

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE HUMAN, CRITICAL, PUBLIC JESUS

MONIKA HELLWIG

Georgetown University

JESUS OF Nazareth has come into focus in a new way in the theological reflection of the last 50 years. In counterpoint with continuing reflection on the cosmic and eschatological Christ, there has been a new wave of interest in grounding Christology more intensively, extensively, and attentively in the full human and historical reality of Jesus. A number of forces have contributed to this: in particular, the maturation of modern biblical and patristic scholarship; the impact of Jewish-Christian and other interfaith encounters; the more inclusive scope of modern science, and particularly of the social sciences; modern philosophies, most notably existentialism and process thought; the influence of more widespread study of the history of religions; and, finally, the questions raised by various political, economic, and social liberation movements of the contemporary world.

FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS IN CHRISTOLOGY

Perhaps the first fundamental shift in Christology during this period has been the turn from a classic form of "descending" to an evolving form of "ascending" Christology. These two terms, which have come into general usage since the Second Vatican Council, were defined explicitly by Karl Rahner in a lecture given in Munich in 1971 but published some years later.¹ At that time Rahner was pointing to a shift that had been happening gradually for some time. The classic form of Christology was based on the formula of the Council of Chalcedon. It was mainly an elaboration of the meaning and implications of that formula for our understanding of who Christ is in relation to God and in relation to the human community, what we are to infer about his knowledge and will and sensory experience during his lifetime, what his condition is now, and so forth. This came to be designated a "descending" Christology because it began with the affirmation of a divine incarnation, thus proceeding from the divine "down" to the human, and because it began from a dogmatic formula on a "high" level of philosophic systematization and led "down" to the concrete historical events on which the systema-

¹"The Two Basic Types of Christology," *Theological Investigations* 13 (New York: Seabury, 1975) 213-23.

tization was based.

The implications of this starting point and this direction of argumentation were very consequential. The concise verbal formula as a starting point gave a certain static quality to Christology.² The discussion proceeded more or less syllogistically from the initial premise of the one person and two natures, and this mode of argumentation lent continuity, distinctiveness, and a certain easy assurance to all that was claimed for Christ. Moreover, it grounded the distinctiveness and certainty of Christian theology as a whole in an almost effortless way. As a pillar supporting Christian faith, and leading to a catechesis of comfortable certainty, this style of Christology had much to recommend it which is seldom acknowledged by theologians now.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of this style of Christology have become very evident in the last decades.³ In its crudest terms, it was a method which moved from the unknown to the known—from assumptions of what it means to be divine to attempts to harmonize what it means to be human with the pre-established content of the divinity claim. Similarly, the discussion moved from a highly abstract formulation to selective consideration of the historical events on which it was based. More specifically, it is problematic that we inherited a Christology separated from soteriology—a discussion of who Christ is prior to any discussion of how he has made and is making a difference. This order of discussion in effect rendered irrelevant to Christology the way Jesus lived his life, the context in which he lived it, the manner and content of his preaching with all their nuances, his attitudes to people and events, and even the specific causes of his trial and execution. The desirable timelessness and universality that lifted classical Christology out of its particular cultural setting to be adaptable to all times and societies was had at too steep a price—a certain sterile irrelevance to the burning issues that people of our time face day by day.

Further concern has been expressed in these last decades over the sociopolitical implications of the classic Christology. Because of its timeless character, rather detached from the events of human societies in their constantly changing history, classic Christology seems rather to explain than to challenge what is going on in the human community.

² So much so that Karl Rahner found he had to argue, in an article written before 1954, that Chalcedon might be a starting point, but it must not be seen as the static end point of Christology for all time: "Current Problems in Christology," *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 149–200.

³ A concise and penetrating analysis of the problems encountered in classic Christology in our times has been offered by Gerald O'Collins, *What Are They Saying about Jesus?* (New York: Paulist, 1977).

