is the Christ?" and "why the Church?"—would unearth a wide range of substantive differences.

In an attempt to sort out these differences and to shed light on the problematic facing Christianity today, I will set forth a spectrum of four views in Christology and ecclesiology. The spectrum of positions may seem blunt and too sharp at first glance, but it does pose in stark terms the options we face. The goal of the presentation of the four views is

⁴This point is developed in Haight's essay, in the early section entitled "The Church as Problem."

⁵Rahner employs the phrase "open Catholicism" at the very beginning of one of his more important essays, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," *Theological Investigations* 5 (Baltimore, 1966) 115.

basically expository rather than critical, leading to self-understanding and exploration rather than aiming for closure or a decided option among positions. But before we set forth the four positions, some preliminary comments on the type of views we present must be given.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SPECTRUM

Before describing positively what the spectrum consists of, I note two examples of models which it is not. It is not a duplication of the classic work of H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.⁶ His five types focus on the relation of Christ and culture. While mine necessarily include that question, they focus more directly on the place and necessity of Christ and the Church for the salvation of mankind. In addition, in his models the positive or negative factors present in a particular culture or situation would partially determine how Christ would interact with that situation. Secondly, my spectrum is not like the five models of Church presented by Avery Dulles in his important *Models of the Church*.⁷ His models are primarily descriptive, image-related models that point to the reality of the Church. They are complementary rather than exclusive. That is to say, a complete view of the Church would involve elements of the Church as institutional, sacramental, communitarian, kerygmatic, and servant.

In the spectrum I am setting forth, the four views are intentionally designed to be mutually exclusive rather than complementary. Logically, you cannot hold two of them. They might be termed systematic models rather than descriptive, and they will refer to views that would be considered unorthodox as well as orthodox. Clearly they are not sociological models, gained from a survey of the attitudes of Christians. They are theological, and are constructed methodically to explore the different logical possibilities of professing one's faith in Jesus as the Christ. The key words that distinguish one position from the next are carefully chosen precisely in order to make the logical and theological distinctiveness of the positions sharp and clear, and not merely to indicate shades of difference. Because of these differences in substance, if

⁶New York, 1961. Charles Davis, *Christ and the World Religions* (London, 1970), adapts the five types of Niebuhr to the problem of Christ and world religions. While this is illuminating, it is different from my task, which is to focus directly on the indispensability of Christ for salvation. Most helpful for my discussion of types and models is the second chapter of David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York, 1975). He presents five methodological models in contemporary theology, which often intersect with our spectrum. But here, too, he focuses upon method and presuppositions, while my direct focus is on the Christological and ecclesiological content. Tracy's footnotes (esp. p. 34, n. 1) present bibliographical references on the use of types and models.

⁷New York, 1974. Dulles' introduction and first chapter present a rationale for the use of models in ecclesiology.

you choose one position on the spectrum, you cannot hold any of the others at the same time.⁸

An additional way of viewing this spectrum is by seeing it as a functional approach to Christology and ecclesiology. I am presenting four exclusive, noncomplementary positions on the extent to which Jesus Christ is Savior for all mankind. I am not examining his inner self or person, or even the manner in which he redeems mankind. So, too, in regard to ecclesiology, I am not describing or defining the Church in terms of its inner principle of unity, but in terms of its function in and for the world.

While Catholic theologians would probably set themselves in the middle of the spectrum, avoiding the extremes of right and left, the advantage of the full spectrum is that it points out extremes to be avoided, extremes which in curious and subtle ways influence our thought and conduct. We live in an age of pluralism, including theological pluralism within the Church. In this situation the clear and distinct boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy are not always clearly distinguishable. Thus, Rahner in an essay on heresy speaks of the presence and danger of latent heresies and leanings to heresy that might affect the theologian.⁹ While these inclinations remain unarticulated, they do affect our spontaneous practice and our response in dialogue, even if they are screened out in more reflective theological writings or lectures. In an analogy from moral theology, we can speak of a core vs. a peripheral systematic theology. What we say and hold in the core of our Christian existence may be orthodox, but that could be surrounded and influenced by attitudes, instincts, or customs that might be unorthodox. We must accordingly be alert to inconsistencies between our theory and practice. A theoretical commitment to Jesus as the Christ, as the way, truth, and life, could well be in tension with our lived practice and practical attitude towards nonbelievers. So, too, while in theory we see the Church as the light of nations, in practice we could too easily settle for an attitude of practical indifferentism.

In addition, theologians must constantly strive for internal consistency. That is to say, a position in Christology must be theologically consistent with the necessarily related positions of sin, grace, faith, and Trinity. In examining and working towards such consistency, the presentation of a spectrum of views can be of considerable assistance. At the end of this essay I will point beyond Christology and ecclesiology to

⁸While the spectrum presents four positions that are mutually exclusive, the theologian will probably find himself inclining or moving from his own position towards neighboring positions.

⁹Karl Rahner, *On Heresy* (New York, 1964). See, e.g., pp. 23-24, 37-38, 48-49. He employs the term "latent heresy" throughout.

other related areas of theology exemplified by the four positions on the spectrum.