Jesus emerges as the Pantocrator in the world as it already is, with all its injustices, false values, oppression and exclusion of less powerful groups, enduring conditions of cold war, and so forth. Attitudes that take these things for granted as the state of the world until the end time are linked with a too exclusive concentration on the divinity of Jesus as his essential identity, thereby placing him above all these things, and placing the salvation he mediates in that other, eternal realm which is where he really belongs. That realm, incidentally, is the realm of spirit. Risen bodies are quite awkwardly located there, and mortal bodies not at all. As long as salvation belongs exclusively in that realm, famine, disease, homelessness, persecution, even torture are not immediately relevant to the project of redemption. Moreover, it can quite easily be assumed that the social structures causing all this human suffering, and the relationships between people which the structures embody, are also not of immediate relevance to salvation. To Jesus in person these problems are related through the individual who suffers them, because the humanity of Jesus (seen as very passive) provides the model of patient and uncritical endurance under all circumstances.

The attempts at a Christology "from below" arose from this awareness of irrelevance, empowered by increasingly sophisticated New Testament scholarship, and given linguistic categories by existentialist philosophy. In narrative form these attempts included such works as Romano Guardini's *The Lord*.⁴ In systematic theology early attempts included such works as Karl Adam's *The Christ of Faith*,⁵ in which a serious effort was made to bring the ascending Christology suggested by New Testament scholarship into partnership with the post-Chalcedonian descending Christology that was the established norm. At this stage, in the early 50s, the intention seems to have been to supply a missing component of Christology rather than to reshape the whole enterprise. That missing component was the human history and the human experience of the historical Jesus.

Simultaneously, however, other realizations were being stirred up. The foundational theological work of Karl Rahner in the 50s and early 60s⁶ introduced new epistemological as well as ontological questions into Christology. Such questions were prompted by the existentialism of Martin Heidegger in particular, though they went back to the philosophy

⁴ Chicago: Regnery, 1954; original German, 1937.

⁵ New York: Pantheon, 1957; first published as a collection of revised lectures in 1954, in the original German.

⁶ As set forth at that time in *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) and later incorporated in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), originally published in German in 1976.

of the Enlightenment and corresponded to issues that had been raised by Thomas Aquinas. These questions had to do with what it means to exist, to be human, to be spirit living a corporeal life in a material world, and to know and understand in ways that far transcend sense perception. Rahner related these questions to that of the relation between beings and the transcendent source of being, God, and it was in this context that he approached the divinity claim for Jesus and the Chalcedonian formula. Something similar had been attempted even earlier among Protestant theologians, by Paul Tillich in particular, reinterpreting the tradition in an even more radical way.⁷ Because of its radical questioning in a Catholic context, the Christology of Rahner emerged as very complex and addressed to fellow theologians. Tillich, who did not have the constraints of a continuing hierarchic magisterium, was able to achieve a simplicity and coherence that made the work accessible to a much wider readership, though in the long run perhaps less useful to the community of believers in their life and worship.

What was essentially at stake in existentialist Christologies was the determination not to say about the human Jesus anything which we know from our own introspective reflection on our own human existence to be self-contradictory or otherwise absurd. It meant positively to assume in the human Jesus the fulness of humanity as we can discover it from within the experience of being human. It may seem that this is obvious and has always been a touchstone of orthodoxy, since Chalcedon insisted that the one Jesus Christ to whom we rightly attribute divinity is not therefore to be understood as less than fully human. Yet it is clear that the verbal orthodoxy maintained through the centuries was accompanied by styles of devotion, iconography, worship, and Christian life that sharply contradicted the assertion of the full humanity of Jesus. As has frequently been observed by theologians in recent times, emphasis on the divinity of Jesus that diminished his humanity, so that he was no longer a model for imitation, often escaped notice or passed for devotion, while strong emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, even within the bounds of orthodoxy, has usually been suspect. The developments of the last half century have been no exception to that.

Although the existentialist approach to Christology raised issues and questions that cannot be forgotten again but will remain a permanent part of Western Christian tradition, there were other influences that suggested that the transformation of theology in general and of Christology in particular had by no means gone far enough. Biblical scholarship, while it pointed so insistently to the humanity of Jesus, also

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957).

demanded attention to the particularity of his historical context, which combined with post-World War II anxiety about the modern holocaust of the Jews and about the religious component that played a part in it. The result was a series of studies and publications concerned with Jesus as a Jew of the first century, living in the context of the Hebrew tradition with its particular sense of covenant, election, and messianic expectation, and confronting a variety of sects with very diverse interpretations of the tradition. In this way the teaching of Jesus, his own sense of relationship to the transcendent God, his attitude to worldly power, and the shape of his expectation of the coming reign of God all came into a new focus. Jewish authors, such as Jules Isaac,⁸ challenged many of the factual presuppositions on which traditional Christology depended. Other Jewish authors, such as David Flusser,⁹ studied Jesus in his own historical context, not as the founder of Christianity but as a teacher in the tradition of Judaism who made a contribution to that tradition. Christian authors responded. Though the discussion was wider than Christology, the latter was included. Some responses were extreme in their call for a radical rethinking of Christology, including even the Christology of the New Testament.¹⁰ Other responses have been more cautious, while equally aware of the far-reaching nature of the challenge presented to Christology by Jewish scholars. Those who have addressed the Christological issues directly have included J. Coert Rylaarsdam,¹¹ Jakob Jocz,¹² John M. Oesterreicher,¹³ and John Pawlikowski.¹⁴

After initial responses to the accusation of "deicide" long made against the Jews, and to the question of "infidelity" and historical hostilities, Jewish-Christian discussion inevitably moves to the reasons for calling Jesus messiah and the nature of the redemption he is said to have brought about, and by way of these questions to the claim of his uniqueness and definitive status in history, and finally to the divinity claim. The Jewish-Christian dialogue has remained, unfortunately, the concern of a rather

⁸ E.g., in *Jesus and Israel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), first published in French in 1959, representing research of decades.

⁹ Cf. *Jesus* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

¹⁰ E.g., Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974), containing ideas adumbrated in earlier lectures and articles.

¹¹ See, e.g., J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "Jewish-Christian Relationship: The Two Covenants and the Dilemmas of Christology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (1972) 249-70.

¹² Cf. Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: A Study in Controversy between Church and Synagogue* (London: SPCK, 1954), revised from earlier edition of 1949.

¹³ For the relevant bibliography, see Michael B. McGarry, *Christology after Auschwitz* (New York: Paulist, 1977), and John T. Pawlikowski, *Christ in the Light of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1982).

¹⁴ Most recently in *Jesus and the Theology of Israel* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989).

small circle of theologians, but its influence on Christology has been penetrating. For example, the Jewish challenge has beaten a path into Christology from soteriological questions, and these not in the abstract but in concrete historical terms, including the this-worldly aspects of the promised restoration of the reign of God. Furthermore, the Jewish challenge has called for the re-evaluation of both the teaching and the claims of Jesus by situating them within Hebrew tradition and its expectations, which requires serious consideration not only of the influence that Jesus had on others, but of the influences that shaped him—a very practical demand to take the humanity of Jesus seriously.

Meanwhile, there were other post-World War II influences toward a soteriology inclusive of this-worldly issues of survival, community, justice, and peace, and these influences inevitably led to Christology. The work of Protestant theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg in eschatology eventually came to terms with the questions it raised for Christology. In his major work *Jesus—God and Man*¹⁵ Pannenberg began to implement this in a Christological synthesis that seriously incorporated history—both the events themselves in which God is self-revealing and the development of the understanding of those events. How seriously the historical development of the understanding was being studied at that time is evidenced by the publication of Aloys Grillmeier's *Christ in Christian Tradition*.¹⁶ The trend to insert Christology in history, in the development of understanding, and in the realities of human suffering and struggle came to later fruition in Moltmann's *The Crucified God*,¹⁷ which focuses on the central issues as questions about the actual human situation in the world and its history, in the context of a rethinking of the Lutheran tradition. At the same time, within the Catholic ambit, J. B. Metz, while working primarily in fundamental theology, made suggestions toward a political Christology in which the historical events of the life, death, and further impact of Jesus become the paradigm for the whole human experience as we live it today in its public as well as its private dimensions.¹⁸

As is generally recognized, the Second Vatican Council did not contribute directly to Christology, yet with its concern over the worldly tasks of the Church in *Gaudium et spes* the council certainly gave support to

¹⁵ Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968; original German, 1964.