In setting forth this spectrum of views, I am necessarily inadequate to the detailed analyses and distinctions that could be made within each position. And when I refer to specific theologians, this is done not to place them squarely in one or other position, but to exemplify the position I am presenting. It must also be admitted that the spectrum is inadequate to the differences that exist between Christian Churches. For my purposes, I include under "Christian Church" the mainline Churches, that would hold to belief in Jesus as the Christ, as Lord and Savior, and would exercise the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. I take the liberty of speaking in broad strokes of the Christian Churches, since the focal point of this essay is more upon the forces from outside affecting the Churches than the differences between Christian communities.

The reason why I set forth a Christological position first, and then the related ecclesiology, is a theological one. Even though ecclesiology has been in the center of Roman Catholic theology since Vatican II, I maintain that an ecclesiology follows from more basic positions taken (implicitly or explicitly) in Christology. The function and mission of the Church follows from the function and mission of Christ.¹⁰ In presenting the four positions, I begin with the most conservative and move towards the most liberal. The order could readily have been reversed. In fact, for the spectrum to function as an aid to the self-understanding of the theologian, it would be valuable to view one's own position from both directions, that is, as moving both towards and away from the more liberal and conservative positions.

Finally, I mention briefly what is common to all four views. In terms of Christology, all affirm that Jesus Christ is *a* way to salvation, a mediator of authentic existence. All view the Church as *a* way or means to salvation. They differ, however, on the relation of Jesus to other mediators of salvation, and on the relation of the Church to other mediations. They differ, therefore, on the degree of dispensability and the normative value of Jesus Christ and the Church for salvation. Salvation I am interpreting in a broad sense to mean God's activity whereby mankind is delivered from sin and its consequences. The saved person lives in accord with the reign of God, beginning in this life and achieving its fulness in life everlasting. The gifts and fruits of the Spirit as described by Paul characterize this saved life.¹¹

¹⁰ Each of the following essays will in different ways test and verify this principle—in the scriptural evidence, in patristic thought, and in contemporary theology of the Church.

¹¹ I do not enter into the complex question of the meaning of salvation as interior/spiritual vs. external/developmental. While this discussion, especially among theologies of liberation, is central to theology today, it is not the focus of my concern.

FIGURE 1
A SPECTRUM OF CHRISTOLOGIES AND ECCLESIOLOGIES

I Ecclesiocentric universe, exclusive Christology	Jesus Christ and Church constitutive and exclusive way of salvation	God's saving grace → Jesus Christ → explicit Church only
II Christocentric universe, inclusive Christology	<p>a) Jesus Christ and Church constitutive but not exclusive way of salvation</p> <p>b) Jesus Christ constitutive but Church nonconstitutive way of salvation</p>	<p>God's saving grace → Jesus Christ → explicit Church → all humanity</p> <p>God's saving grace → Jesus Christ { explicit Church all humanity </p>
III Theocentric universe, normative Christology	Jesus Christ and Church normative but not constitutive way of salvation	<p>God's saving grace { Jesus Christ as normative → Church various religions, all humanity </p>
IV Theocentric universe, nonnormative Christology	Jesus Christ one of many ways of salvation	<p>God's saving grace { Jesus Christ → Church various religions, all humanity </p>

A brief view of Figure I will provide an overview of where I am moving. I will analyze each of the four positions in detail, beginning with the first.

ECCLESIOCENTRIC UNIVERSE, EXCLUSIVE CHRISTOLOGY

Christology

The first position on the spectrum is the most conservative. It maintains that there are no other mediators of salvation than Jesus, since he is the only God-willed revealer of God's grace and salvation. All other savior figures are idols, man-created, with no power to lead to salvation. It is only through explicit personal knowledge of and commitment to Jesus as the Christ that salvation is possible. Jesus becomes a mediator of salvific grace only through a personal relationship to him. In other words, the activity of the divine Logos is limited to those who have explicit contact with the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. In this position the universe could be considered as Christocentric, and in an exclusive sense. Jesus Christ is the center and key to the meaning of human existence, and he becomes this for the individual only insofar as the individual comes to explicit awareness of, and contact with, Christ.

In the course of Christian history, scriptural evidence for this position has been found in texts such as these: "There is no other name in the whole world given to man by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:12); "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15-16); "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5); "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6).

Ecclesiology

The normal corollary to such a strict Christological position is a literalist interpretation of the maxim "Outside the Church no salvation." Because of its close connection with the saving events of the life of Jesus, the Church (as Christ) is the exclusive institution of salvation. The individual attains salvation only through explicit membership in the Church, since there is no other mediator of the salvation of Christ. Other religions, just as other savior figures, are false—fascinating but futile human attempts to reach the one and true God who is revealed exclusively in Christ. Scriptural evidence for this ecclesiological position is found in the missionary command at the end of Matthew's Gospel¹² and in the baptismal and Eucharistic texts of John's Gospel: "Unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5); and "If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and

¹²For an exegetical interpretation of these texts of Matthew, see the section of Thompson's essay on "The Gentile Mission."

drink his blood, you will not have life in you" (Jn 6:53). In this first position, therefore, there is no grace in the world if there is no Church.

Elements of this position are found in some explanations of infant baptism, in discussions of Limbo, and in some explanations of the missionary thrust of the Church. It helped account for the strong and tenacious missionary stance of saints such as Francis Xavier. Baptism is considered the necessary means to avoid eternal condemnation. Jansenism reflects this position in its rigor, and Leonard Feeney, of the more recent past, also exemplified it.¹³

In summary, this ecclesiological position is even more rigorous than an exclusive Christocentric view. It results in an ecclesiocentric universe.¹⁴

CHRISTOCENTRIC UNIVERSE, INCLUSIVE CHRISTOLOGY

Christology

If the first position could be characterized as an exclusive ecclesiocentric position, then this position is an inclusive Christocentric position. Since this and the following view of the spectrum seem to be most widely held and thus at the center of theological discussions today, I will present them in greater detail.

The second position is less rigorist than the first insofar as it moves from an exclusive view of Christ and the Church to one that allows for anonymous or implicit Christian faith as a way to salvation. It is more optimistic about the possibility of salvation. While persons can only be saved by the grace of Christ, that grace is offered and available to all, even to those who have never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. In this emphasis it is in sharp contrast to the previous position. In its positive tenets it maintains that there is only one economy of salvation, that Jesus Christ is the normative revelation of God and is constitutive of the work of God in the world. He is the mediator of all other revelations, and the salvation which can be attained in the world first occurs in Jesus and occurs elsewhere only through him.

The key word that distinguishes this position from the following is "constitutive."¹⁵ To say that Jesus is the constitutive mediator of

¹³ Catholic magisterial statements condemning heretical aspects of Jansenism can be found in Denzinger-Schönmetzer: e.g., 1295 (2305).

¹⁴ Pertinent here is Hans Küng's essay "The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation," in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed. Josef Neuner (London, 1967). He discusses the history and meaning of the phrase "Outside the Church no salvation," and shows it to be an ecclesiocentric view of the universe.

¹⁵ I have chosen the word "constitutive" to specifically characterize this second position of the spectrum. Other words have been employed by systematic theologians to indicate this type of high Christology: e.g., Jesus Christ as the absolute, final, unsurpassable, irrevocable, universal, eschatological, definitive, and unique mediator of salvation. Without examining them, we can see that they point to a common theme, signifying the essential constitutive function and importance of Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind.

salvation is to say that he is not only normative but the indispensable one. Without him there would be no salvation. He is the efficient cause or the condition apart from which there would be no saving grace in the world. The name "*Jesus Christ*" indicates that this saving event is constituted not by the eternal Logos but only because the Logos became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. "Constitutive," therefore, means that without this historical incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, no person would be saved.

To explain how the saving grace of Christ is present and operative beyond the explicit Christian pale, theologians speak of the anonymous Christian, the latent Church, and the supernatural existential. In these moves, the second position is clearly distinguished from the previous. Salvation is here available *extra Christum*, but it is only possible *propter Christum*.

Two key scriptural texts for this position are 1 Tim 2:4-6, "God our Savior desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth; for there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all"; and Acts 17:23, where Paul says that what the Athenians worship as unknown, he proclaims to them in proclaiming Jesus Christ as risen Lord. Rahner, for example, relies heavily upon these texts in speaking of God's universal salvific will.¹⁶

Jesus remains the center, not only decisively revealing, but also constituting and making available, God's love to all mankind. He is the condition apart from which we cannot achieve authentic existence and salvation. It is only in and through Jesus that God's salvific will becomes operative in human history. Thus Rahner, for example, writes in his key essay on Christianity and non-Christian religions that "God desires the salvation of everyone; and this salvation willed by God is the salvation won by Christ."¹⁷ He exemplifies what we mean by "constitutive" when he writes: "He namely, as God made man, is the true and only efficient cause of our salvation; as Son of God he is our salvation itself, and access of grace to God the Father."¹⁸ From its very inception, God's plan to save all mankind has proceeded from the God-man as its starting point and to him as its goal.

Ecclesiology

In this as in the first position, Jesus is the constitutive, normative mediator of God's salvation to mankind. But divergences from the first

¹⁶ Among the many places where Rahner employs these texts, see the clear statement in his *The Christian of the Future* (New York, 1967) pp. 94-97.

¹⁷ *Art. cit.* (n. 5 above) p. 122.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, *Mary, Mother of the Lord* (New York, 1963) p. 95.

position appear clearly when we move from Christology to ecclesiology. There is a decisive move away from the narrow and literalist interpretation of the maxim "Outside the Church no salvation." One does not have to be explicitly Christian to be saved, even though those not explicitly Christian are saved only through the grace of Christ that is manifest and present in the Church today.