¹⁶ New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965; original German, 1964.

¹⁷ New York: Harper & Row, 1974; original German, 1973. The speed with which these books were being published in translation gives testimony of the growing concern with the rethinking of Christology at that time.

¹⁸ Cf. J. B. Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," in *New Questions on God* (Concilium 76; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 9–25.

the trend to formulate Christologies with a political component. Moreover, it is not surprising that in the aftermath of such a socially-aware council, numbering among its participants, for the first time, many bishops from the Third World, from very poor countries, from non-Western cultures, there should be a rediscovery of Jesus as champion of the poor and powerless. The various strands of liberation theologies that arose in Latin America, in Asia, Africa, and among black Americans, looked for ways of grounding a Christian theology of liberation in the person of Jesus.

It must be admitted that liberation theology, so named by common consent among Latin American theologians in 1970, took almost another decade after that date to produce fully elaborated Christologies, though these theologians raised a constant cry that such were needed. The earliest attempt was probably Albert Cleage's *The Black Messiah*,¹⁹ adumbrating the subsequent definition of what constitutes a liberation Christology. That definition later demanded explicit recognition of the particular hermeneutic circle involved for each author and for the believing community out of whose experience that author wrote. Liberation theologians wanted a carefully reflected acknowledgment of the experience and questions with which particular authors approached the meaning of Jesus and the claims made for him in the New Testament and history of the Church. They wanted an acknowledgment that no one comes to Christology free of cultural bias and preconceived expectations—least of all, conventional academic theologians trained in classical theology in traditional settings. As no one is free of cultural bias, it is important that we all recognize our own particular bias. This means that there is no theology, and therefore no Christology, which is timeless and universal; there are only particular Christologies.

But the liberation theologians make a further claim, briefly designated as the hermeneutic privilege of the poor. It is the claim that among particular vantage points for the construction of a theology, there is one which has better access to the true meaning of the Christian gospel: the vantage point of the poor, the powerless, the excluded or dispossessed. The argument for the position is that the New Testament itself acknowledges this, and that Christian tradition in history has always come back to the same realization, not because the poor are better or more spiritual, but because they are more obviously needy of God's saving power. Thus it has been maintained that these conditions should bring about a special type of particular Christologies. The challenge that follows is how to connect such particular Christologies with the great mainline tradition

¹⁹ New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968.

that has provided continuity for the community in its worship, apostolate, and community life.

An early attempt to meet all the criteria was Leonardo Boff's *Jesus Christ Liberator*,²⁰ which emphasized the plurality of the historical sources, the degree of participation involved in the various Christologies of our own times, the elements of liberation in the impact of Jesus on history, and the vantage point of the poor. What was disappointing at that stage was that magisterial constraints left the juncture with the Christology of Chalcedon in place but quite awkward. More recent attempts include the five-volume work of Juan Luis Segundo,²¹ which is, however, not so much a synthesis of his own as a demonstration of alternative possibilities based on the precedents in Scripture and in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. Segundo is intent not on a systematic but on showing the uses and misuses of theorizing. The most systematic attempt to date of a liberation Christology from Latin America is that of Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*,²² which offers a boldly ascending Christology. Sobrino gives full value to the historical events of the life of Jesus in their own context, viewed and questioned with the dominant interests of the poor in mind. He links this to the Christ of faith by means of the soteriological questions, and presents an incisive evaluation of the Chalcedonian formula and its subsequent interpretations. The books on Jesus that have emerged from Asian and African liberation theologians have tended to be lives of Jesus offered for inspiration and imitation, with little or no attempt to come to terms with Chalcedon or the traditional issues of Christology. This is at least in part due to the understanding that Christology is more truly and effectively done by letting the conventional theological questions fade into the background and focusing instead on the inspirational and exemplary impact of Jesus as a better way of understanding both the difference he makes and who he is.²³ It is clear that there is yet a great deal to be explored from this perspective.