This ecclesiological position finds echoes in the documents of Vatican II. For example, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church speaks of those who can be saved if they sincerely seek God and follow the dictates of their conscience. In a footnote the document refers to the letter from the Holy See to Cardinal Cushing opposing the position of Leonard Feeney on the salvation of non-Christians. A parallel position is found in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.¹⁹ While this second position is clear in that we can be saved without becoming explicit members of the Church, what is not entirely clear is whether the Church must be viewed as the constitutive mediator of the salvific grace of God to mankind. Hence we must examine two possibilities for an ecclesiology; (a) the Church as the constitutive mediator of grace, just as Jesus Christ is constitutive mediator, and (b) the Church as not a constitutive mediator of grace, but representing or pointing to the constitutive mediation of Christ.

a) Because of a close and inseparable link between Christ and the Church, the grace of Christ becomes available to non-Christians only through the Church. That is to say, if the Church were to cease, so would the salvific grace of Christ. The Church is as much a necessary mediator of grace as Christ himself is, and is indispensable for the salvation of mankind. The maxim "Outside the Church no salvation" comes to mean "Without the Church no salvation." If there is no Church in the world, then there is no salvation.²⁰ A scriptural text exemplifying this position would be the words of Jesus, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16). So, too, the image of the body of Christ employed by Paul indicates that separation from the body necessarily involves separation from the head, Jesus Christ.

Two references to theologians are added, to exemplify this position in ecclesiology. De Lubac, among his powerful and beautiful writings on the Church, expresses himself as follows:

¹⁹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 16 (*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott [New York, 1966] p. 35); Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 22 (pp. 221-22).

²⁰ Heinz Robert Schlette, in his *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York, 1966), explains that this interpretation of the maxim is substantially held by Michael Schmaus; see p. 16.

if . . . the formula "Outside the Church no salvation" has still an ugly sound, there is no reason why it should not be put in a positive form and read, appealing to all men of good will, not "Outside the Church you are damned," but "It is by the Church and by the Church alone that you will be saved." For it is through the Church that salvation will come, that it is already coming to mankind.²¹

Rahner writes in similar vein that "It is only in Jesus Christ that this salvation is conferred, and through Christianity and the one Church that it must be mediated to all men."²²

b) In the second type of ecclesiology, the Church is viewed as the representative community in continuity with Christ. Because of this closeness to Christ, the Church is a privileged mediator of salvation. Yet, because the work of Christ has been accomplished and his Spirit given, even if the Church were to cease, God's salvific grace won by Christ would remain present and effective. The maxim "Outside the Church no salvation" in this position indicates that the Church signifies or points to the reality of God's salvation operative throughout the world.²³ While the Church mediates this salvation to its own members, it serves only to point non-Christians to the reality of God's grace that has always been present and available.

The Church's mission here is not one of absolute necessity of survival, in order that God's grace may be present, but a mission to represent and proclaim the love of God which is operative and available to all. In making the love of God more explicit by witnessing to its fullest manifestation in Christ Jesus, the Church makes a fuller and more explicit living of the saved life possible. Walter Kasper speaks along these lines: "The Church's mission, which is rooted in the absolute claim of Christianity, is not so much to save the individual—who in principle can be saved outside its visible communion—as to represent and proclaim the love of God, to give testimony to hope, and so to be a sign among the nations."²⁴ In accord with this position, to be saved, a non-Christian need not necessarily have a desire for the Church (*votum ecclesiae*), only a desire for Christ (*votum implicitum Christi*).

THEOCENTRIC UNIVERSE, NORMATIVE CHRISTOLOGY

Christology

If the previous position is best characterized as an inclusive Chris-

²¹ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism* (New York, 1950) p. 118.

²² Karl Rahner, "The Church, Churches, and Religions," *Theological Investigations* 10 (New York, 1973) 31.

²³ An example of this interpretation can be found in the essay on Church in *Sacramentum mundi* 1, in the subsection entitled "Outside the Church No Salvation," by Marie-Joseph LeGuillou.

²⁴ Walter Kasper, "Absoluteness of Christianity," in *Sacramentum mundi* 1, 312.

to-centric view, this might be called a theocentric position, with Jesus as the normative expression of the loving and salvific nature of God. While the key word of the previous position was "constitutive," here the key word is "normative." We can unpack its meaning by beginning with a standard definition, where a norm is a rule or authoritative standard. The word is familiar to Christian theologians from its application to Scripture as the *norma normans, non normata* for Christian theology. It indicates, therefore, a measurer, a superior or ideal type, which can function to measure, correct, and judge others by its own standard or correct measure. When applied to the person and work of Jesus Christ, "normative" indicates that he is the revelation and mediation from God which corrects and fulfils all other mediations. It does not imply that he is the constitutive, unique, or unsurpassable mediator of salvation for all mankind.

It is important to note that this third position presents a real option between the second and fourth positions. If we cannot affirm Jesus Christ as constitutive mediator, we do not necessarily shift to a position of total relativity. There is a middle position, where the key concept of normativeness enters.

What reasons move theologians from the Christocentric to the theocentric view, where Jesus remains highly significant, as the normative mediator of God's saving grace? As the Christian theologian becomes more aware of the positive values of other religions, he begins to examine more carefully the uniqueness and universality of his own claims. So, too, the *de facto* minority status of Christians is seen as a given that will not be overcome in the foreseeable future. If God desires all to be saved, much of His saving activity will be accomplished in a religious milieu which is non-Christian. The very fact that several theologians begin to speak of Christianity as the extraordinary way of salvation, and of other religions as the ordinary way, indicates a shift in perspective.²⁵

In a more directly theological line of argument, the danger of the previous position is that it can tend to equate theology with Christology in an unnuanced manner. It inclines to a position where we say that God has never spoken to man at all except in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus becomes the constitutive mediator not only of salvation but of all human knowledge and truth. H. Richard Niebuhr thus explains that by inclining to substitute Christology for theology, we incline to substitute the love of Jesus Christ for the love of God.²⁶ The previous

²⁵ See, e.g., the works of Hans Küng and Heinz Robert Schlette already cited (nn. 14 and 20 above).

²⁶ Niebuhr expresses this caution in *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* (New York, 1956) pp. 44 ff.

position, in addition, has difficulty in accounting for the reality of man's life with God prior to the historical appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. To maintain its strong Christocentric focus, it speaks of a proleptic appropriation of his benefits, or the anticipated merits of Christ affecting persons born before the saving action of Jesus. By this move it avoids the obvious difficulty of affirming that God was unforgiving until Christ came.

Viewed positively, this third Christological position states that Jesus Christ is the normative way to God and His salvation, but he is neither the exclusive nor the constitutive way. Salvation, which was always possible for all mankind, becomes decisively and normatively manifest in Jesus. God is love, and this love has been operative always and everywhere; this love is revealed most clearly in the person and work of Christ, but it is not mediated *only* through Christ. Scriptural evidence for this theocentric position would be found in the first Letter of John 4:7-10, as well as in Pauline texts where Christ belongs to God (1 Cor 3:23) and God is the head of Christ (1 Cor 11:3). Finally, in Romans 8:39 Paul speaks powerfully of the love of God *made visible* in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The basis for saying that Jesus is the normative mediator of salvation can come from two directions. First, some hold that this is what Scripture clearly teaches, speaking of Jesus as the Word of God, and God speaking to us in His Son in the fulness of times (Heb 1). Others, Troeltsch for example, conclude to the normativeness of Jesus Christ and Christianity through comparison with other religions.²⁷ The varied claims are examined in dialogue; then, based upon a view of who man is and who God is, we judge that Jesus Christ is the normative revelation and exemplification of the nature of God and man. Troeltsch writes:

Accordingly, he will be a Christian because he discerns in Christianity the purest and most forceful revelation of the higher world. He will see in the Christian faith not the absolute but the normative religion, the religion that is normative not only for him personally but also for all history up to the present time.²⁸

Because this third position on the spectrum is controversial and a genuine *quaestio disputata*, I will refer to several theologians in whose writings we find descriptions of this position. Schubert Ogden, reflecting on the theology of F. D. Maurice, writes that today we need a new reformation in Christian theology: "Whatever else our age may still be willing to accept from us, surely it will no longer hear of a Christianity

²⁷ See Troeltsch's *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (Richmond, 1971).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

that is little more than a tribal religion with universal pretensions."²⁹ He develops this:

One is still free to affirm that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, as real and necessary as it certainly is, does not constitute our human rights and responsibilities, but rather vindicates them In the same way, one may affirm the necessity of Jesus' sacrificial life and death without in the least supposing that his sacrifice accomplishes some other end than perfectly manifesting God's everlasting purpose to embrace even our sin within his love.³⁰

In this interpretation of the Christ event, Jesus is not constitutive of man's salvation but represents and reveals decisively and normatively the universal love of God. The absence of the Christ event would not imply or result in the absence of grace, but rather the absence of the decisive manifestation of grace.

Eugene TeSelle likewise affirms the centrality of Jesus, but speaks against his uniqueness:

The humanity of Jesus, although it is shaped by and attests to the Word, neither exhausts the Word nor is the sole means of access to it, for the Word is both knowable and efficacious elsewhere. The uniqueness of Jesus—a uniqueness which should not be seen apart from the uniqueness of Israel and the Church—will consist then in being the touchstone by which other responses are judged, the achievement by which their deficiencies are overcome, the center of gravity around which they cluster.³¹

In a criticism of Rahner's doctrine of the anonymous Christian (the second position on our spectrum), TeSelle writes:

The consequences of his theory of the omnipresence of grace, taken to their full extent, are precisely the opposite of what Rahner himself suggests: it is not that everything must be organized around the one figure of Jesus, but that Jesus is the complete and definitive expression of a relationship between God and man which is present, at least in potentiality, from the very first and which can be acknowledged and approximated to some degree at any time and place.³²

There is another manner in which this third position might be affirmed. Without explicitly denying that Christ is the constitutive mediator of all salvation, one could hold a sceptical attitude and say we have no evidence to affirm that Jesus Christ is the constitutive mediator for all mankind. Such seems to be the position of H. Richard Niebuhr:

²⁹ Schubert Ogden, "The Reformation That We Want," *Anglican Theological Review* 54 (1972) 268. See also his *Christ without Myth* (New York, 1961) esp. chap. 4.

³⁰ *Art. cit.*, p. 267 f.