At least in the earlier stages, liberation theologians found themselves at odds with another contemporary influence on the shape of Christology, i.e. the scientific and technological way of seeing reality and thinking about it. A first impact came from the writings and personal contacts of Teilhard de Chardin. Although he was not professionally a theologian

²⁰ Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978; first Portuguese edition, 1972.

²¹ J. L. Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985 ff.).

²² Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978; first Spanish edition, 1976. But note that there are substantial revisions in the 1978 English edition.

²³ This seems to be the case, e.g., with Albert Nolan's *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976).

and did not claim to write theology, his extraordinary mystical vision of the evolutionary creation and ultimate unity of all things in Christ as omega point found such responsive chords in many believers that professional theologians took it up and developed it into systematic presentation. Because during his lifetime Teilhard was forbidden to publish his material on this topic, the theological development of his thought has really only taken place during the last two decades.²⁴ What it offered to theologians was an entry into the process mode of thought in a way that was not too abstract or remote from common experience.

However, Teilhard was not the only source for the elaboration of a process theology and Christology. Based upon the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, interpretations of the role and meaning of Jesus in universe and history as an integrating force in the becoming of the whole world have been set out by authors such as Norman Pittenger²⁵ and David Griffin.²⁶ Such an interpretation receives rather strong support from the New Testament, in spite of the fact that process thought as such had not been dreamed of at the time. The main intent in the elaboration of process Christologies seems to be to establish the relevance of Christ and the gospel to all phases of human life, and to show how at some deeper level everything is inextricably connected. The reason for a certain opposition between process and liberation theologians appears to be the tendency of the former to see all things working together for good to fulfil God's purpose, and the inclination and steady conviction of the latter to see all things through prophetic lenses of sharp critique and protest. For the process theologian Christ is the presence of the divine as a gathering and consolidating force, while for the liberation theologian Christ is the radical divine challenge to the way things are in a world shaped largely by sin.

An impulse of a rather different kind has been the urge to contextualize Jesus of Nazareth with reference to other religious traditions and other great religious figures in human history. For the local churches in non-Christian cultures this has been an issue for some time. Some of the bolder and more interesting answers to the question have been those of Geoffrey Parrinder in *Avatar and Incarnation*²⁷ and of Raymond Panni-

²⁴ Some of the Christological works resulting: Christopher F. Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); George A. Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ from Paul to Teilhard* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968); Robert Hale, *Christ and the Universe: Teilhard and the Cosmos* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1973); and cf. Karl Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the Universe," *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 157-92.

²⁵ *Christology Reconsidered* (London: SCM, 1970).

²⁶ *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973).

²⁷ London: Faber, 1970.

kar in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*.²⁸ What is innovative in these approaches is the suggestion that the understanding of Christ may need to come to Christians at least in part from outside their own tradition. Other authors, such as Charles Davis in *Christ and the World Religions*,²⁹ challenge some traditional assumptions about the uniqueness of Christ in the light of other savior figures and other ways of wisdom and salvation. What is particularly interesting about these approaches is that, whether or not one agrees with them, the task of Christology will never be the same as it has been—reasoning in the isolation of its own faith tradition. We shall always have to answer the challenge raised by the other traditions and by other ways of seeing and evaluating our own tradition. In the world of our times this has become one of the major issues for Christian faith among believers generally, and it is right that theology should be challenged to deal with it. The difficulty of dealing with the question in a tradition of Christology already so fully developed in isolation from other traditions or the wider ecumenism is evident in the work of authors such as Eugene Hillman³⁰ and Aloysius Pieris.³¹ Its urgency and importance as the wave of the future is exemplified by the fact that a recent Tübingen roundup of 20th-century theology³² devotes five of the ten essays in its Christology section to perspectives from the other religions. And indeed, not only those of other religious faiths but Marxists also have in this half century expressed intense interest in the person and significance of Jesus as a force in history that demands attention and response of some kind. An example is the thoughtful book of Milan Machoveč, *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*.³³ There is a two-way movement of stimulus and challenge in this. Marxism has long challenged the Christian reading of the message and import of Jesus in the modern world by its own concern for defrauded laborers. Now that liberation theologies have focused on the social-justice implications of the redemptive message and ministry of Jesus, this Christian movement has in turn challenged Marxism concerning its too easy dismissal of the way of Jesus as alienating.³⁴

²⁸ 2nd ed.; Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis, 1980.

²⁹ New York: Herder, 1971.

³⁰ Cf. *Christ and Other Faiths* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

³¹ E.g., in *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

³² Karl-Josef Kuschel, ed., *Lust an der Erkenntnis: Die Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Piper, 1986).

³³ Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976.

³⁴ Not all Marxists, of course, have shared such easy dismissal. One notable early exception was Karl Kautsky, whose *Foundations of Christianity* was reprinted several times, e.g. New York: Russell, 1953.

SECOND-LEVEL PROBLEMS

Out of all the above trends and considerations there arise some second-level problems. One of these that affects all of us urgently in varying degrees is that of giving a confident, reliable, recognizable, intelligible, and inspirational account of Christology to the ordinary listener or reader of our times. The rethinking of Christology has moved so fast and along so many different lines that there is a notable lack of confidence in their own understanding, and of trust in any explanations offered, even among the highly educated but nonspecialist members of Christian communities. This is acute among Catholics because they have grown up to expect a level of certainty and sharp definition, which is precisely what we have discovered we cannot have. In that context various theological authors have responded in various ways. Walter Kasper, in *Jesus the Christ*,³⁵ written more than 15 years ago, maintained a basically conservative position while acknowledging freely the results of new biblical and historical scholarship and the impact of new questions. This would leave the reader free to pursue some of those questions beyond the boundaries to which Kasper himself was willing to go—at least in print at that time. An almost diametrically opposite response has been that of Hans Küng in *On Being a Christian*.³⁶ He is not hesitant to shock and challenge established views and expectations in Christology if he can show that he has support in the New Testament. The extremely wide dissemination of his large book suggests that many readers, including Catholics, can tolerate critical reflection on what has previously seemed to them authoritative beyond question in the traditions of the Church, if they are shown the necessary reference points in Scripture. This may be an outcome of the Second Vatican Council, with its insistence that ordinary Catholics be put more closely and constantly in touch with the Scriptures.

A further second-level problem is that of providing a credible continuity with the authoritative traditions in the eyes of those who constitute or influence the doctrinal magisterium of the Church. Two interesting but hitherto unsuccessful attempts in that direction are those of Piet Schoonenberg and Frans Josef van Beeck. Schoonenberg, in work that remains largely unpublished because he was forbidden by the Holy See to disseminate it, has argued persuasively that there are three available models in patristic writings for the union of the divine and human in Jesus, and for a way of establishing his identity in relation to the transcendent God: a God-Christology, a Logos-Christology, and a Spirit-Christology. The last of these, allowing more flexibility in the use of the analogy, has

³⁵ New York: Paulist, 1976; original German, 1974.

³⁶ Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976; original German, 8th ed., 1974.

nevertheless not been kept or developed in Western Christianity. What Schoonenberg has done in manuscript is to research the source texts in their local traditions and draw from them possibilities of development that would establish continuity and respond to contemporary questions and problems.³⁷ The solution offered by van Beeck in *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric*³⁸ is to liberate creativity and freedom of thought once more, by showing the roles that religious language has played in different circumstances at different times. His interesting endeavor is very enlightening, and (to use an old saying of Aristotle) the understanding of understanding (to which this study is conducive) leads to the understanding of whatever there is to be understood.