³¹ Eugene TeSelle, *Christ in Context* (Philadelphia, 1975) p. 164.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

So far as I could see and can now see, that miracle has been wrought among us by and through Jesus Christ. I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to men outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence also of something like Jesus Christ.³³

Paul Tillich seems to summarize succinctly the third position when he writes: "If he is accepted as the Savior, what does salvation through him mean? The answer cannot be that there is no saving power apart from him, but that he is the ultimate criterion of every healing and saving process Therefore, wherever there is saving power in mankind, it must be judged by the saving power in Jesus as the Christ."³⁴

Ecclesiology

The ecclesiology of this third position is similar to the second ecclesiological stance of the second position, where the Church is a sign of salvation but certainly not its indispensable mediator. Insofar as Christ is normative, the Church can be considered the normative way of salvation. In God's plan the Church is intended to be the community in which the truest and fullest revelation of His love is manifest. The Church is the measure by which other religious communities are judged. But insofar as Jesus Christ himself in this third position is not constitutive, much less can the Church be considered to be the constitutive mediator of salvation.

There seems, however, to be a difference in the attitude of the believer to Jesus in this third position compared with the second. Since it is a more theocentric position, and since Jesus is viewed as the normative but not constitutive mediator of salvation, he is viewed less as the object of faith and more as a model of faith. Jesus Christ points the believer to the Father rather than to himself. In the second position, in contrast, Jesus is viewed as the sole embodiment and realization of God's love, and he is clearly the object of worship. His humanity is holy, seemingly independent of his decisions and actions.³⁵

THEOCENTRIC UNIVERSE, NONNORMATIVE CHRISTOLOGY

The third position affirms Jesus Christ as the normative mediator of salvation. In the fourth position, a more sceptical epistemology is operative, maintaining that it is impossible or unnecessary to judge

³³H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," *Christian Century* 77 (1960) 249.

³⁴Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 2 (Chicago, 1957) pp. 167-68.

³⁵The subsequent essays on the Church by Haight and Sears will present examples of these two different attitudes towards the person of Jesus Christ.

among religions and savior figures. Judgments about claims to uniqueness or normativeness are unverifiable and without basis. Adherents of this position refuse to make judgments or comparisons about various religions, and prefer an epistemological relativism or scepticism. This position could be viewed simply as a negative refusal, but it must also be viewed in a positive manner insofar as the adherent stresses even more than the previous position the incomprehensibility of God and the mystery of human subjectivity. It prefers to let God be God; it cautions against making God and His ways into our image, and against trying to judge Him and His ways by our human standards. Its posture is that of Job when he exclaims in reverent awe before the mystery of God: "I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand, on marvels beyond me and my knowledge" (Jb 42:3). It echoes the mysterious ways of God to which Jesus refers when he boldly asserts that "men from east and west, from north and south, will come to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13:29).

In this position, therefore, there are many mediators of salvation and Jesus Christ is one of them. To move from this neutralist position to one which affirms that Jesus is either normative or constitutive is to move beyond the evidence at hand. Perhaps a person like Thomas Jefferson exemplifies this model in his writings.³⁶ He writes of the advantages and disadvantages of the system of morals which Jesus presented, and concludes that they could be considered the most perfect and sublime ever taught by man. Jesus is the great teacher or enlightener, leading his followers in the search for wisdom. In a similar manner, Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks critically of the Christian Churches, although he does look favorably upon Jesus as belonging to the true race of prophets. Jesus, according to Emerson, can be considered a true mediator in that sense only in which possibly any being can mediate between God and man—that is, an instructor of man. He teaches us how to become like God.³⁷

There can be an intense loyalty to Jesus Christ and his cause, but it is not such that we make the further step of placing him in a unique or even normative position in regard to other great figures of history and other ways of salvation. The ecclesiological position clearly follows. There are many communities of salvation, for God has no special, favored way in which we are to achieve salvation.

Is this fourth position a legitimate and tenable Christian position? In

³⁶ Among the varied writings of Jefferson, see his *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, Extracted Textually from the Gospels*.

³⁷ A key essay of Emerson that manifests this position is his famous "Divinity School Address."

the Roman Catholic Church's reaction to certain movements of the nineteenth century, it is clearly disallowed. For example, in Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), theses 15 to 18 of Section 3 are specifically directed against attitudes of religious indifferentism or latitudinarianism, which would assert that all religions are equal. Yet, when the fourth position is viewed positively in its emphasis upon the incomprehensibility of God and acknowledges Jesus as a way of salvation for his followers, it seems to be more viable and not merely a negative position of religious laxity or indifferentism.

Paul Tillich, for example, refers to the mystical critical element in human existence. We come to see that all our formulations about God are inadequate and that we must somehow go beyond them. While it is true that we do need embodiments of the Ultimate, these are secondary.³⁸ So, too, Rahner indicates in several of his essays that God is always found as mystery, as the incomprehensible one.³⁹ Even God's revelation of Himself in Jesus does not remove the mystery; in fact, as with all knowledge, according to Rahner, it makes it more of a mystery. Thus the revelation of God in Christ could be considered as deepening rather than lessening the mystery of God's salvific ways for mankind. While the conviction that God is love grows deeper, the question of how God's salvific love illuminates mankind can become ever more mysterious. Rahner has called the Christian the true and most radical sceptic. He can hold no opinion to be completely true and no opinion to be completely false.⁴⁰ I suggest these thoughts from Tillich and Rahner to remind the theologian of the caution with which he makes his theological statements. Elements of this theological caution lead persons to move to this fourth and most tolerant position on the spectrum.

In addition to the more directly theological rationale based upon the incomprehensibility of God, a reason that might lead to this position is a careful observation of the actual history of religions. Such is the case with Arnold Toynbee. He would argue that the study of the history of religions reveals no movement of religions towards Christianity or Jesus Christ as unique or even normative. The more we examine particular religious traditions, the more we are struck by their individual characteristics and differing viewpoints. Thus it becomes more difficult to make judgments

³⁸Paul Tillich, "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian," in *The Future of Religions*, ed. Jerald Brauer (New York, 1966) p. 87. See also Tillich's concluding section in his *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, 1952) for his thoughts on the God above God.

³⁹See, e.g., his essay on "Mystery" in *Sacramentum mundi* 4. This point of view is powerfully expressed in the address Rahner delivered at the University of Chicago, Nov. 5, 1975, on "Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God."

⁴⁰The final pages of the talk referred to above (n. 39) express this viewpoint.

of uniqueness or normativeness among religions, for these judgments all too often are unfair or inadequate to the richness and complexity of the particular religions.

We ought also, I should say, to try to purge our Christianity of the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is unique. This is not just a Western Christian belief: it is intrinsic to Christianity itself. All the same, I suggest that we have to do this if we are to purge Christianity of the exclusive-mindedness and intolerance that follows from a belief in Christianity's uniqueness.⁴¹

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

If the spectrum of four views I have presented is clarifying in terms of Christology and ecclesiology, then it should also be of assistance in clarifying positions in related areas of Christian theology. Instead of developing these areas at length, I present them in the form of a diagram (Figure II).

I set this forth again with the caution that I am making generalizations and that at times the pieces do not fit. But I do it with the conviction that the spectrum does exemplify larger viewpoints, attitudes, and methodological differences that are significant in Christian theology today. To expand on this, I will lift from the diagram several suggestive lines of inquiry in the area of method and basic viewpoints that seem to be exemplified by the four positions of the spectrum. Three areas to be briefly examined are (1) the attitude to the non-Christian world as the dialogical partner of theology, (2) the attitude to specifically Christian sources and resources, and (3) indications of theological method involved in the four positions.

1) *Attitude to the non-Christian world as a dialogical partner in theology.* The first position (ecclesiocentric) looks with total negativeness upon the non-Christian world, as the place of error. There is no purpose in a two-way dialogue; there is only a call to conversion. The second position, anonymous Christianity, views the non-Christian world as ordered to Christ, with its truth and good ultimately derived from and indeed constituted by Christ. It engages in dialogue but ultimately interprets the non-Christian world in terms of Christian categories. Thus it is relatively open-minded. The third position, theocentric, is more open and positive towards non-Christian realities, since it sees the non-Christian world as a place of genuine revelation and as a way to God. It can learn from non-Christians about the same God whom it sees normatively revealed in Christ, for all religions are mediations of divine

⁴¹This quotation from Toynbee is from his key essay "What Should Be the Christian Approach to the Contemporary Non-Christian Faiths?" in *Attitudes toward Other Religions*, ed. Owen Thomas (London, 1969) pp. 160-61.

Topic area	FIGURE II			
	1) Jesus Christ exclusive mediator	2) Jesus Christ constitutive mediator	3) Jesus Christ normative mediator	4) Jesus Christ one of many mediators
Extent of God's saving grace and love	limited to Christians	through Christ to all	to all, and manifest most clearly in Christ	to all in different ways
Kingdom of God and Spirit of God	identified with the Church	present only through Christ, for all	manifest most fully in Christ, for all	available for all
Attitude of Christian to non-Christian world	negative attitude, since it is place of sin and error	receptive to action of God in the world in- terpreted Christo- logically	receptive, open, maintain- ing Christ as norm of God's activity	positive attitude, with God operative universally
Attitude to other re- ligions	other religions as abso- lutely false	other religions as rela- tively false, pre- Christian	others as relatively true, yet normed by Jesus Christ	true, valid ways of salvation
Christian missionary attitudes	bring all into the Church	point all to Christ so as to make explicit what is already implicit	point to Christ as norma- tive way, and learn from dialogue	dialogue, but allow diversity of religion
The individual is saved by	orthodoxy necessary	orthodoxy and ortho- praxis	orthopraxis as primary	orthopraxis as sole criterion
Sinfulness is overcome by	strong sense of sin, overcome by Christ in his Church	Christ as the exclusive way beyond sin	Christ as the normative way beyond sin	many ways to over- come sin
Type of Christology	high Christology, Trinity and hypostatic union	high Christology, Trinity and hypostatic union	low Christology, stress the humanity of Jesus	low Christology
Christ event is salvific by	ontological power of the Incarnation of Christ efficient causality	ontological power of the life, death, resurrec- tion of Christ efficient causality primarily	moral power of the teach- ing, life, death, resur- rection of Christ exemplary causality primarily	moral power of the teaching, life, death, resurrection of Christ exemplary causality

salvific truth. The fourth position, the extreme opposite of the first, refuses from epistemological grounds to make judgments among religions. In dialogue it must accept the given pluralism, since it sees no way to move beyond pluralism to make judgments of normativeness. Thus, in the final analysis, it is a passive partner in dialogue between religions.