Yet it is evident that two books, or a handful of books, no matter how good, cannot achieve this kind of freeing of the prayerful and prophetic imagination. It requires a kind of ground swell of Christian consciousness and theological activity to move the institutional Church so that those who think creatively will not effectively be silenced. Perusal of recent statements of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and of the edited reports of the International Theological Commission,³⁹ give some indication of how slow the gathering and movement of such a ground swell can be.

A third second-level problem is that of finding categories for Christological reflection which have some intelligibility in the contemporary world. This is an endeavor that has preoccupied Edward Schillebeeckx for almost three decades. Quite early, even before the Second Vatican Council offered more latitude for creative theological reformulation, Schillebeeckx, in *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*,⁴⁰ suggested that the discussion of the "one person, two natures" formula would be considerably eased by drawing into explicit conversation an element of the notion of person that has remained constant even as the semantic content of the term changed over the centuries. That element was and is the implication of presence and the possibility of encounter, offering high intelligibility in the contemporary culture for a Christology of divine presence to be encountered in Jesus. This very rich insight, expanding the sacramental principle as it had emerged from the icono-

³⁷ Schoonenberg's *The Christ* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971; first Dutch edition, 1969) sets out the problems, but to my knowledge the only published text that sketches his approach to a solution is "Spirit Christology and Logos Christology," *Bijdragen* 38 (1977) 350-75.

³⁸ New York: Paulist, 1979.

³⁹ Cf. *Select Questions on Christology and Theology, Christology, Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1980, 1983),

⁴⁰ New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963; original Dutch, 1960.

clast controversy, is still carried through in the far more complex *Jesus*⁴¹ and *Christ*⁴² volumes of the much later trilogy.

These culminating volumes of Schillebeeckx' long wrestling with the biblical, historical, methodological, and systematic aspects of Christology not only offer an extraordinary synthesis of insights and gains from liberation, process, existentialist, and political theologies. They also capture some beachheads that will not lightly be lost again. Such is the clear definition of what constitutes the historical Jesus: everything that makes up his historical impact is part of the historical Jesus. A completely new approach to the messianic claim and the divinity claim is established with the thesis that it is the capacity to make history that provides the proper hermeneutic key to understanding the identity of a person. Moreover, it is an approach that is able to include all aspects of biblical and historical scholarship and to answer the challenges from the human sciences and from the other traditions of East and West, both religious and secular. These volumes achieve a new kind of confidence for the Christian believer, because they re-establish the authority of experience on a methodologically sound foundation.

A final second-level problem is that of making sense of the divinity claim in terms of contemporary perception of reality. I do not mean justifying the claim, but simply establishing that the assertion means something. This is not only a theological imperative for the sake of coherence; it has become an urgent pastoral imperative. An increasing level of lay interest and sophistication in theological questions is combined now with far less willingness to accept positions simply on the authority of official teachers or of traditions handed down. On the level of popular piety, at least in the English-speaking countries, there is an increasing tendency not to deny but to ignore the divinity claim as something simply lacking in intelligibility. Moreover, in my observation that tendency frequently combines with a trend to shift out of the institutional churches—again not in deliberate protest but rather by a drift out of an involvement that has quietly ceased to make sense. At the same time, these are for the most part conscientious people to whom Jesus is a hero and inspiration in the same category as Mahatma Gandhi but more so.

What seems to have happened is that the human Jesus, in all the concreteness of his particular historical existence, has come into his own among Christians and non-Christians of our time, but at the expense of their finding the truly unique Christian claim for Jesus quite irrelevant. It is this, among other factors, that makes the appeal of interfaith and

⁴¹ New York: Seabury, 1979; original Dutch, 1974.

⁴² New York: Crossroad, 1981; original Dutch, 1977.

history-of-religions courses and books as a vehicle for looking at the claims Christians have made for Jesus,⁴³ and allows for the development of "pluralistic" styles of Christology.⁴⁴ But it is this trend also which lends high credibility and appeal to approaches such as that used by Gerard Sloyan,⁴⁵ in which no prior assent to doctrine is assumed but the readers are led to draw their own conclusions in their own time.