2) *Attitude to specifically Christian sources and resources.* In the first position, Scripture and Christian dogma are the final and absolute criteria for truth, unassailable by non-Christian viewpoints or even by contemporary experience. The Scriptures, which are often read in an inadequate proof-text manner, are normative over contemporary experience. In the second position, Scripture and tradition retain their normativeness but are examined more critically and historically. They are interpreted in terms of their response to their situation and not in a fundamentalistic sense made applicable to all times and places. Thus adequacy for contemporary experience becomes a norm or guideline, in addition to Scripture and tradition. In the third position, Scripture and tradition are viewed as normative for the believer but not for nonbelievers. Other religious sources and traditions function salvifically for other religions, even though in dialogue we would maintain that we can point to the superiority or normativeness of the Christian witness. This conviction of the normativeness of Christianity is not imposed upon other religions, nor even used to interpret other religions from our Christian perspective. In the fourth position, Scripture and tradition remain an important way for the Christian but are surely not the only way to discover God. The epistemological attitude of this position denies that we can adequately understand other religious traditions to which we do not belong, so as to make comparisons between Christian and non-Christian sources and resources.

3) *Indications of theological method involved in the four positions.* In the first position, theology proceeds from above, from religious documents that are norms above space and time. It is highly dogmatic and universalistic in its attitude, with little or no attempt at a correlation of Christian sources and contemporary questions and experiences. In the second position, correlation takes place, but from the conviction of the ultimate truth of the Christian witness. Thus it, too, is basically dogmatic and universalistic, although it is more open to, and involved in, concrete historical experience. It seems to rely upon a universal ontology in its affirmations concerning the constitutive function of Jesus Christ. The third position moves from a universalist and dogmatic towards a historical and existential viewpoint. Individuals and groups in dialogue with other individuals and groups become the locus for truth and intelligibility. Jesus Christ emerges as normative from below, from historical experience. Thus, while this position may contain elements of

an ontology or may find itself moving towards an ontology, that ontology will be formed from below, with its ultimate intelligibility emerging from history. In the fourth position, the shift continues, from dogmatism through universalism through historical intelligibility, to focus upon epistemological problems. It affirms that there is no point from which we can affirm that Jesus Christ is the constitutive or even normative way of salvation.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

I conclude with a brief evaluative statement of each of the four positions. The first position, exclusive ecclesiocentrism, seems clearly out of touch with our common experience of the values and spiritual resources of non-Christian religions. It is unacceptable because of its closed nature, its refusal to join in discussion with opposing viewpoints.

The second position, an inclusive, constitutive Christology, does take into account the values of non-Christian realities, even though in the final analysis it interprets them from the Christian perspective. It does seem to be the mainline Christian position, exemplified, for example, in Catholicism in Vatican II. But it seems that it will continually be under attack from a more liberal position, based either upon the manner in which it selects from and interprets the Scriptures, or upon the more general and encompassing question of the historical nature of all human understanding.

The third position, theocentric, with a normative Christology, can join more readily in dialogue with non-Christian religions and affirm its theistic position. The dialogue of differences resides on the level of mediations rather than ultimates and ends. The advantage of this position is its openness to dialogue and its high respect for other religious traditions. Two questions may be put to it. First, in affirming Jesus Christ as normative, does it not find itself moving in the direction of the previous position, and asking what is the basis of this normativeness? Secondly, from the other direction, does it not have to respond to the challenge of epistemology and establish more critically how it can affirm that Jesus Christ is superior or normative in relation to other savior figures?

The fourth position, where Jesus is one of many mediators, seems somewhat ineffective in an age of pluralism, since it affirms that we cannot make decisions among religions and religious savior figures. It is an attractive position because of its cautious scepticism, because of its tolerance of other positions, and because of its emphasis upon the majesty and mystery of the divine.

As I have indicated, it would seem that the most important discussion among Christian theologians is between those who affirm the second or

the third positions. Both positions demand that we take Christ and culture, the Church and the world, with utter seriousness. Neither of the two poles can be dissolved, minimalized, or left out of the discussion. In the first position, the pole of the world and culture is definitely left out; in the fourth position, the pole of Christ and Church, as traditionally understood by Christian theology, is minimalized.

Obviously, discussion on the merits of the various positions could continue. But the major thrust of this essay is to serve as an introduction, to lead into the following related essays, which focus upon ecclesiology in the Scriptures, in tradition, and in contemporary theology. If this essay is successful in setting forth a spectrum of positions and categories in Christology and ecclesiology that will be of assistance in subsequent discussions, it will have achieved its main purpose.