This prevailing seriousness about Jesus in his human particularity has the thrust and direction of the conscientious people of our time. It has been remarked often that the life and impact of Francis of Assisi brought certain aspects of the humanity of Jesus to the fore: closeness to nature and to nature's provident God, unassuming simplicity in the dedicated life of a homeless wandering preacher dependent fully on the charity of others, and friendship with all. For centuries there was the inclination to add to this an attitude of nonprotest, of cheerful acceptance of the way things are, and of unwillingness to criticize. What has happened in our own times has had a very different thrust. The human Jesus who is found so inspirational, exemplary, and powerfully motivating is rather the prophetic figure, an inspiration to protest marchers, hunger strikers, nonviolent rebels against unjust and oppressive structures in society. Jesus emerges as a critical and public figure, not political in the sense of our modern expectations during his lifetime, but certainly political in the broad sense of the building of the human "city" in his impact upon subsequent history. It is clear that those who are personally enthusiastic and motivated by Jesus as exemplary and revelatory do not envision the political Jesus as the already reigning Pantocrator, but as the struggling, suffering pretender to the throne who would and will bring justice and protection to the poor and powerless of the world.

However, with considerable enthusiasm in our times for the prophetic figure of Jesus, there is a certain tragedy in the disappearance of the divinity claim into simple irrelevance. It is tragic for all the reasons that the Church Fathers of the fourth century gave: the radical nature of the redemptive claim and the long-sustained hope that it contains is captured precisely by the paradox so awkwardly and doggedly insisted upon at Chalcedon. Nothing is more urgent in our times than confidence and energetic, operative hope for the redemption of the world in all its increasing complexity. There is too much cynical disillusionment. But Christian hope for the fulness of redemption is directly linked to the

⁴³ Cf. John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), and Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987).

⁴⁴ E.g., John Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975),

⁴⁵ E.g., *The Jesus Tradition* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-third, 1986).

definitive difference that Jesus makes in the possibilities of our history, and that definitive difference in turn is linked inseparably to the claim that Jesus is uniquely capable of making that difference because what he does, God does. To sustain effective hope in the redemption it is urgently necessary to render the divinity claim intelligible to the modern mind and imagination. It is not possible to do this without some change of vocabulary, some experimentation with analogies and imagery, some broadening and rethinking of categories, and some retrieval of lost strands of the tradition.

It is evident that many in our times have attempted this task. Within Catholic theological circles they have attempted it with constant attention to the tradition in all its rich variety and in communion with the contemporary community of believers. Nevertheless they have frequently been censored (and one might even say harassed) for not repeating literally and in detail the explanations of the classic Christology in its established seminary versions. It is obviously not possible to achieve a breakthrough to contemporary intelligibility by literal repetition. That magisterial censorship so persistently holds out for a verbal orthodoxy where this has become confusing and profoundly alienating for believers may be the greatest scandal in the Church of our times because of the importance of the issue that is at stake for the life of the believing community and the continued active participation of its members.

There are several solutions to the dilemma that can be offered at a theological if not at a pastoral level of the institutional Church. Most of them seem to come in the last analysis to this: personal models for the pre-existence of Jesus as divine are liable to be taken literally in a way that makes the Christian claim absurd, because two persons cannot be one person. On the other hand, the Scriptures and the tradition, and the analogies from the ways in which other traditions speak of the divine, offer a rich variety of highly suggestive nonpersonal models which are not so easily reduced to the absurd. We have all along acknowledged Jesus as Word or utterance of God, as visible Image of the invisible God, as Wisdom of God, and (so it seems to me), implicitly but in a very profound sense of the term, as divine compassion.⁴⁶ These models speak to our time, and they offer the continuity with the faith tradition as well as maintaining the paradox on which our confidence in the redemption so immediately depends. Now that the search for the historical and human Jesus has had such extraordinary success, it seems that the most urgent attention must be given to the contemporary intelligibility of the divinity claim.

⁴⁶ *My Jesus, the Compassion of God* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983) develops this suggestion at greater length.